

Now appearing at the French River Amphitheater
“Flight of the Waxwing”
An Aerial Ballet
August 14, 2006



Every year around this time the French River slows to the point where water stops flowing over most of Perryville Dam. When this happens the dam becomes a very special place to visit. In essence it is transformed into an amphitheater complete with seating and different shows every day. Go there and sit on the walls overlooking the dam, or even better climb down and sit in the center on the granite blocks. Stay very still, before long you will start to see all the animal life that thrives here. You may see a Great Blue Heron catching fish at the base of the dam. Other days you may go there and ducks will be swimming around. Occasionally you'll see a muskrat or beaver swimming under the bridge or a Kingfisher sitting on a branch waiting for the right moment to dive into the water and come up with a small fish in its bill. When the sun shines into the water you can see the beautiful long green aquatic plants waving in the current. They seem to be dancing to the sound of all the small waterfalls that bubble out from between the stones of this old 1880 arched step dam. The water is very clear and you can sometimes see fish swimming in the pools and if you're lucky the occasional turtle swimming leisurely around. This is also a favorite place for water snakes to bask on the rocks and in the crevices. If you're squeamish about snakes you may



want to stay up on the wall rather than down on the dam. The truth of the matter is “snakes won't bother you if you don't bother them”. Every time I go there, I see something different and exciting.

Last year around this time I would drop my daughter off every day at the soccer field not too far from Perryville Dam for practice. From there I would go sit at the base of the dam with my camera in hand. Frequently after I had been there for about a half-hour or so, a pair of Mink would emerge from an opening between the rocks. They would start to play a game of hide and seek, going in one opening and coming out another chasing each other into the water and then back into the rocks. It was amazing to watch. I haven't seen the



Mink this summer but if you go there now and sit for a while, you will be treated to a wonderful show. Little black flies called Caddisflies (Trichoptera) are on the dam this time of year by the hundreds, don't worry they don't bite. They're very small and you don't pay much attention to them until you notice that when they fly around it triggers the start of an aerial ballet.





Every year a new group of young Cedar Waxwings are raised nearby and find the Caddisflies irresistible. Waxwings are extremely regal looking birds and are seldom seen in town. But at this wonderful place you'll be surrounded by at least half a dozen or more Waxwings at any given time. They perch in the trees surrounding the dam, on the dam itself and on the rocks in the water at the base of the dam. Once they get comfortable with your presence their ballet will begin. First you will see one Waxwing fly out over the water, fluttering and rolling chasing a Caddisfly, then another and before long the show is underway with all the participants in motion. Sometimes more than one will go after the same fly and that's when you see some really fancy flying. When you have 4 or 5 birds in the air at the same time hovering, rolling and diving all around you, it's amazing. When they get really comfortable with you being there sometimes they fly over to catch a Caddisfly, hovering right in front of your face. If you sit very still they might even land right next to you. They'll stand there for a moment combing the skies for the next tasty morsel and then fly off after it.



Whether you are a bird watcher or not you should take some time out of your busy schedule and go enjoy this show. Before long the flies will be gone, fall will be here and the Waxwings will disappear into the woods where they will live on berries for the winter.

By Alan Dabrowski
French River Connection