

Furbearers talk bears down in Ashland

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Friends of the North Pikes Creek Wetlands is hosting “The Life and Ecology of Wisconsin's Large Furbearers of the North,” presented by John Olson at 7 p.m., Dec. 7 at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center.

Are you just dying to stroke the fur of a bobcat, lynx, cougar, wolf or coyote? Well, now's your chance. The Friends of the North Pikes Creek Wetlands are hosting “The Life and Ecology of Wisconsin's Large Furbearers of the North,” presented by John Olson at 7 p.m., Dec. 7 at the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center.

At FNPCW's premier lecture of their winter series, Olson will share a table full of furbearer pelts for petting as well as a pack of stories to bring them to life.

“We hosted John in 2014 and it was a really popular program,” said Kathy Wendling, president of FNPCW. “But he couldn't get through all the furbearers of northern Wisconsin because there are so many of them. He had to quit before he got to the larger furbearers.”

A standing-room-only night at the NGLVC on that Dec. 3, the auditorium was packed with young school children as well as professionals in biology and forestry. Questions flew around the room like stun darts. Dozens of people lined up afterwards to feel the pelts Olson had on display.

“People are fascinated by large furbearers,” Wendling said. “They catch a glimpse of them when they're driving or walking in the woods and they want to know more about them, and they want to pet their fur. Who can resist petting a bobcat pelt?”

Olson has been invited back to finish up where he left off, the only difference being he's retired now. He turned in his furbearer specialist badge for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in 2016, also the WDNR pelts he used for his lectures. Nonetheless he will have a few of his own pelts squirreled away over the years and some borrowed from his former employer.

Olson describes himself as full of weasel energy.

"I've totally failed at retirement," he jested the day before Thanksgiving, minutes prior to hopping into his car to drive to deer camp.

An annual tradition, he, his two brothers and a few wives who enjoy hunting hightail it down to the old family farm/camp in Winter for a Thanksgiving hunt and feast. His family spread includes over 250 acres with a log cabin on it, a place to boil maple syrup, and tons of hiking, hunting and skiing opportunities—a perfect place for a future furbearer to explore as a child, which he did, and still does.

One activity Olson has engaged in as a retiree is managing this property and several others he owns in Iron County, Price County, Bayfield and northern Minnesota.

"I've got my hands full doing a lot of land practices," he said.

He also bought a sawmill, because his son's a log homebuilder. And as a former northern Wisconsin furbearer specialist, he still gets invited to host programs.

"The Association of Fish & Wildlife agencies has continued to ask me to be involved with some of our national and international work," he said. "I've been doing what we call fur schools. They're weeklong training courses for wardens and wildlife biologists. I've been doing those in Idaho, Kentucky, New York and Wisconsin."

In February, he was asked to attend a conference in Portugal where he talked about current furbearer activities in the United States.

"It's been a kind of busy retirement," he confessed.

Besides furbearers, a topic of interest that may surface is the subject of politics and the current metamorphoses taking place within the departments of resource management.

"Science, now, is not as important to some of our higher-level administrators, (state and national)," Olson reflected. "We still hope to continue to keep science as an important part of decision-making in how to manage resources, but the political and the social aspects, I think, right now have been trumping most everything else."

It was a good time to retire, he said, not just because of politics, but because there are younger people better equipped to handle the challenges ahead.

"The younger people have more training and education in social aspects," he said. "They may be able to do a much better job in today's world than some of us older curmudgeons who are really steeped in science and wanted to follow the science of the animals as much as we could in resource management. We now have more people with a greater variety of values and systems for balancing resource management."

Though concerned about the short-term versus long-term decisions being made, Olson is an ever-positive force, as well as consummate entertainer who'll continue to provide stories, history and, yes, pelts for petting, when invited to do so. Just for the record, he is giving this lecture gratis.

“Life and Ecology of Wisconsin's Large Furbearers of the North” is being cosponsored by the Friends of the Lincoln Community Forest and the Chequamegon Audubon Society, brethren conservation groups dedicated to preserving species as well as the wilderness habitats. A large portion of the work these organizations accomplish has to do with education.

“At FNPCW, we want to educate the next generation of conservation advocates and stewards,” Wendling said. “It’s important to have young people at some of these programs and get young people out to the wetlands, because I think it was Jacques Cousteau who said, ‘We only protect what we love, we only love what we understand, and we only understand what we are taught.’ It’s really true, if people get out there to see how beautiful wetlands are and they understand how they function, they’ll want to protect them.

“And we need to do that, because in future generations who’s going to stand up for wetlands and stand up for our wild lands?”

Other programs in the FNPCW winter/spring lecture series include “Wisconsin’s Warbler Treasures,” presented by author and radio personality, Laura Erickson at 7 p.m., April 19 at the NGLVC, cosponsored by the Chequamegon Audubon Society; also, “Turtles of Northern Wisconsin,” presented by Bob Hay, president of Turtles for Tomorrow and retired WDNR herpetologist at 7 p.m., May 10 at the NGLVC, cosponsored by the Friends of the Lincoln Community Forest. The Chequamegon Audubon Society will also present three additional lectures, also starting at 7 p.m. and held at the NGLVC: Jan. 25 with Erik Olson on the American Kestrel Project; Feb. 28 with Sara Hudson on the City of Ashland Participation in Bird City; and April 4 with Sumner Matteson on Declining Tern Populations in the Chequamegon Bay.

To learn more about Friends of North Pikes Creek Wetlands go to: <http://www.northpikescreek.org/>.