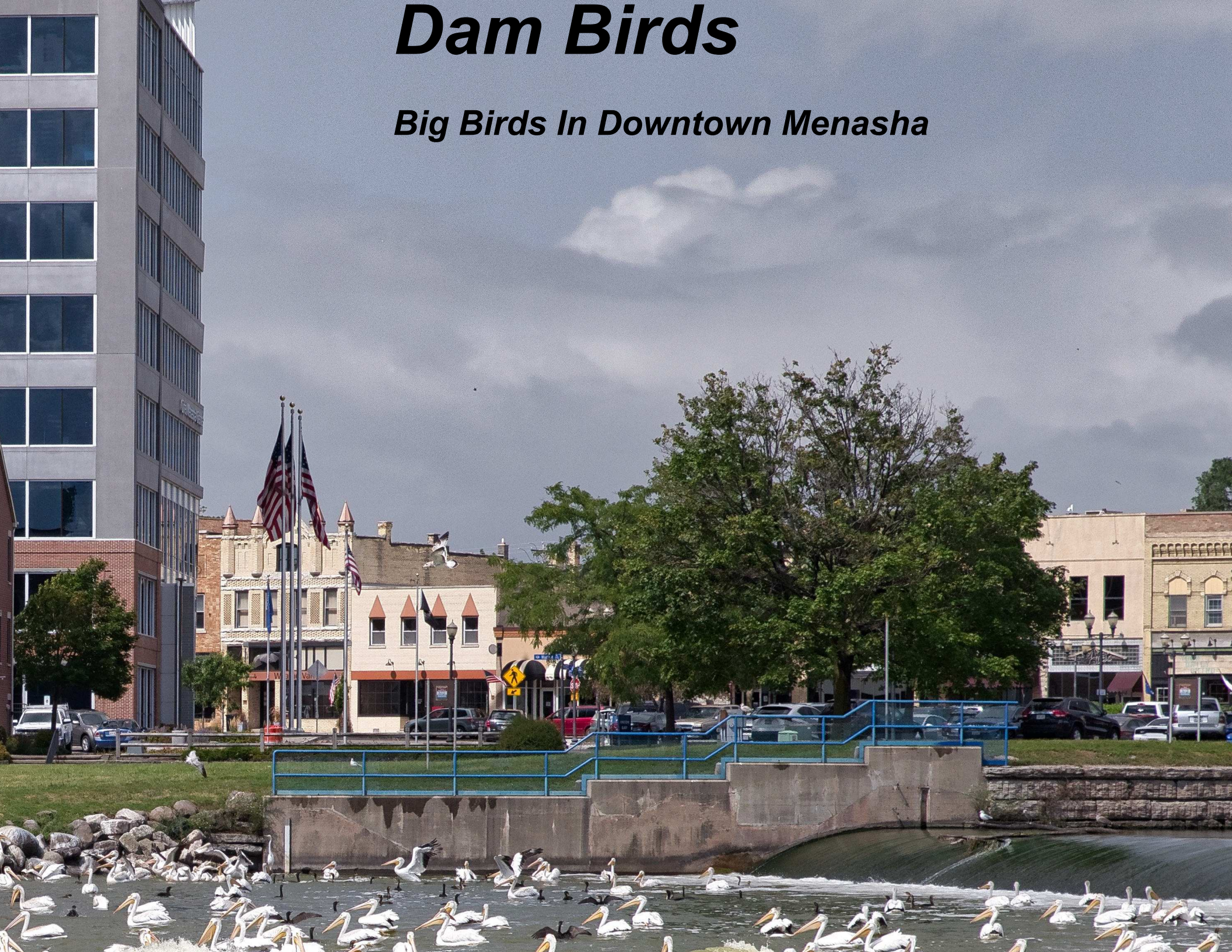


Dam Birds

Big Birds In Downtown Menasha





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Photography and Text By John Henry Gremmer

When I discovered the big birds at the Menasha Dam, in downtown Menasha, Wisconsin, during mid-summer of 2017, I knew immediately that I wanted to make them my summer photography project. This was a biological phenomenon, right in downtown Menasha! Thousands of pelicans, cormorants, egrets, gulls, terns, great blue herons, and black-crowned night herons were gorging on fish in the waters below the dam. Big birds, that are usually difficult to approach in natural areas, were right in front of me, and very accessible for photographing. They kept a safe distance from people, but a lot closer than in the wild. The black-crowned night herons, which for me had always been difficult to shoot, were just 20 feet away, and seemingly oblivious to my presence. Pelicans and cormorants floated nearby. This was the greatest bird show in Wisconsin.

I wanted my photo project to tell the whole story of the birds, fish, physical environment, and people. I visited the site three or four times a week. From my seat on a comfortable lawn chair close to the water's edge, I could observe the birds' behavior. Some pelicans were solitary fishers taking fish near the surface. Other pelicans formed small groups and corralled fish to a specific spot and then dove as a group to catch them. Cormorants made deep dives to the bottom to catch their fish and then would fly up and perch in nearby trees. Egrets sat on the ironwork of the dam and reached down and grabbed fish. Black-crowned night herons and great blue herons did the same. Gulls and terns dove head first into the water to get their meals. The show went on day after day.

The big bird show starts with the tremendous number of fish that crowd up close to the dam on the Fox River during late summer. Gizzard shad, fresh water drum, whitebass, and smallmouth bass are the dominant species. Those are the main ones, but you can catch just about any warm-water fish here. Why are all the fish there? I believe it has to do with all the oxygen in the water formed by the churning water coming through the dam gates.

I spent most of my time along the breakwall, on the south side of the dam where the gates are located. A little park is there with adequate parking. People were always fishing or bird watching when I was there. The fishers, like the big birds, caught lots of fish, using all kinds of techniques.

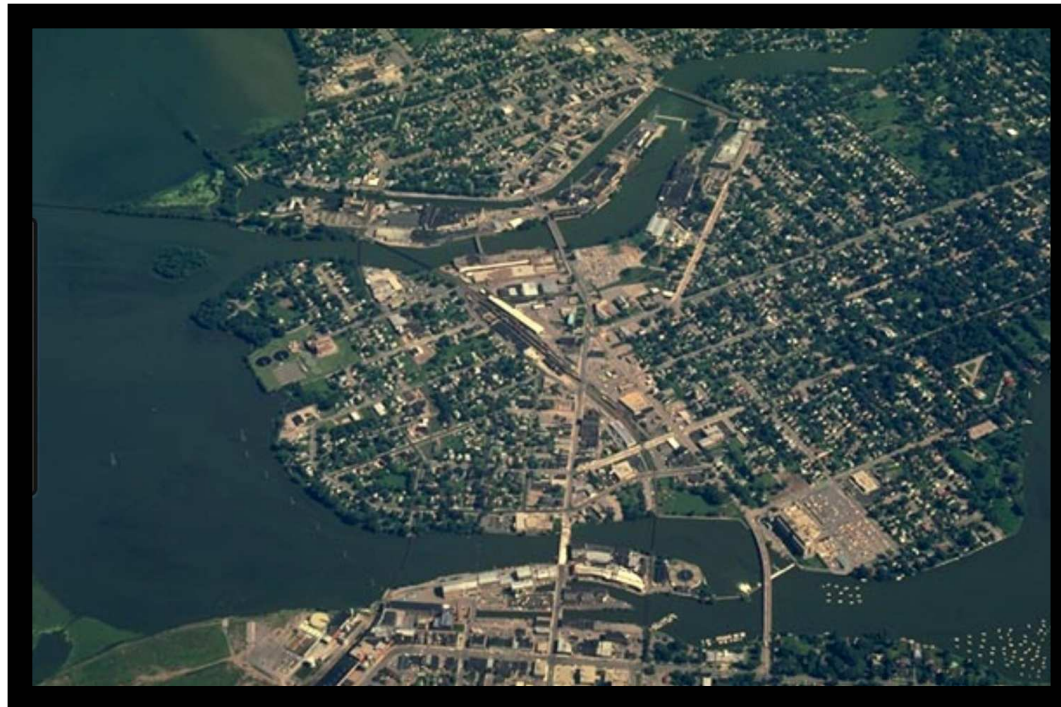
This is my story as I saw it through a camera lens.

John Henry Gremmer, 2017

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the people fishing around the dam for their cooperation in doing this project. Thanks go to Tom Young for first alerting me to the big birds below the dam. Thanks to John Nebel for encouraging my photography projects. Thanks to my son Sam for helping shoot along the river. Special thanks go to my fishing partner Rick Fahrenkrug for helping with editing. My wife Sue's input on my artistic endeavors has always been appreciated and important.

See more of my photography at: https://www.flickr.com/photos/j_henry_g/



An aerial view of Neenah(bottom) and Menasha(top), Wisconsin. The dam is in the top half of the picture on the north channel of the Fox River. The Fox River flows from Lake Winnebago, on the right, to Little Lake Butte Des Morts on the left.



(Above) People checking out the pelicans below the dam. A couple of gates are open and the water is surging downstream. (Top Right) Pelicans looking for a meal below the dam. (Bottom Right) Wide angle view taken from the Racine Street Bridge, upstream of the dam.





(Above) Cormorants in the air and pelicans on the water. In the middle of the image you can see the end of Main Street in Menasha. Birds are constantly coming and going. The fish are the big attractor! (Top Right) A boat, above the spillway, starting down the canal towards the marina and lock. (Bottom Right) The draw-bridge above the dam lifts, to let a boat head to Lake Winnebago.





Danger

**Strong Currents
and Undertow**

**No Swimming
or Wading**



ATTENTION

YOU ARE USING PRIVATE LANDS WHEN YOU FISH HERE

1. DO NOT USE VISITOR PARKING AREAS
2. CONFINE YOUR PARKING TO THE WEST END OF THE LOT
3. DO NOT LITTER---YOUR FAILURE TO COOPERATE COULD RESULT IN CLOSING THIS AREA TO PUBLIC ACCESS
4. THIS PROPERTY IS OFF LIMITS TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 10 PM & 5 AM VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW

RR DONNELLEY

Attention Anglers!

KEEP ANGLERS SAFE
PLEASE STAY ON THE TRAIL AND DO NOT ENTER THE WATER

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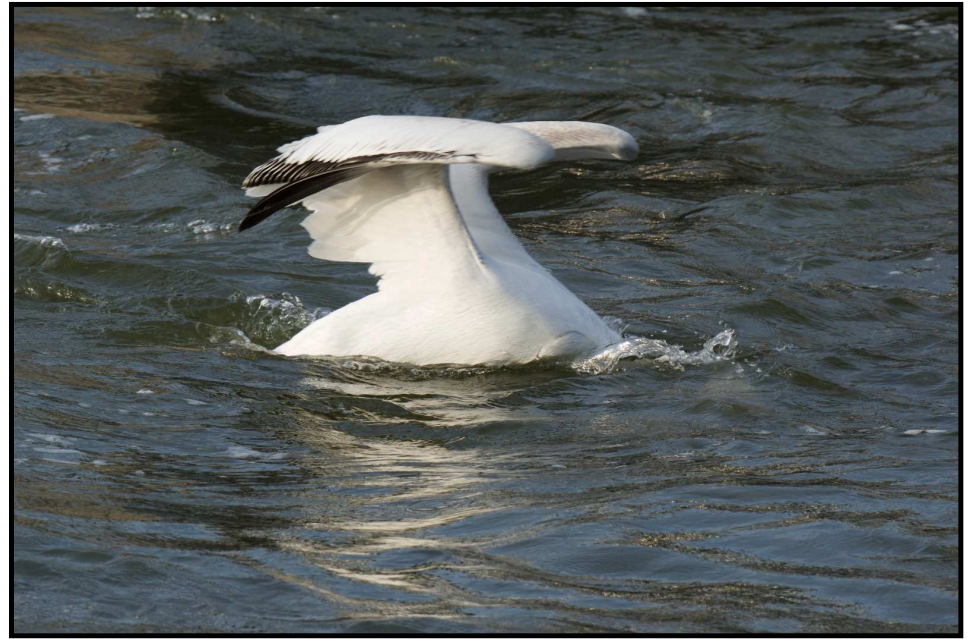
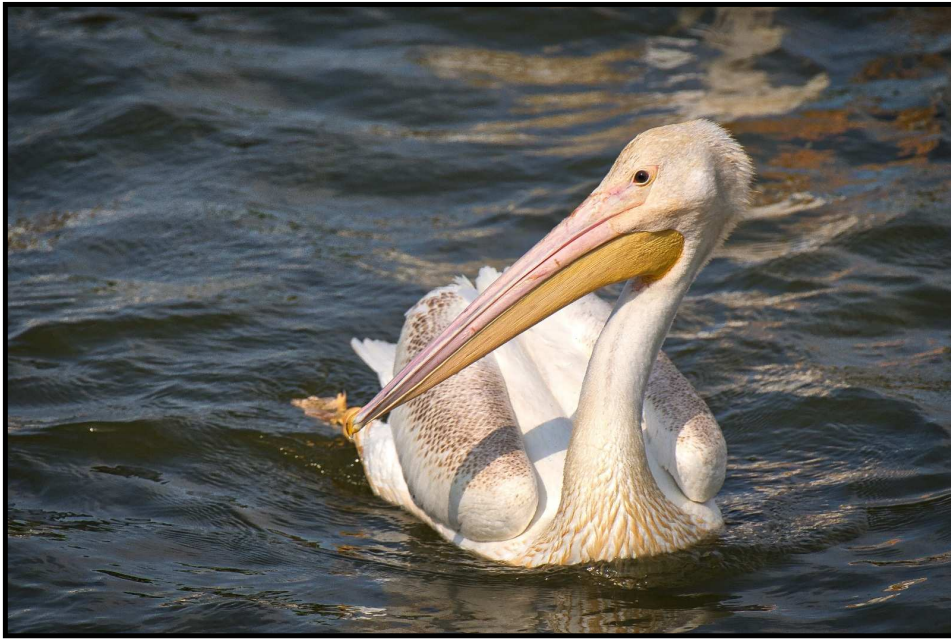
(Above) A flock of pelicans approaching the dam, looking for a meal. Notice, all have the same wing position. They are beautiful fliers and remind me of B52's. (Left) Signs found along the breakwall below the dam.



An American White Pelican gliding in toward the the area below the dam. They have 8 to 9.5 foot wingspans, weigh 10 to 20 pounds, and can be up to 6 feet long.



Maybe the best part of watching the big birds at the Menasha Dam is observing the nimble, controlled landings and take-offs of the pelicans. They are extremely agile in the air. Once on the ground they are less graceful.



(Top Left) One of this year's hatchlings floating below the dam. (Top Right) Pelican grabbing a fish. (Bottom Left) This pelican just caught a nice fish and is positioning it in its mouth. (Bottom Right) You can see the fish in the expandible bill of the pelican.



Pelicans resting on the bank on the north side of the dam. In the water, they work together to corral the fish. The black cormorants dive lower in the water column to catch their fish, while the pelicans feed on the surface.



(Above) On the north side of the river, below the dam, this old factory serves as a resting place for egrets and pelicans. Sometimes I would see forty or more egrets on the roof. (Top Right) Pelicans searching for surface fish just below the dam. (Bottom Right) A flurry of violent thrashing and diving takes place when pelicans spot a fish. Usually someone comes up with it.





(Top) Three pelicans in a race to grab a fish. (Bottom) A pelican getting airborne by pushing off the water with its feet.

Double-Crested Cormorant

Thousands of double-crested cormorants frequent the area below the dam. Unlike ducks, they don't have waterproof feathers, and when the feathers get saturated, they roost in nearby trees to dry out. Cormorants are well adapted to swim towards the bottom to catch fish. Double-crested cormorants are found from the Aleutian Islands in Alaska down to Florida and Mexico.

Measuring 28 to 35 inches in length, the all-black birds develop a small double crest of black and white feathers on their heads in breeding season.

Cormorants' droppings are highly acidic and will kill trees where the birds roost.







(Top Left) Cormorant carrying a stick back to its nest. (Bottom Left) Cormorants squabble over a roosting branch at the top of a tree below the dam. (Above) Notice how the cormorant's droppings have white-washed the leaves, and that many of the leaves have already died or disappeared from the branches.



Whitewashed trees just downstream of the dam. Hundreds of cormorants are perched in the trees. Eventually all the trees will die.



Cormorants fishing just below the dam spillway. The current is too strong for them below the dam gates. The cormorant population has spiked in the last 10 years in the area.



Cormorants heading for a roosting tree at day's end.

The Great Egret

The great egret is a large heron with all-white plumage. Standing up to 39 inches tall and measuring 31 to 41 inches in length, egrets have a wingspan of 52 to 67 inches. Weighing around 1.5 to 3.3 pounds, they are distinguished by their black legs and yellow bill. Males and females are identical in appearance. Once not found in our area, they have extended their range to southern Canada.

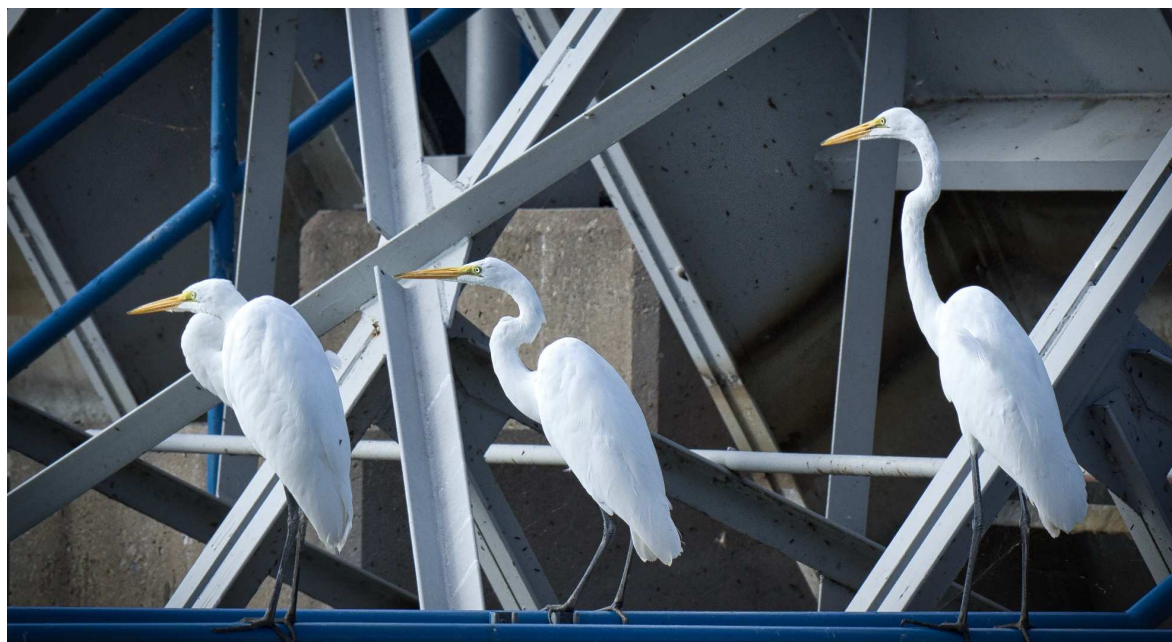




Egrets flying from one side of the river to the other. I made this artsy, abstract-like image by slowing down the shutter speed to blur the wing movement. They are extremely graceful fliers.



Egrets have claimed the roof top of this old factory as their resting place. From here they fly over to the iron work on the dam and grab fish. Notice the great blue heron in the bottom left corner.



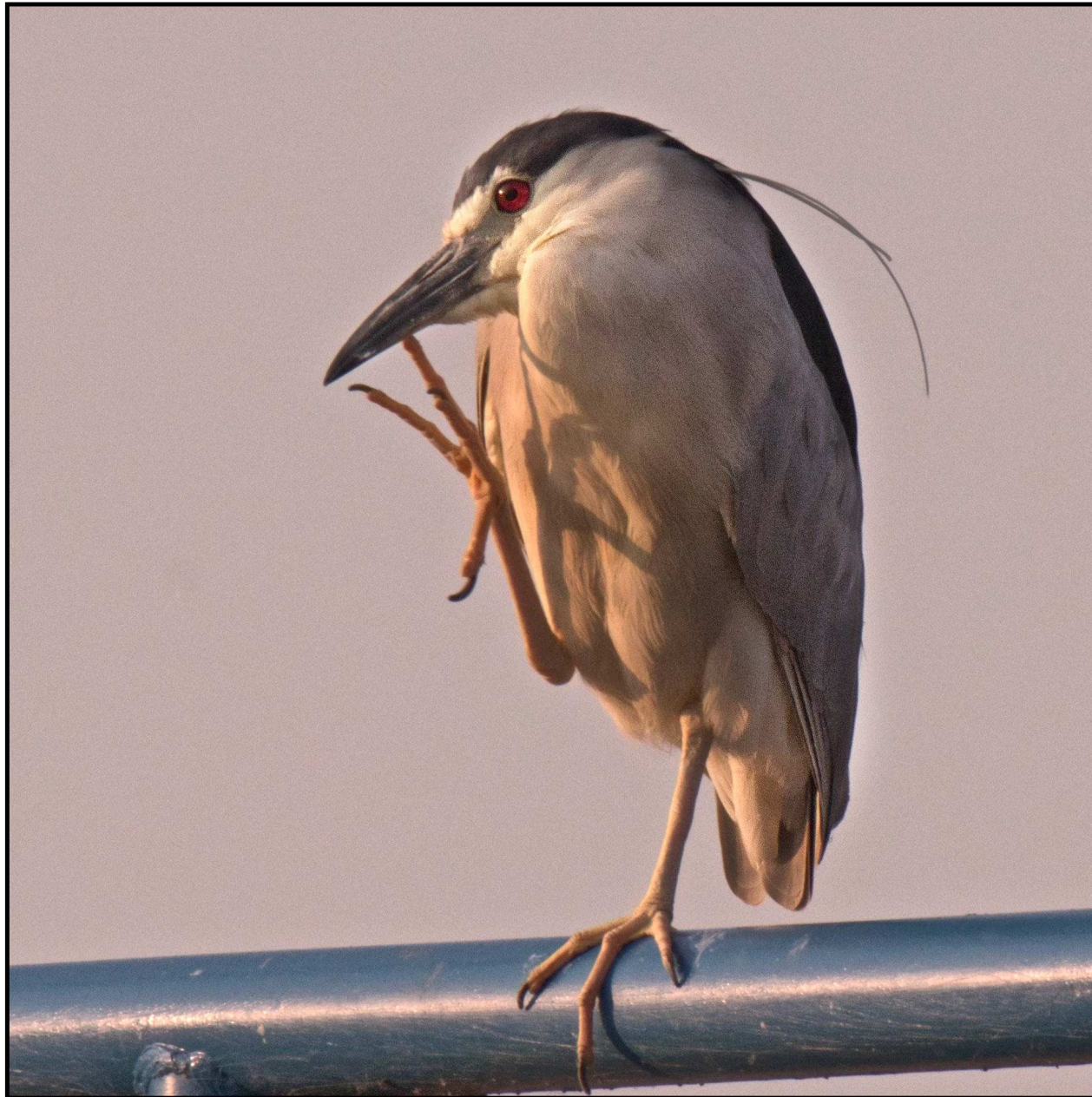
(Top) Egret coming in for a landing on the dam. (Bottom) Egrets resting on the ironwork of the dam.



(Top) Egret with a freshly caught shad. (Below) The swallowing process is fun to watch.

Black-Crowned Night Heron

This heron is found throughout a large part of the world. They are about 25 inches long and weigh around 28 ounces. Two or three long white plumes, erected in greeting and courtship displays, extend from the back of the head.





Black-crowned night herons standing on the dam gates' ironwork looking for fish to catch. Notice the size of their feet and that red eye.



An immature black-crowned night heron standing on the dam ironwork. Their eyes are orange and their legs are greenish yellow. They learn from the adults how to catch fish.



This black-crowned night heron was standing along the breakwall and when I got too close it leapt into flight. Notice how it is pushing off with its legs and feet.

Great Blue Heron

The great blue heron is a large wading bird in the heron family. It has a head-to-tail length 36 to 54 inches, a wingspan of 66 to 79 inches, and weight of 4 to 7.9 pounds. They range all over North America, Central America, and southern Europe.





Great blue herons are found wading along the edges of the river and standing on the ironwork of the dam gates.

Terns and Gulls

Terns(below) and gulls fly above the water below the dam looking for fish. Spotting a fish, they hover, and dive head-first into water. They are more acrobatic fliers than the bigger birds and often try to steal fish from other birds like cormorants.





This gull is trying to get a foothold on the shallow spillway. It failed and flew off.



One gull is diving for a targeted fish, while the other emerges fishless.

Mallard Duck

Though there are many types of ducks found along the river, the mallard is the only one that stays year around. Below is a female.



Canada Geese

Canada geese can be seen floating up and down the river, but never just below the dam. They are not fish eaters. Often they are found eating grass and resting on a field, on the south side of the river, just downstream of the dam.



Bald Eagle

There is an active eagle nest near the dam. Look up and you may find it. The birds can often be seen gliding up and down the river.



The Fish: What The Birds Are After

I have no definite idea of why there are so many fish below the dam. I suspect it has to do with the amount of oxygen in the water. Maybe food is washing in from Lake Winnebago. Maybe they are trying to move past the dam into Lake Winnebago. Below is a white bass, they are plentiful in the river.

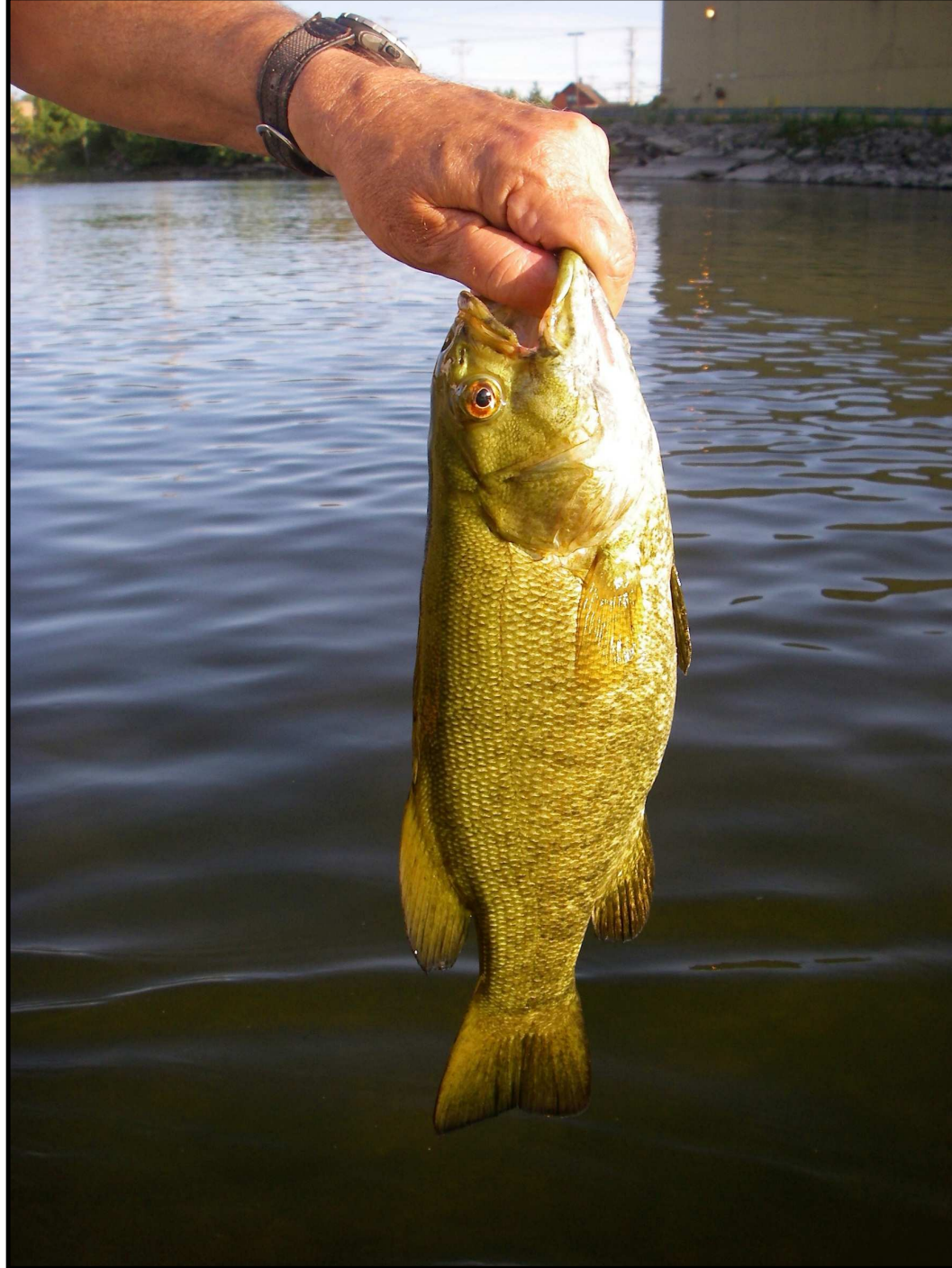




Gizzard Shad are found over most of the United States. They can grow up to 14 to 16 inches. There are huge numbers of these fish below the dam. One day they were so thick we could reach down from the breakwall and grab them.



Fresh water drum, often called sheephead, are super abundant and usually stay near the bottom. At times thick schools of them can be seen near the surface.



Smallmouth bass swim up and down the river, above and below the dam, and provide great sport. I have spent many hours fly fishing this stretch of the river and have hooked everything from sturgeon to gars. Smallmouth are my favorite.

People Fishing

Big birds aren't the only ones interested in catching fish near the dam. People of all ages and ethnic backgrounds found fish above and below the dam. They form a relaxed, friendly, cooperative community that share stories and fishing tactics. (Below) Waiting for a bite. (Top Right) A young girl prepares to re-bait her hook. (Bottom Right) Pelicans keep an eye on the young girls as they scoop for fish.







A young fisherman, near the dam, shows his catch to people coming to see the big birds.



People comfortably fishing above the dam in the warm sun.



(Above) This fisherman is rigging-up to do some serious fishing, hoping to fill the white bucket. (Right) This man is giving me a report on the day's fishing.





While some people fish, others, like the two photographers with long lenses, are there to see the big birds.



This family has located a good spot to fish below the dam on the north side of the river. The pelicans keep a safe distance.



This man, fishing along the breakwall on the south side of the river below the dam, lands a sheephead.

Some Random Closing Thoughts:

I am writing this in January of 2018 and all the big birds have left the Menasha Dam site. They're catching fish in warmer, ice-free places. They will be back in the area when spring comes, building their nests, and hatching out more big birds. Will they return to the dam site come summer? It all depends on whether the fish show up again. Nature is unpredictable.

When I was a kid back in the 1940's and 1950's there were no pelicans or egrets in Wisconsin. Seeing a blue heron, cormorant, night heron, or Canada goose was a rare event. Rare enough to stop what you were doing and look at them in amazement. This is why it fascinates me when I look up and see a flock of pelicans fly overhead, or see egrets hunting in a roadside pond.

I have lived in Wisconsin all my life and the state is in my blood! It is where I want to be! Where I want to be with family, fish, hunt, garden, and photograph. We have open spaces, low crime rates, little traffic strife, beautiful lakes, rivers, and streams, abundant wildlife, the beautiful four seasons, etc. I even love winter!

This book is just part of a photography project that also includes: a month long gallery show at the Menasha Public Library, an opening reception, a slideshow program on the project, and an online presence for many of the images.

In the future I hope the Wisconsin people and their political representatives will reverse the degradation of our water, air, and soil that has been taking place. Future generations will need clean water, clean air, and healthy soil to survive. So do the big birds! Nature needs our respect and protection.

John Gremmer

