

NATURALLY: Oakland Cemetery provides peaceful site for birdwatching

- By ED PATTERSON Special to the Gazette
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Despite the name, the fish crow is a generalist, eating everything from crabs to carrion, fruit and grains.

Courtesy photo

Oakland Cemetery is one of the most unusual places in Indiana County to birdwatch.

According to the cemetery's website, "The Oakland Cemetery was established in 1863 on a buckwheat farm owned by James Clark. The first burial was the infant son of the Carson family." In 1863, the location of the cemetery was regarded as "out in the country" to Indiana Borough.

Today, Oakland Cemetery is no longer "out in the country," located across the road from the Regency Mall and near other commercial and residential developments and the enlarged IUP campus.

Yet, amidst all of the commercial development, a visit to the cemetery can be a place to experience nature. Tall pine trees, mighty oaks and shrubbery shield the visitor from the noise of the modern world while you walk among the graves of the notable and lesser-known descendants of the area.

We did some birding on our visit and the cemetery yielded common and not-so-common species. Chickadees, song sparrows, blue jays, robins, and cardinals were seen and heard. In some cultures, cardinals are viewed as messengers from the hereafter with the thought that loved ones are attempting to connect with them. This symbolism comes from the word *cardo* (the root of the word “cardinal”), meaning hinge, and the bird is a hinge between the earth and the loved one’s souls.

We also saw a flock of fish crows who have been nesting in and around the cemetery and throughout Indiana Borough for many years. Fish crows are not common in these parts, but many years ago, they established a colony here. Maybe it was the McDonald’s across the road from the cemetery that attracted them.

Although fish crows look similar to the American (common) crow, they are about five inches shorter than common crows and a bit smaller (thinner) with a short, distinct nasal call, unlike the more familiar caw-caw of the common crow.

Recent winters have been mostly mild and on an early February day, the crocus was already in bloom, a subtle reminder that nature’s seasons are advancing earlier and earlier. Many wildflowers and flowering trees now bloom up to two weeks earlier than they did a few decades ago.

Henry David Thoreau meticulously recorded the leafing out of trees and shrubs during his lifetime. Researchers, using his journal notes, have learned that in the Concord, Mass., area, leafing out occurs at least 18 days earlier than in Thoreau’s time. We would most likely find similar results here in Indiana County. The changes will impact plant and wildlife species differently; some will be able to adapt, while others will fail to adjust to the timing of these seasonal changes.

My wife and I walked among the graves, stopping to comment on the people we remembered and admiring the various headstones and inscriptions. We visited the graves of family members and local people we knew, as well as other notable people from our time here in Indiana County.

A few of the notable people buried here include: John Sutton, who helped found the Indiana Normal School, now IUP; Judge Harry White, who served as a legislator and a county judge and is credited with donating land known today as White’s Woods; Harry McCreary, who founded the McCreary Tire and Rubber Company; Jim Nance, legendary athlete from Indiana High, Syracuse University and professional football; and Frances Strong Helman, who was instrumental in establishing the Indiana County Historical & Genealogical Society.

To learn more about Oakland Cemetery and its interesting history visit:

<https://oaklandcemetery.us/>.

Watching the birds that day, I was reminded of a quote by Emily Dickinson, “I hope you love birds, too. It is economical. It saves going to heaven.”

Ed Patterson is director of Indiana County Parks & Trails. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.