Will County Audubon Society's

THE CHICKADEE

A Chapter Newsletter

February 2026

President's Message-February 2026

By Martha Sojka

Our January program on "The Hidden Lives of Hummingbirds" was very interesting and informative and if you missed it, you can now view it on our YouTube channel! Our February program will also be virtual so be sure to grab a snack and tune in. Stay warm!

Leadership continues to work together to bring fun and exciting ways for members to learn and mingle including Breakfast with the Birds this month! We welcome all interests and levels, so take a look at what we have to offer in February and join in. If you have time, talent and/or treasure that you want to share with the Chapter, reach out with your thoughts and let's grow this bird loving community. Nature needs you!

Upcoming Events

February 12th, Monthly Meeting & Program, 6:45, via Zoom, Birding in Brazil.

February 14th, 8:30 to 12:00. Breakfast with the Birds, at Pilcher Park.

February 20th, Deadline for the March Chickadee.

March 14th, 9:30 am, Field Museum, Chicago.

April 11th, 9:00 am, Bird Hike at O'Hara Woods.

April 18th, 10:00 am, Lake Renwick Volunteer Training.

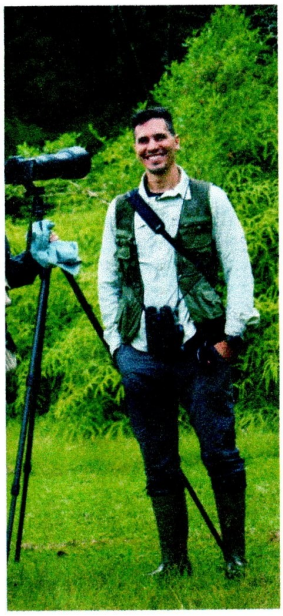
April 25th, Pop-up Field Trip with April 25th Nancy Cinatl of The Conservation Foundation.

May 9th, Spring Bird Count.

WILL COUNTY AUDUBON HOSTS

BIRDING IN BRAZIL: HIGH DIVERSITY THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY.

PRESENTED BY



Raphael Santos is a highly accomplished field ornithologist and birding tour leader with over 25 years of experience guiding groups throughout Brazil and other South American countries. A trained biologist and leading expert on Brazilian birdlife, he has spent years working with scientific collections in museums, publishing books, conducting technical reports, and banding wild birds. His sharp identification skills, deep knowledge of vocalizations, and ecological expertise make him an exceptional guide and speaker. Beyond the species list, Raphael crafts immersive birding experiences, connecting participants to the landscapes, cultures, and conservation stories behind each bird. A full-time guide and tour designer, he is known for his leadership, patience, and engaging style. Fluent in English, Spanish, and Portuguese, Raphael is widely regarded as one of Brazil's top birding professionals.

February 12, 2026

Business meeting 6:45pm
Program to follow 7:00pm

For the Zoom invitation, Go to
https://willcountyaudubon.illinoisaudubon.org/events/

Will County Audubon Programs are free and open to the public.

Brazil has one of the highest bird diversities on Earth, which is why birders from all over the world travel to this remarkable country. To cover the main birding routes and visit the most famous sites, multiple trips would be needed —and even then, there would still be much more to see. During his talk, Raphel will present the main birding itineraries in Brazil, the number of bird species typically recorded on a standard 18-day trip, and some of the most sought-after birds for every birdwatcher.

Will County Audubon Society

Breakfast With the Birds

FEB.14, 2026 | 8:30AM-NOON

PILCHER PARK NATURE CENTER

2501 HIGHLAND PARK DR, JOLIET, IL 60432

EMAIL HOSPITALITY CHAIR LEIGH-ANNE CLARK FOR FOOD/DRINK SIGN-UP LEIGHANNE_S@YAHOO.COM

BIRD FRIENDLY COFFEE WILL BE PROVIDED

FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

more information can be found at:
https://willcountyaudubon.illinoisaudubon.org

Field Trips

By Kara Morales

Our January chapter field trip to Rock Run Rookery ended up falling prey to blustery winter weather and rain! We still had 9 participants and were able to scope the waters thanks to the sail-covered overlook. We were able to get some close-up looks at Common Goldeneyes and even had a small raft of Red-breasted Mergansers. A short break in the rain allowed the group to venture down the trail, almost get pooped on by a Bald Eagle, only to have to turn back when the blowing rain returned with a vengeance.

We were able to log 17 species: Canada Goose, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Common Goldeneye, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Ring-billed Gull, American Herring Gull, Great Blue Heron, Bald Eagle, Downy Woodpecker, American Crow, European Starling, American Robin, American Tree Sparrow, and Dark-eyed Junco. There were even three Wild Turkeys feeding on Route 6 just outside the rookery. Thanks to everyone who turned out to brave the crazy winter weather!

February chapter event is Breakfast with the Birds.

March 14th Chapter Field Trip: I am excited to announce a special opportunity for our chapter to visit the Field Museum in Chicago! We will be getting a behind-the-scenes tour of their Ornithology Department and lab with a presentation about how the employees and lab volunteers collect and process bird specimens for the museum. More information on this event and how to register will be sent out in a chapter email soon- be looking out for that!

April 11th-Chapter Birding hike at O'Hara Woods in Romeoville

April 25th Pop-up Field Trip- Nancy Cinatl of The Conservation Foundation will give us a tour at her private property in Oswego. She will share the work she has done with native plantings and how that has helped support birds and other wildlife on her land. More information to come

January Meeting Minutes

Submitted by: Frank Ibarra

Date: January 8, 2025

Time: 6:45pm

Location: Pilcher Park Nature Center, Joliet IL

Meet called to order by: Martha Sojka, President

Attendance: Members, visitors and guests were welcomed. Total present: 44 via Zoom,

Minutes of November 13, 2025 Meeting: Meeting minutes read and approved, Motion by Frank Ibarra and seconded by Rita Renwick.

Hospitality: Breakfast with the Birds is scheduled for February 14th. Anyone interested in bringing a treat, please contact Leigh-Anne Clark.

Treasurer's Report: Janet Schleeter reported that a total of $679. was received from the silent auction held at the November 2025 meeting. Balance as of 12-20- 25: $5,929.69

Newsletter: Michele Olson thanked all the contributors to the Chickadee. The next deadline for articles is January 20th. Michele was recognized for her wonderful work on the newsletter.

IAS Rep: Frank Ibarra had nothing to add to his IAS report January report in the newsletter.

Committee Reports:

Programs: Greg Dubois reported the upcoming programs as follows: February- Brazil, 5 Biomes by Rafael Santos, via Zoom. March- Rita Renwick, Her trip to Panama in March 2025, in-person. April-Alicia Ward, International Crane Foundation Biologist, Natural History of Whooping Cranes, Audience in-person. May- David Edlund, U of I Grad Student, The Decline of Eastern Whip-Poor-Wills, in-person.

Membership/Communications: Martha filled in for Maura Carlisle. She listed the ways to connect to WCAS as: Membership, FB page, FB group, Email chat and website.

Field Trips: Kara Morales thanked all the those who took part in the Christmas Bird Count. There were 12,000 birds counted and 67 species identified by 34 participants.

The upcoming field trips are: January 10-Rock Run Rookery, January 31- Mississippi trip.

Conservation: Rita Renwick highlighted the Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves Restoration Kickoff at Pilcher Park on January 17th, 9 a.m. as a great local volunteer opportunity.

Old Business: If anyone has a special project idea for leadership to consider, please email WCAS at: wcas@willcountyaudubon.org

New Business: * Planning Your Native Garden: Native Garden Planner, Live on You Tube on January 15th at 5:00pm, *Pilcher Park Restoration Kickoff is January 17th at 9:00am. *Wild Things Conference is scheduled for January 31st.

Motion to Adjourn: Rita Renwick moved to adjourn the meeting and Janet Schleeter seconded. Motion was approved at 7:10 p.m.

BLISSFUL BOOKS FOR BIRDERS

Submitted by Diane Sniegowski

The Feather Detective: Mystery, Mayhem, and the Magnificent Life of Roxie Laybourne by Chris Sweeney, is a fascinating look into the career of a woman whose life's work was studying feathers. Her unusual career at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC pioneered a forensic science that would help to solve many cases from murder to identifying birds responsible for airplane disasters. The author describes Ms. Leybourne's journey through this new field and the many challenges she faced in a male-dominated institution.

This attention-grabbing book educates the reader on the unique study of feather forensics. Leybourne examined minute structures of feathers from hundreds of birds, picked apart bone fragments, and applied her knowledge of migration as she unraveled many mysteries. At times she obtained clumps of material that did not look like feathers or bird bones, so she needed to develop a method for sorting, classifying, and identifying what was given to her. The vast contributions she made to the Smithsonian and the budding scientists she mentored along the way are woven into this engaging narrative.

This book is a must-read if you enjoy exploring how forensics are used to solve cases, especially when it pertains to feathers. CSI – Avian style! Check it out at your local library.

Happy Reading and Happy Birding!

Treasurer's Report

By Janet Schleeter

Balance as of 12/20/25	$5,929.69
Income:	
Chapter Dues	260.00
Total	260.00
Expenses:	
Speaker	198.00
Total	198.00
Balance as of 1/20/26	$6,189.69

IAS REPORT

By: Frank Ibarra, IAS Board Representative, February 2026

Annual Appeal Update: Total received and allocated through early January is $136,369: General Operations: $79,283.24, Land Protection and Stewardship: $15,707.33, Membership and Education: $1,278.33, Conservation Science: $40,100.00.

Financial News: Although Christmas of 2025 lacked snow cover, things were definitely as green in the office as they were outside. Rhonda Rush (Lake-Cook Audubon Chapter) sent a generous gift of $10,000. then followed up, a week later, with a stock donation valued at $121,000. Both amounts are restricted to Land Acquisition & Stewardship. In between the holidays, Santa riding in his FedEx truck, delivered a $50,000 check (unrestricted) from Ross Thompson, long-time member of IAS and our affiliate, Decatur Audubon Society. John Burns (Westchester) a former scout in Russ Gremel's troop, donated $7,000. He restricted the gift to Russ' namesake sanctuary.

December 2025 Board of Directors Meeting: Officers for 2026, Kevin Richards (President), Frank Ibarra (Vice-President), Adam Reiss (Secretary), and Francine Appleton (Treasurer) will return for another year. December is also the meeting where the list of Standing and Special Committee Chairs and Committee Members for the upcoming year is presented. Standing Committee Chairs and Special Committee Chairs for 2026 are: Kevin Richards, Chair, Executive Committee, Francine Appleton, Chair, Finance Committee, Deb Carey, Chair, Land Protection and Stewardship Committee, Frank Ibarra, Chair, Long Range Planning Committee, Isaac Stewart, Chair, Membership and Education Committee, Randy Schietzelt, Chair, Conservation Science Committee, Frank Ibarra, Chair, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility & Inclusion Committee (DEAI), Grace Norris, Chair, Nominating Committee, Bob Fisher, Chair, Advocacy Committee.

Adams Wildlife Sanctuary: The area around the new building has been cleared and shortly before the temperatures dropped, the crew was able to pour the footings. Hopefully, we will see more progress now that the holidays are past.

Chapter Certifications: Reminder to Chapter Presidents that Chapter Certifications are due February 28.

Happy Winter Birding to All! Stay safe out there.

My Spark Bird

By Greg DuBois

Since childhood, I have had an interest in birds. But not until early adulthood would I characterize my interest as anything more than casual. Growing up I could ID robins, grackles, starlings and House Sparrows. We also had Northern Flickers and Brown Thrashers around my home. I still recall the summer evenings when it was common for the Common Nighthawks to be foraging and calling in the sky above my neighborhood.

In the early 1980's is when my first spark birds were discovered. I was in the US Navy and stationed at the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard in Bremerton, WA. Just a one-hour ferry ride from Seattle. During this time, I became friends with a co-worker who turned out to be an avid birdwatcher and he became my mentor.

I vividly recall three spark bird experiences that occurred during my three years in Bremerton.

While hiking solo in a suburban wood lot, I heard a strange and beautiful song. While I could not see the bird, I was able to describe the song to my mentor the next day at work. Not having a field guide and being inexperienced in birding terminology, I whistled the notes as best I could and characterized the song as like a bird whistling through a copper tube. My friend got a big laugh out of my description and asked, "Do you mean like playing a flute?" That was it! Yes! He identified the bird as a Swainson's Thrush. This is a bird we see here in IL in migration but don't often hear its flute-like song. Follow this link to Cornell's All About Birds Website to hear it. Scroll down and listen to the first recording listed and that is what I heard. https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Swainsons_Thrush/sounds

During another walk near my home on some vacant land, I encountered a small flock of vividly colored and marked birds feeding on the ground. They were yellow, black and white with massive beaks and unlike anything I had ever seen. I must have acquired a field guide by then as I identified them when I returned home as Evening Grosbeaks.

My final spark bird encounter in the Pacific Northwest was as vivid and surprising as it was brief. During another solo walk through a patch of pines an orange and black robin sized bird landed on the edge of a pine tree about 20 yards in front of me providing a close and unobstructed look of about 6-8 seconds before flying out of sight. I recall later describing the bird to my mentor as a robin with racing stripes! He got another hearty laugh at my expense and identified the bird as a Varied Thrush.

That three years in the Pacific Northwest was more like a spark place that fueled my fascination with birds. It was the first time I encountered multiple species of hummingbirds, the first place I saw an Osprey carrying a fish in flight head first. I saw many ducks and other seabirds for the very first time, but the details of the above three encounters are still with me, over 40 years later.

2025 Christmas Bird Count Results: WCAS

by Bob Soukup

WCAS held our portion of the Christmas Bird Count on Saturday, December 20th. The weather this year was cool, mainly between 25-30 degrees F, and fairly windy, but without snow or rain. We had a very successful count this year with great results compared to the past couple of years.

We had 34 participants this year (21 in 2024), counted a total of 11,932 birds (7012 in 2024), and identified 67 species (59 in 2024). The top ten species again made up about 90% of our totals. As expected, the Canada Goose topped our list. This year the big honkers checked in with 6608 birds counted. The rest of our top ten species were as follows:

2) European Starling	1200
3) American Robin	908
4) Mallard	769
5) Common Merganser	318
6) Mourning Dove	252
7) House Sparrow	227
8) Ring Billed Gull	226
9) Dark Eyed Junco	179
10) Herring Gull	107

A couple of things I found interesting were that we counted over 900 American Robins this year compared to about 100 in 2024, and 27 Bald Eagles compared to 4 last year.

I'm in the process of uploading results for our count circle (ILJO) into the National Audubon Society database. Thanks very much to everyone who participated, and again a big thanks to Kara Morales for organizing the count. The WCAS members and guests who counted this year were as follows:

Cindy Alberico	Tim Balassie	Maura Carlisle	Carol Cooley
Joel Craig	Alex Dimitralias	Cathy Dubois	Greg Dubois
Jeni Gabrenya	Andrea Garritano	Auggie Garritano	Auggie Garritano
Bob Hafey	Sarah Hamilton	Nick Howard	Nancy Herschberger
Amy Kolodziej	Sean Kolodziej	Glenn Johnson	Tom Moore
Kara Morales	Mario Morales	Anthony Nuccio	Michele Olson
Rita Renwick	Brendan Riley	Jenny Riley	Jacob Schmidt
Mark Schultz	Diane Sneigowski	Bob Soukup	Jim Turba
Jean Tyrell	Andy Wilde	Lee Witkowski	

Conservation Notes-February 2026

Rita Renwick

Have you made your new year's resolution yet? Time in nature is a way to improve physical and mental health. Exposure to natural and peaceful environments reduces stress, anxiety, and boosts the immune system. Twenty minutes in nature reduces cortisol levels - a stress hormone. It lowers the risk of depression, improves the ability to concentrate, and sparks creativity. Exposure to natural light, especially in the morning, regulates circadian rhythm improving sleep. Walking in nature improves physical fitness. Studies show that a connection to the natural world contributes to happiness and even the sounds of nature are restorative.

What opportunities do we have to make our lives more "green?"

You might create or improve a native garden in your own back yard, but the Will County Forest Preserves, Pilcher Park, Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, I & M Canal, Plank Rd. Trail, offer opportunities to experience nature, locally.

Some sites and trails are so popular, I choose lower-use times to visit. Fewer bikes, dogs, and people make for a more peaceful outing.

Volunteering also gets you out in nature, whether it is with Friends of IL Nature Preserves (Friends of Pilcher Park), the Forest Preserve District, or Midewin. Happiness can be found in a greener world!

Training for Lake Renwick Interpreters is Saturday, April 18 if interested! Check out the Will County F.P. District website for more information about volunteering.

Bob Soukup volunteering at Lake Renwick.

Friends of Pilcher Park planting natives.

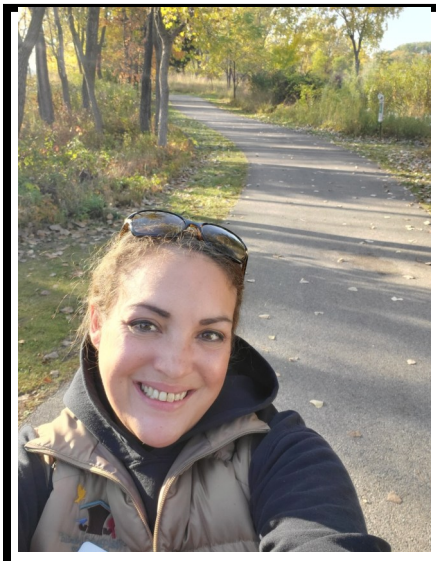
Friends of Pilcher Park Nature Preserve:

Winter Kickoff Update

By Martha Sojka

Friends continue to meet to work on restoration efforts at Pilcher Park. On January 17th volunteers gathered for a winter kick-off and worked on removing small understory trees in an upland area of the park. Workdays are available year round and volunteers are always welcome.

For more information, email pilcherpark@friendsilnature.org



A Bird's-Eye View: Identifying Birds from the Top Down

By: Ellen Green (Owner or Wild Birds Unlimited, Joliet)

One of the most satisfying moments in birding is that instant of recognition—when a quick glimpse turns into a name. While many people focus on birds at eye level, learning to identify birds from a top-down view opens up a whole new layer of observation, especially for birds seen flying, perched high in trees, or visiting feeders below a window.

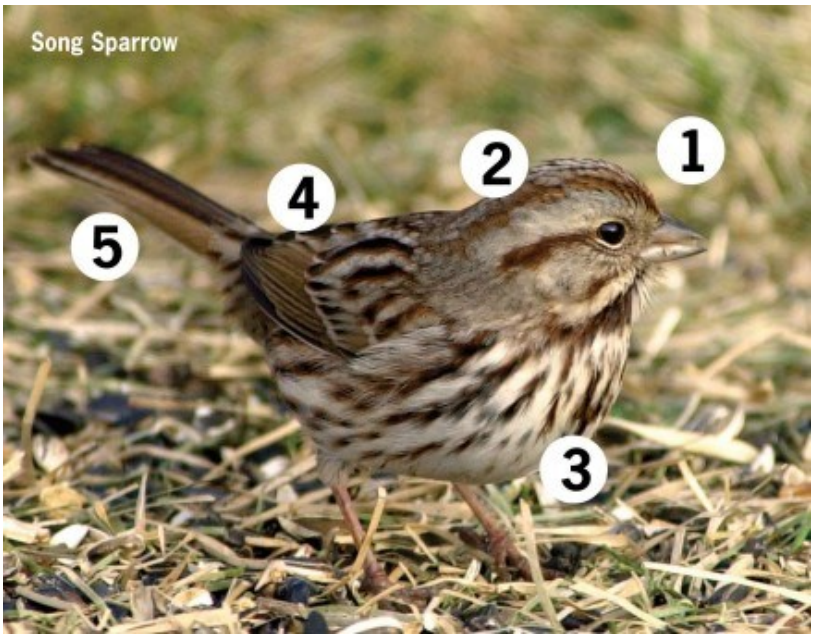
Start with the **silhouette (1)**. Before color or detail comes into play, notice the bird's overall size, shape, and posture. Is it sparrow-sized, robin-sized, or closer to a crow? Does it look compact and round, or long and sleek? Observe how it perches—upright, horizontal, or hunched—and how it flies. These big-picture clues immediately narrow your options.

Next, shift your focus to **head markings (2)**. Even from above, the head can reveal important details. Look for a distinct cap, also called a crown, that may be solid, striped, or boldly colored. Notice any stripes above or through the eye, pale eye rings or "spectacles," cheek patches, or a dark mustache mark along the face. A contrasting white throat patch can also stand out, even at a distance.

Then examine the **body markings (3)**. What colors dominate the back, breast, and belly? Is the chest plain, spotted, streaked, or marked with a bold patch? Check the flanks—the sides of the body—for streaking or clean coloration. A bright white or yellow rump patch, visible as the bird flies away, can be a key identification feature.

Pay close attention to the **wings (4)**. Are they a different color than the body? Look for wing bars, spots, or contrasting edges on the feathers. These details are often easiest to see from above when a bird is in motion or briefly spreading its wings.

Now, study the **tail (5)**. Is it long or short compared to the body? Note the shape—is it forked, squared, rounded, or pointed? Look for color patterns, bands, or stripes running horizontally or vertically.
Lastly, pay attention to the bird's behavior. Is it perched in a tree? Or is it on the ground? Is it alone or in a flock? Is it visiting a feeder and if so, what is it eating? The habits of a bird can also be very helpful for identification.



Wild Birds Continued

A good pair of binoculars can bring these features into sharp focus, and a reliable field guide helps piece the clues together. But, of course, there is an app for that- Merlin Bird ID. Merlin helps you ID birds in three different ways: Sound ID, Bird ID, and Photo ID. This amazing app, hosted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, is completely free and the content and performance is continually improved. Merlin is available in the Apple APP store & Google Play. Learn More: merlin.allaboutbird.org

With practice, your eye will learn to collect these details quickly. When you can name the species visiting your yard, they are no longer just random birds—they become familiar neighbors, deepening your connection to the natural world just outside your door.

February is a great month to celebrate birds! Not only is it National Bird Feeding Month, but it's also the month of the Great Backyard Bird Count. Thought I'd share some of the store's events with you for February:

Friday & Saturday, February 6th & 7th

How-To Participate in The Great Backyard Bird Count

What is the Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC)? And How can you participate? The GBBC is a citizen science project to learn about how birds are faring and anyone, anywhere, can participate! During these "How-To" days, you will learn how to ID birds, count them, and enter your count on MerlinID or ebird. The GBBC is great for people of all ages and experience with birding.

For more details call the store: 815-744-3800

Time: 9AM-5PM

Cost: FREE

www.joliet.wbu.com

Saturday, February 14th

In-Store Presentation "The Secret Love Life of Birds"

@ Wild Birds Unlimited, Joliet

Have you ever seen courtship or nesting behaviors from birds? They are unique to say the least! Join us for an engaging and educational presentation on the secret love life of birds. The experts at Wild Birds Unlimited will take you on a deep dive on the different mating and courtship strategies of birds. All are welcome to attend. It is recommended to call the store to reserve a seat (815-744-3800)

Time: 11AM

Cost: FREE

www.joliet.wbu.com

Donnie R. Dann

January 2026 – Volume 30 Number 1

CONSERVATION ALERT

Nature as Healer?

As I begin my 30th year of writing these Alerts, my original goal has been to raise awareness among the largest group of people possible and improve the perspective that readers have toward the importance of environmental protection. I hope at least to some small extent, I have succeeded and will continue to do so. Thank you for being among my loyal readers and for helping to continue spreading these messages far and wide.

Medications and doctor's visits seem to be an ever-increasing part of our lives, particularly as we get older. Maybe a walk in the woods or just spending some time in a lush garden with blooming native wildflowers is the prescription many of us need. Can immersion in nature really contribute to our physical and mental well-being?

The eminent Harvard Scientist E.O. Wilson wrote of a concept he called "biophilia" in which he discussed humans' natural affinity for the world's plants, animals, and natural landscapes. He said people feel an innate preference for the environment that cradled us, just as all other living things thrive in their own particular habitats.

In the American Journal of Preventative Medicine, environmental psychologist Dr. Howard Frumkin looked at the scientific basis for our relationship with nature and that it is a likely component of good health. Consider what several recent scientific studies showed:

- In testing the impact of animals on human stress and pain, prior to oral surgery the most relaxed people were those that watched fish in an aquarium, in contrast to a variety of other passive activities like sitting quietly or observing a waterfall.
- 95% of people living in retirement homes said that windows facing green, landscaped ground were important or essential.
- Patients recovering from surgery in rooms overlooking trees and foliage had shorter hospitalizations and less need for pain medications as compared with patients with brick wall views. In a dental waiting room, a large mural of an open natural scene was wall hung on some days and removed on others. When visible, patients had lower blood pressure than on days when the mural was taken down.

In a sampling of over 700 people who participated in a wilderness excursion, 90% reported the experience helped the break an addiction, defined broadly from nicotine to chocolate.

Henry David Thoreau and John Muir discussed the spiritual benefits that can accrue from spending time in the deep woods or in the mountains. Rachel Carson said "you will never be tired, bore, or alone if you have an interest in nature", and Zeno, "the goal of life is living in agreement with nature". The Wilderness Act of 1964 was inspired by recognition of the relaxing, healing, and deeply restorative power of forests murmurs, mountain retreats, and fields of flowers.