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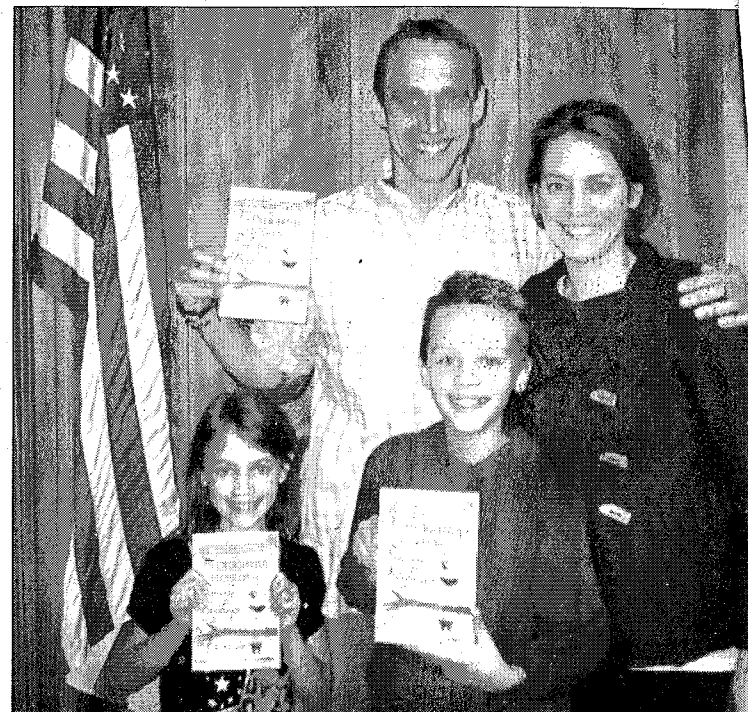
Birding, Hope, and Storytelling: A Family Affair

By Laurie Dashnau

In a world burdened by war, hunger, environmental conservation issues, and more, how does one sustain hope and cultivate hope in others? Eli Knapp, Professor of Intercultural Studies, Biology, and Earth Science at Houghton College, wrote his newly released book, *The Delightful Horror of Family Birding: Sharing Nature with the Next Generation*, published by Torrey Press, largely in response to this question. "Birds are the perfect antidote to the despair that can so easily prevail," he asserted.

During a talk Eli gave to members of the Allegany County Bird Club at Grace United Methodist Church in Wellsville on November 2, he shared dozens of pictures taken on excursions with his family and "extended family," his students, to such far-flung places as Tanzania and Ecuador. He equally shared pictures of a Long-tailed Duck, found in Irondequoit Bay, New York, as well as of a "surreptitious" Black-billed Cuckoo and a Northern Cardinal, both spotted in Fillmore. "We always gawk at photos taken in exotic places," Eli said, "forgetting that what we see outside our windows is equally arresting."

Quoting an Emily Dickinson poem, "Hope is the thing with feathers / That perches in the soul / And sings the tune without the words / And never stops at all," Eli went on to explain that, whenever he returns home or back to his office from birding, he comes back "lighter" than when he went. "I think I get my



Author Eli Knapp with his wife, Linda, son, Ezra, and daughter, Indigo.

gone extinct, including six species in North America. "You now only see these birds in museums," Eli reflected.

Overall, however, Eli's presentation was much more poetic and narrative in nature. He recounted a time when he stayed up late to study Organic Chemistry and was startled by a Barn Owl that hit the window right in front of him only to fly away, "dissolving into the inky night." "This was one of those indelible moments that etch themselves into the mind," he stated, explaining that encounters with birds often are "mesmerizing experiences" that are transformative for those of

comes in birding being a communal rather than solitary experience. This truth was very evident during Eli's presentation, as his daughter Indigo (named after the Indigo Bunting) responded to him showing a slide of an Elf Owl, which is a mere six inches long and can fit into most people's pockets, by squealing with glee, "Oh, how cute! My favorite!" Eli's son, Ezra, chimed in with birding anecdotes of his own.

Why should others care about birding? In our technology-saturated society, Eli fears far too many people have "lost the art of being present" to others and the world around them and

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he comes back "lighter" than when he went. "I think I get my 'therapy' more habitually than anyone else," he semi-quipped, "and with the benefits of getting exercise and without a counseling bill."

Indeed, Eli's presentation was quite entertaining. Referring to an Acorn Woodpecker he saw in California, he commented, "In a single granary tree, one of them had stored 50,000 acorns. If you're a hoarder, this is your bird." He then told the group about the Brown Thrashers spotted locally, saying, "If I were to start a grunge rock band, this bird's name very well might be the name for it as well." He also talked about growing up near Lake Ontario and how, as a boy, he would ride his bike to the parking lots at the State University of New York at Oswego and try to spook the hundreds of Ring-billed Gulls who congregated there, only to be bombarded with "retributive raining feces."

Eli's talk had its share of serious moments too, including the sobering fact that, since the 1500s, 150 species of birds have

merizing experiences. "I think that are transformative for those of us who love nature." "I've always stared out of windows, put out bird seed, and chased birds. In sum, birding has always been a healthy addiction for me," he recounted, "both because of the sense of the quest involved and because birding is a portal into investing oneself in lots of other concerns" such as ecological stewardship.

Just why are so many people enamored with birds? Eli believes it is because they are colorful, accessible, and endlessly varied—10,000+ strong in kinds. Many of them also have funny names, participate in hilarious dances, and have songs we enjoy learning and imitating.

Eli concedes that a good share of his birding excursions—some of which could be deemed "hair-brained"—have included him, his family, and his students being hot, tired, and frustrated, especially when a sought-after bird has proven "ever so elusive." Nevertheless, the adventure of the pursuit and the joy when eventually finding the bird are far greater than the feelings of failure when unsuccessful.

So, too, is the joy for Eli that

art of being present" to others and the world around them and of paying close attention and sustaining focus. Birding is one way to be aware of the beauty and diversity around us and to "practice awe." Eli reminded his audience that "It has been said that 'The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of wonder.'"

Eli acknowledged that he is not the first person to address these matters, recommending Richard Louv's Last Child in the Woods and Scott D. Sampson's How to Raise a Wild Child as books written in a similar vein as his. Yet Eli's collection of essays is as timely as ever. "For some of my students," Eli explained, "walking off a sidewalk and silencing their phones and other devices is a terrifying 'first.' Whether interacting with them or my own children, I long to help reawaken in them the goodness of reveling in nature and in sharing that goodness through the power of narrative."

Eli's book can be purchased through Amazon. Everyone is also welcomed to attend Eli's next presentation, 6:00-7:30 p.m. Wednesday, November 14 at the David A. Howe Public Library in Wellsville.

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