

A Native Garden Takes Wing



By Brian “Fox” Ellis | Art by Cheri Lee Charlton

ON THE CORNER of Ravenswood and Rosehill on the north side of Chicago a native garden has taken root. “This corner has always been a bit of an eyesore,” stated Scott Fink, President of the West Edgewater Area Residents (WEAR) association. “Our main garden to the north evolved into a butterfly sanctuary with a growing focus on native flowers. When we decided to take over the adjacent vacant lot, we wanted it to be 100% native.” Possibility Place, a native plant nursery in Monee, helped with the plant selection.

“Preparing the site for planting was a massive amount of work,” he continued. “It involved removing dead trees, solarizing the lot with black plastic, clearing some of the gravel, removing cement blocks, and then spreading three truckloads of dirt and compost. It was a big community effort.”

Fink also applied for the IAS Bird and Butterfly Sanctuary Certification. He and I met at the Wild Things conference during a presentation on Rockford’s Audubon Mural Project.

“We’re always looking for ways to make the garden more engaging for the community,” he said. “When I saw the Audubon mural presentation, I knew we had to find a way to create a mural here. This educational element creates a greater awareness of endangered birds and the ecosystems they depend on.”

Scott and I met again at a webinar for the Audubon Mural project. I was invited to join the WEAR team as the avian advisor. We also met the artist Cheri Charlton, who volunteered to help design and paint the mural. The three of us focused on birds one would see in the garden, with an emphasis on seasonal migration. We explored the overarching idea that we are all migrants, and yet we are connected to the land we currently call home. Birds, like people, migrate in different ways. Some are year round residents, while others are just passing through. There are birds that nest and raise their young here, but migrate to Mexico each winter. Other species will raise their young in the far north, spending their winters here. One goal of this project is to cele-

brate the neighborhood’s connections to these migratory pathways.

“We chose birds that had colors that would make a visual impact from far away,” Charlton said. “I was also excited to include my favorite, the Red-bellied Woodpecker. I learned about them in a bird mural I worked on in Rogers Park in 2017. I chose poses that created a dynamic composition, with backgrounds that are connected stylistically with a transition from season to season.”

With crowd sourced funding they have met their goal. This spring they will wash and prime the walls and do an underpainting, blocking in large areas of color. Charlton will use a grid system to transfer the images proportionally onto the walls. Students from nearby Sean High School will help paint. Then Charlton will add the fine detail with line work and spray-painting techniques. You can visit online to watch the progress, or better yet, volunteer next spring to wield a paintbrush and help this project take flight. wearchicago.org ♦