

# Birds, photojournalism centered in new WKU gallery

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1 of 12



l journalism and photography, g Stuff” show. The show will Tuesday, March 4. (Jack

Tim Broekema, a professor in Western Kentucky University’s department of visual hangs exhibits inside the department’s gallery room for the upcoming “Birds Doing feature wildlife photography from photographer Steve Jessmore, and is set to open Dobbs / Daily News)

For Steve Jessmore, a photojournalist of 50 years, the adage of giving a voice to the voiceless extends beyond people. Birds, too, lack a voice – that is, until they’re hurt or gone, he says.

And birds will get an important part of the spotlight at Western Kentucky University’s newest gallery, featuring a variety of photography from Jessmore, twice a first-place winner in the wildly competitive Audubond bird photography contest. The exhibition, “Birds Doing Stuff,” features a photo selection from a work-in-progress by Jessmore that aims to showcase the beauty and fragility of a sliver of northwest Michigan’s Torch River – where tourism and overuse of the land has compromised the ecosystem and its wildlife.

The opening reception is March 4 at 6 p.m. in the Jody Richards Hall Atrium; a 7 p.m. presentation of his work will follow at the Jody Richards Hall Auditorium. The gallery, open to the public through April 18, has hours 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Wednesday and 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday through Friday; it’ll close when WKU closes.

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Curator Tim Broekema, professor of visual journalism and photography, intends, as usual, to make it experiential. An island in the middle of the gallery will represent the problem on the river; on either side is the shore, where birds are fighting for space, he said.

“It’s a unique show, curated for that space,” he said. Once it ends in April, “it goes down and will never be seen again.”

The photos span several years – an expanding collection that Jessmore turned from a hobby into a project that has spurred ongoing advocacy for the Torch River ecosystem.

All but out of work early in the pandemic, an assignment to photograph kayaks led him to try kayaking himself. He soon found himself heading out before sunrise to take pictures – and one September 2020 day, ducks flew overhead, but he couldn’t get the shot.

“I remember saying, ‘Game on: This is what I’m going to try to learn to photograph,’ ” he said.

Jessmore soon had wins in the Audubon Photography Awards. After placing in the top 100 in his third year competing, Jessmore pitched the larger project behind the WKU gallery to National Audubon Society Photo Editor Sabine Meyer, who has since helped him develop it, he said.

This larger project, tentatively to be titled “No Wake Zone,” intends to show the calm where the wildlife is out, contrasting with the storm of human activity, Jessmore said.

He shared his pictures with local conservation groups and sheriff departments on both sides of the river in the fall, and he’s had meetings with Michigan Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy. A solution, he said, is in the works – and the groups are trying to get some sort of rules and restrictions in place before boaters converge on Memorial Day and over the summer, he said.

“I believe the problem’s on everybody’s’ mind, but I think the photos were proof of the problem,” he said. “I think there was a spark ...

What I’ve always done in my career is tell real long-term stories . . . I’m hoping my work sort of speaks to help protect (the birds) and protect their habitat.”