

'New way of looking at nature': These naturalists explore queer ecology with geese, owls and more

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As Raquel García-Álvarez guides hikers on a trail surrounding the Sand Ridge Nature Center, her remarks on flora and fauna are interrupted by

geese honking. She explains, as curious onlookers admire the birds skirting the water, that there's more to them than meets the eye.

Geese are known to display "homosocial behavior," she said. For example, there's been documented instances of two male geese pair-bonding with each other.

"Wildlife does not live within the context of us assigning them, 'Oh, you're gay, you're straight.' They show homosocial behavior because they use it to bond. It also just brings them joy," said García-Álvarez, the policy and sustainability manager at the Forest Preserves of Cook County.

On a sunny September afternoon, about 20 [community members](#) embarked on the "Queerness of Nature Walk" at the South Holland nature preserve. Naturalists used plants and animals like geese to teach queer ecology, the idea that nature doesn't always express itself in a binary way.

Lanie Rambo, a Forest Preserve naturalist, described queer ecology as "a new way of looking at nature" that acknowledges how sometimes labels such as gay or straight, and male or female, aren't precise. She said people often "anthropomorphize," taking human characteristics and applying them to nature.

"This is a bad idea, because nature is much more fluid. It's much more flexible, and there's a lot more going on than just these binary categories," she said.

In fact, Rambo said there's evidence that 1,500 [animal species](#), from insects to mammals, engage in same-sex behavior. These relations weren't historically recognized largely due to homophobia, she said.

"A lot of times when scientists saw these things, they'd say, 'Oh, this animal is doing something abnormal or this is wrong. This is bad or this animal has gone crazy.' That's not necessarily true," Rambo said.

Eliot Schrefer, author of the book "Queer Ducks (and Other Animals)," chronicled some of this history in an article in The Washington Post. Explorer George Murray described same-sex relations among penguins as "depraved" in 1911, and the Edinburgh Zoo director T.H. Gillespie said bisexual penguins "enjoy privileges not as yet permitted to civilized mankind" in 1932.

Some theories suggest scientists mistakenly misgendered animals engaging in same-sex relations, while others believe scientists overlooked the behavior to avoid censure from colleagues, Schrefer wrote. Emerging research also acknowledges that some animals have sex for reasons other than procreation, and it doesn't necessarily affect their species' ability to survive.

Rambo said female-female pair bonds in American kestrels, small falcons that are common in Illinois, have raised eggs together successfully.

"As someone who has been working with animals since I was about 18 years old, my working theory is that it brings them joy to live this way, to be with each other," she said. "They don't need to be ostracized from their communities. Things that bring you joy reduce your stress and reduce your [heart rate](#) and prolong your life."

Birds challenging gender norms

At the beginning of the walk, Rambo pointed out the nature center's resident great horned owl, identifiable based on its prominent feathered tufts and large yellow eyes. At first, she said staff believed the owl was

male based on size, but recent behavior seems better aligned with a female. Rambo said it's difficult to tell males and females apart in many [bird species](#).

"For us, as the caretakers of the animal, it doesn't really matter. They've got to eat. They need to have enclosure, they need to have stimulation for taking care of them," Rambo said. "But whether or not they're male or female, it doesn't matter."

Later on, a bright red northern cardinal, the state bird of Illinois, perched on a fence in front of hikers. Though rare, García-Álvarez said "bilateral gynandromorphism" is possible among the birds, essentially meaning that they're half-female, half-male. These birds appear almost perfectly split along the middle, with bright red feathers characteristic of a male on one side and pale brown feathers common to females on the other.

García-Álvarez added scientists have also identified half-male, half-female rose-breasted grosbeaks, a common summer resident in northern parts of Illinois. The gynandromorphs have one yellow-brown "wing pit" that is common in females, while the other side has the pink color typical in males.

"There's a lot of violence toward individuals who consider themselves trans—[trans women](#), trans males, and there's also high suicide rates within the LGBTQIA+ community because they are not accepted," García-Álvarez said. "So imagine if they were to hear those words, 'You are perfect just the way you are,' or 'You are natural just as nature intended.'"

Impact on humans

Flowers also prompt people to think critically about gender, García-Álvarez said. A flower is considered "perfect" when it has both male and

female parts within one flower structure.

"Imagine if we talked about humans in that same way, like you are perfect because you embody both the masculine and female spirit," she said.

For some, this science feels personal. When Christine Fleming, who volunteers at other [nature preserves](#) throughout the state, got an email explaining the event, the 22-year-old knew it was worth driving an hour from her home in Skokie. She thought the discussion on the cardinals was particularly informative.

"I love nature. I've been camping with my family since I was a kid," Fleming said. "I had gotten a major in environmental science. So this is my thing."

As a gay Latino member of the Cook County Board of Commissioners, Anthony Quezada said it's important to talk about different identities—even in nature. The walk was part of the county's Racial Equity Week.

"As a queer person growing up in a poor community, I was taught to believe in a binary for myself," Quezada said. "But as I got older, I started to understand that I love multiple people, that I express myself in multiple ways, just as nature does."

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