



express

Choreographer

**Jennifer
Monson**

connects with
nature by
performing along
the migratory
path of birds.

BY MATT PEIKEN
Pioneer Press

Jennifer Monson's dances hang on a wing and prayer. "They've always been about what's wild and uncontrolled and mysterious and uncontrollable," Monson says.

Her troupe, aptly named Bird Brain, has spent the past seven weeks performing along a northern migratory path of ducks and geese, starting in Texas and shadowing the Mississippi River. Bird Brain is in the Twin Cities this weekend, performing at a former ammunition depot tonight, the Minneapolis Sculpture Garden on Saturday and outside the University of Minnesota's Bell Museum on Sunday. Bird Brain then heads north to Duluth on its way to Canada's Whiteshell Provincial Park.

Monson, who lives outside New York City, debuted Bird Brain four years ago with the "Pigeon Project," whose rooftop performances in Brooklyn were drawn from noticing swallows and hummingbirds thriving in an urban environment near the Hudson River. In the years since, she



flights of fancy

has focused projects on gray whales and ospreys before turning this spring to ducks and geese. Monson plans to close Bird Brain in 2006 with a tour based on northern wheatears.

The link, Monson says, is her intrigue with the navigational instincts of different animals and, in turn, the challenges of summoning similar traits with a dance ensemble.

"It all comes from a strong point of view of preserving wetlands and undoing all the wrongs that have been done," she says.

Monson usually focuses on specific endangered species but couldn't find any among ducks and geese, she says, because hunters have "done such a good job" protecting the population — so much so that, since starting this project, her opinion of hunting has changed.

"I grew up on the East Coast, outside a culture of hunting, but I found out hunters tend to be incredibly informed and have done this incredible preservation of habitat," she says.

"They're probably singularly responsible for still having wetlands in this country."

FLIGHTS OF FANCY: 2E

- **What:** Bird Brain Dance
- **When and where:** 6:30 p.m. today, Twin Cities Army Ammunitions Plant, Hamline Avenue North at Highway 96, Arden Hills; 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday, Minneapolis Sculpture Garden at Walker Art Center, 725 Vineland Place, Mpls; 11 a.m. Sunday, courtyard of Bell Museum of Natural History, University of Minnesota, 10 Church St. S.E., Mpls.
- **Admission:** Free
- **Call:** 612-375-7622

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Bird Brain's current tour has taken other unintended turns, such as starting in Corpus Christi rather than Houston — "They have red-headed ducks that winter there, so it worked out," Monson says — dictated in large part by arts institutions ready to receive them. Walker Art Center is sponsoring Bird Brain's weekend in the Twin Cities.

"Like the ducks on their path, I based my tour on the routes where we were likely to get resources," Monson says.

Like many who perform out-

doors, Monson roots herself in the abstraction that comes with improvisation, but there's a cumulative quality to her work and larger purpose fueling Bird Brain's flight.

The Sierra Club has helped Monson identify open spaces and urban centers vital to endangered species. Monson spends several days in every community in which she performs, meeting people and soaking up the environments that will become her stages.

She has created educational guides for elementary school-

children, and many classes respond by creating "flocking dances" for Bird Brain performances.

"It's taken me a really long time to understand dancing outdoors and I'm still not sure I really do," she says. "I'm taking in so much information, and every single ounce of energy disperses everywhere, so it's difficult to contain.

"But there's something about allowing myself to become completely ambient and blend into the landscape, and I consider myself successful if people begin thinking of their own connections to nature."

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ANJA HITZENBERGER

Says choreographer Jennifer Monson about her work: "I consider myself successful if people begin thinking of their own connections to nature."