

# BIRD SONGS

Newsletter of the North Lakeland  
Discovery Center Bird Club

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## **A Review of the Minocqua Christmas Bird Count 2018**

*Donna Roche*

The Minocqua Christmas Bird Count (CBC) took place on Thursday, December 20, 2018. Just prior to this count, the weather had been unseasonably warm. The good snow base was diminished and there was open water on some lakes and rivers. However, we were not to find any waterfowl. Our morning started out particularly dark and foggy and our field counters commented that it was hard to see distances across lakes and up into the sky. The fog lifted in most areas by ten, but it was very damp and still with low bird activity. About 11, a slight breeze and snow showers started for the rest of the day. Finally with a change in the weather coming, our usual dependable winter birds finally started to buzz in and out of the feeders in the yards with filled seed and suet feeders.

Our Discovery Center Bird Club group covered the four quadrants of our Minocqua area CBC with 5 groups of between 1 and 4 people. We met for lunch at 1 pm at Polecat and Lace and enjoyed hearing each other's stories about the species that were counted. There were several people who participated in the Manitowish Water's CBC last Saturday and we compared some of the differences between and similarities of what was seen that day and on this one. A similarity was that few finch or grosbeak species were counted. John Bates talked about the lack of conifer and other cones in our area as a possible reason for the lack of those species. During lunch Carne Andrews took a call from a person who we had earlier visited. The Northern Cardinal that he said visited them was now at their feeders! Also during lunch, John Bates said he'd heard that a Red-headed Woodpecker was at a yard in the area and that we should try to contact the person. We did, there were phone calls back and forth, and finally the bird arrived in the yard for a photo-op and now we have photographic evidence of what I'm sure is a first RHWO for the Minocqua count!

But, that's not all...the stories go on about cardinals in the area later in the day. Ed Marshall gets firewood from a man in Minocqua who reported to him that he had a NOCA in his yard on Thursday that has been showing up all summer with its family! I had called Elaine Kotlarek who had been an active bird club member over the years to be a feeder counter. She said that bird activity in her yard has been light and slow, but that she would watch before she had to leave for a dentist appointment. She called me back later in the day to say that she counted chickadees, nuthatches, and a NORTHERN CARDINAL while at her dentist, Rasmussen Dental off of Hwy 'J'. 'Could she count that for us?...Yes, Elaine and thank you very much! Wow, three sightings of the NOCA for our count. It is also interesting to note that these three locations are not that far from one another....one bird, two or more??

Other feeder counters are responsible for filling in so many other locations that our field counters cannot possibly cover. They get great birds, too!! This year, a few Common Redpolls, a White-throated Sparrow and a Dark-eyed Junco were counted by feeder counters. I am very grateful for their participation each year as always.

Our core bird counters are our field counters. They are terrific, enthusiastic and dependable to support this effort by getting out there and finding birds! Carne, Jean, Kay, Vanessa, Ed, Deb, Sarah, Mary, John, Mark, Jon and Judy.....thank you very much!! And of course, thanks to the guy who has kept this count going by promising me that he will do ALL the paperwork. It's all yours now, GUY! He will have the final tally of bird species and numbers of birds for us, but my total for you now is 24!

## Interesting Sighting

*M E Norton*

Funny I should get the email December 2<sup>nd</sup> about the BIRD SONGS newsletter.

Just that morning I noticed that with the wind and the low clouds that a group of ravens were flying low around the trees in my front and back yard. Then I heard the low chirping sound of a bird but not the usual winter chickadees or blue jays or woodpeckers. I kept looking out my front window to see what it was and then I saw a juvenile eagle flying low and then it landed on a branch in my front yard high up. Then I realized that the ravens were bugging the eagle. I always feel sorry for juvenile eagles because I know they have a tough time surviving. I saw it keep bending down low. I thought it was preening. Then I got my binoculars out and saw that it actually was feeding on something bloody. I could not tell what the prey was because it was in bad shape. Then I was saying 'Yeah' for the juvenile that was doing quite well with its morning meal. I carefully went downstairs and out my front door to photograph it with my little camera. I did get some shots with my zoom. There are times when I wish I had a better camera!



Juvenile Bald Eagle with prey

*Photo by M E Norton*

## **Bird Club Trip to Sax-Zim Bog**

*Sarah Besadny*

On December 5<sup>th</sup>, 8 members of the Bird Club loaded their gear onto the Discovery Center van for a two-day trip through northwest Wisconsin and Sax-Zim Bog in Minnesota. The very first sighting was less than a mile from the Discover Center – a pair of Trumpeter Swans in the open water near the bridge in downtown Manitowish Waters. Our first official stop was the power plant in Ashland where there is always a bit of open water even when the rest of the Chequamegon Bay in Lake Superior is frozen. There was one lone Common Goldeneye swimming around. Soon a pair of otters were spotted doing their funny “run and slide” antics across the ice. It soon became clear that they too had spotted that lone Common Goldeneye and slipped into the water in pursuit. Luckily the duck was paying attention and took off for parts unknown.

While we were headed to the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center for lunch and some birding, a discussion arose about the definition of Chequamegon. Thanks to an internet search, we learned that Chequamegon is derived from an Ojibwa word meaning “place of shallow water”. At the Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center we added some additional species to our trip list, but unfortunately we did not add the Snowy Owl – one had been spotted there the evening before. We tried looking for it along Hwy 2 where one had also been spotted recently but still no luck. So it was on to Duluth.

We stopped at Canal Park in Duluth and took a slippery walk along the channel. There were several rafts of Common Goldeneyes in the water, a group of Ring-billed Gulls lounging on the channel walls and several large flocks of European Starlings and Rock Pigeons were spotted on the bridges near by.

The next day we met Heather (Lumpkin) Gerth at a park-and-ride. Heather was our trip leader for Sax-Zim Bog and she took us right to the birds! The target bird for our first spot in the Bog was Canada Jay (formerly called Gray Jay). Heather came prepared with a bag full of peanut butter that she spread on a tree. It wasn't more than a few minutes before a group of five Canada Jays came sailing in! We all got magnificent views of these lovely birds – it's as if they were just floating in the air as they flew into grab some peanut butter.



Heather put out peanut butter ..... and in came the Canada Jays

*Photos in this article by Mark Westphal*

Heather guided us by some local residents who keep their feeders filled and we all got great looks at Pine Grosbeaks, both males and females, and it was fun to easily see the differences between the two sexes.



<= Male

Pine  
Grosbeaks

Female = >



Then it was on to a trail that held the possibility of a Northern Hawk Owl. Down the trail we traipsed and once we were into an opening the owl was spotted. Once again, we all had great looks at this beautiful bird.

Before the day was over, we had also spotted species that aren't seen too often including Evening Grosbeaks, Shrikes, a Sharp-tailed Grouse, a Pheasant and Black-billed Magpies. Heather was a wonderful guide and Carne did a terrific job driving the van and backing up every time someone would call out "there's a bird!". Great fun was had by all and most everyone went home with at least one life bird to add to their list.

Species seen on the two-day birding trip to Sax-Zim Bog:

Trumpeter Swan - 2

Mallard - 1

Common Goldeneye - 32

Ring-necked Pheasant - 1

Sharp-tailed Grouse - 1

Wild Turkey - 1



Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) – 7  
Ring-billed Gull – 10  
Bald Eagle – 3  
Rough-legged Hawk – 2  
Northern Hawk Owl – 1  
Downy Woodpecker – 3  
Hairy Woodpecker – 2  
Northern Shrike – 2  
Canada Jay – 6  
Blue Jay – 6  
Black-billed Magpie – 2  
American Crow – 5  
Common Raven – 8  
Black-capped Chickadee – 34  
Red-breasted Nuthatch – 7  
White-breasted Nuthatch – 1  
European Starling – 59  
Evening Grosbeak – 4  
Pine Grosbeak – 26  
Dark-eyed Junco – 1

## **Bosque del Apache Adventure**

*Guy David*

During the last 2 days of November, 2018 Bonnie and I had the opportunity to meet another couple at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge near San Antonio, New Mexico. We had described the wonders of the place so they agreed to interrupt their trip to AZ to join us there for a day of birding.

When we first arrived at the visitor center mid-afternoon on November 29, we checked with the volunteers to confirm that the cranes were still using a certain pool for night roosting, where we had seen them on other years. The answer was in the affirmative so we made it a point to be at that pool around sunset to watch the Sandhill Cranes coming in. Being a well-established roosting area for the cranes, there were over 100 other birders and photographers there too! We were present to witness the phenomenon of thousands of birds coming in until it was nearly dark, after which we proceeded to check in to our motel in Socorro, NM, have some dinner, and get a good night's rest. Well, not so restful for me, having anticipatory visions of flocks of white geese dancing in my head.



*All photos in this article  
were taken by Guy David*

### Sandhill Cranes



Knowing that we needed to be back at the same pool before sunrise the next morning, we got an early breakfast and left Socorro in the predawn darkness to get to our destination in time. When we arrived, we found the cranes still in the area of the same pool but, as an extra special treat, an adjacent pool was harboring thousands of white geese too. What an experience to be standing in one spot and hearing a cacophony of cranes calling to our left and so many geese calling to our right. We were wondering what they all were having to say to one another. Our conjecture was that they were discussing whether it was time to leave their pools to fly out to regional feeding areas for the day. Some of us thought they were simply commenting on all those creatures lined up on the dike watching them, shivering in the cold, without nice down feathers lining our bodies. They seemed to be mocking us as they splashed water over themselves and preening, as if to be taking their morning showers!

As sunrise progressed the birds continued to become louder and more restless as they began to lift off, hundreds at a time, to fly out to their feeding areas. We stayed in that area enjoying the spectacle until all of the thousands of birds that were there had left. The whole thing happened in about 1.5 hours.



White Geese

We also left that area to spend the day birding the refuge. One of the wonders of this refuge for the birders is that there are so many great birding areas that are easily accessible by private vehicles. One can drive along multiple ponds and wetland areas while using our vehicles as a blind. The birds don't mind as we drive by, stop, observe, make eBird records, take photos and move on. There are miles of dikes which serve as roadways for this purpose.

There was no need to be concerned about disturbing the wildlife. In the areas accessible to the public, the birds and other wildlife have become pretty accustomed to human presence. In addition to public roads there are many miles and acres of refuge areas that are only accessible by National Wildlife Refuge Management and employees.

One of things that the visitor volunteers told us was to be sure to visit the northern part of the public access area where many of the Sandhill Cranes go to feed during the day. When we arrived in the area later in the morning, we were astonished by how many Sandhill Cranes were present. An expansive area of the upland was used to raise corn. It appears that part of the management practice is to simply knock down areas of corn stalks every so often while leaving the rest of the corn standing. Rather than harvesting this corn it is managed for wildlife use. Judging from the thousands of cranes (no, I didn't try to count them, they were so numerous), they were rather contented. I think that, despite the huge number of cranes present, there would be plenty of corn to help sustain the flock until they depart for northern migration later in February.





Sandhill Cranes

As we wandered the refuge throughout the day, we would occasionally spot a massive flock of white geese reeling about in the sky. They would do this for a few minutes and then settle back down in the areas they were occupying during the day. We did not get close to their daytime feeding areas but, having witnessed a massive number early in the morning in one of their overnight roosting areas satisfied our quest.

White geese reeling  
about in the sky



By the way, the “white geese” were mixed species flocks of Snow Geese and Ross’s Geese. The overwhelming majority were Snow Geese but Ross’s Geese could be

distinguished when we were able to be close enough to observe their bills to check for size, shape, and presence or absence of a “grin patch”.

The overwhelming highlight of our visit to Bosque del Apache certainly was the fact that never during our stay were we out of sight or sound of Sandhill Cranes and White Geese. Capping off the adventure was our ability to observe and record about 50 species of birds on eBird during our stay.

I guess I did a good job with my eBird reporting but I did mess up the identification of one female duck. Within a few days I heard from an area eBird reviewer and we got that settled pretty easily, once I found a lucky photo that I had taken of the bird in flight. Yep, minus one species off my list for the trip. The species I reported was uncommon for the season and the photo showed wing striping that showed the bird was an American Wigeon, not a Blue-winged Teal. I politely thanked the guy for his service!

Here are a couple of websites where one can find a lot of information about this Internationally recognized birding hotspot established along the Rio Grande River.

[https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Bosque\\_del\\_Apache/](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Bosque_del_Apache/)

<http://www.friendsofbosquedelapache.org/Default.aspx>

If you may be thinking of birding this area sometime in the future, do so between late November and mid-February. It is a winter haven for birds that are resident or migrants to the area.

## **Overview of the Northern Hawk Owl (*Surnia ulula*)**

*Mary Jenks*

WOW! I finally got my first look at a northern hawk owl at Sax Zim Bog in December. John Cassidy spotted it first at the top of a tree quite a distance away. Sarah quickly set up her scope and we all got “good” looks. Then amazingly it flew in our direction perching on top of a tree that was much, much closer. So we got some amazing views. It was a beautiful specimen! In flight, it reminded me of a Cooper’s hawk. Their flight might also remind one of a “falcon with fast, direct wing beats” or like a “big, fat Merlin in flight.” It was quite a thrill! The northern hawk owl is a medium sized day hunting or diurnal owl with a long, rounded tail. The face is white with a dark border. Horizontal brown stripes mark the belly. “In evolutionary theory, the similarities between the northern hawk owl and a hawk is an example of CONVERGENCE. Even though these species are not related genetically, the environments which they live in have shaped their development in similar ways.”

A bird of the far north, this owl is common in Canada and Alaska. Fewer than 50 nests have been recorded in the U.S. and all of those in northern MN. Their main diet consists of voles and small mice. Though they have been known to eat grouse, ptarmigan and even snowshoe hare and other small mammals. They hunt from

perches and swoop down for the kill. They have been seen hovering over prey. They are the only owl to have a falcon-like notch in their bill which is used to sever the spinal cord of prey. Since they hunt primarily by day, they rely more on sight than hearing for hunting. Unlike all the other owls, their ears are symmetrical. Their feathers are stiff so their flight is not entirely silent like the nocturnal owls. "When scanning for prey, hawk owls lean forward almost horizontally and pump their tails before falling off their perch and gliding down toward the kill."

Hawk owls prefer open areas with hunting perches such as open spruce forests, tamarack bogs, burned over areas and blow downs. They nest in decayed trees whose tops have broken off, but will also use old woodpecker nests. During breeding season, which begins in February, you might hear a loud, ringing, repetitive call ul-ul-ul-ul-ul-ul-ul-ul, kind of like a rolling whistle. This call can last up to 30 seconds and the male and female will often call back and forth in a duet. The female will lay 3-13 white eggs. Incubation lasts 25-30 days and is carried out by the female. However, the male will help feed the young even after they fledge which is around 25-35 days.



Northern Hawk Owl

*Photo by Mark Westphal*

Since they spend most of their time in very cold conditions to stay warm they hold their body feathers erect to trap more air around their bodies and hold in more warmth. "The technical term for this feather fluffing is PILOERECTION", which is a new word for me. This is what causes mammals fur to fluff and is actually what we humans call "goose bumps."

The global population, which includes Europe, Asia and North America, is estimated to be around 130,000 individuals which would place it in the category of least concern, so would not be eligible to be placed on the IUCN Red List. Finally, there are many nouns to describe a group of owls: a "bazaar", "glaring", "stooping", "parliament" and "wisdom" of owls.

Much of my information on the hawk owl was taken from "Owls of the North—a Naturalists Handbook" by David Benson 2008

*Editor's Note: We are going to add a new feature to our BIRD SONGS newsletter. Each edition will have an overview of a bird that interests the author. Many thanks to Mary Jenks for kicking this off with her wonderful review of the Northern Hawk Owl – a life bird for Mary. We have someone lined up already for our March edition but please contact me if you would like to get on the schedule ... otherwise I'll come begging : )*

## **Life List Quarterly**

*Guy David*

In the early days of the Discovery Center Bird Club our eBird Life List grew by leaps and bounds. As time passes and our list of outings grows it becomes increasingly more difficult to find new species. As I have predicted many times, there will come a year when our club will not find any new species but, 2018 is not that year!

In earlier columns this year I reported that two new species have been added to our life list. The first was a Black-billed Magpie that was observed during the January, 2018 trip to the Sax-Zim Bog area in Minnesota. The second was a Willet that was recorded at Saxon Harbor during a trip in July, 2018. Since then our club has continued our outings and field trips and as a result, we managed to add a third "lifer". Our latest new species was added during an October trip to the Ashland area. There, while scoping a raft of waterfowl by Maslowski Beach, our club added new species number 271, the Black Scoter.

It is interesting to point out that all three new species added to our Life List this year were discovered while birding outside our home range in habitats that are generally not available in north central Wisconsin. It isn't that there aren't other species to be found in our home area, there are. Maybe I'll address that in a future BIRD SONGS article. Over time, we'll find most of them. However, doing that may require organizing some targeted outings to bird in areas where those species may be found. Another strategy would be to vary the timing of our outings to include some evenings, nights, or earlier mornings to work harder on nocturnal species that are known to occur in North Central Wisconsin.

Another variation from our normal birding includes getting out during the winter season. I wouldn't be very surprised if a new species were to show up during one of the two Christmas Bird Counts that the club supports. This column is being written and submitted before our 2018 Christmas Bird Counts so maybe this will be one of those years that some unusual migrant appears in our area that we haven't seen before!

Finding 271 species since the beginning of our eBird lists in 2004 is a very significant achievement for our club. The never-ending quest to add new species isn't necessary for the club to feel enjoyment and great success in our endeavors. Enjoying our time together and thoroughly appreciating every bird that we discover and share together is a large part of why we do what we do. The main thing is to keep our club healthy and keep the club

going out together to find whatever there is to see! Remember, ANY club member can take the initiative to organize and lead an outing! Fresh or unique ideas are always welcome.

As for our 2018 birding records, there is news to report for that too. The upcoming Christmas Bird Counts may well yield some winter species that haven't been recorded by the club yet this year. As it stands in the meantime, the club has recorded 162 species of birds during 2018!

In our September 2018 BRD SONGS I wrote the following:

*"The club's 2017 annual list added up to 161 species so if we are to equal that number in 2018 we need to find 15 more species yet this year. I view this as entirely possible but rather unlikely this year."*

Well, I should have been more optimistic. We recorded 16 new species for the year since then and we still have the Christmas Bird Counts ahead of us! Following is the list of those species.

Ring-necked Pheasant	8110 Highway 29, Meadowlands US-MN (47.0999,-92.7244)
Sharp-tailed Grouse	8110 Highway 29, Meadowlands US-MN (47.0999,-92.7244)
Least Sandpiper	US-WI-Little Rice-Willow Dam Rd - 45.7135x-89.8446
Canvasback	Maslowski Beach
Greater Scaup	Maslowski Beach
Black Scoter	Maslowski Beach
American Tree Sparrow	Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center
Harris's Sparrow	Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center
American Coot	Thompson's West End Park
Gray-cheeked Thrush	Thompson's West End Park
Swainson's Thrush	Thompson's West End Park
American Pipit	Maslowski Beach
Bonaparte's Gull	Bayview Park, Ashland
Double-crested Cormorant	Bayview Park, Ashland
Gadwall	Powell Marsh SWA--Vilas Co.
Dark-eyed Junco	Powell Marsh SWA--Vilas Co.

Bravo! This is so sweet! It's simple, you go birding, you find the birds!

As with new additions to our life list, note the number of these species (13) that were found by us outside of our home area! If we had stayed home for the rest of the fall and birded only on Thursday mornings, this list would not have been achieved!

Now for my pep talk. Hint, hint! New leaders are needed to organize our club to go to some other areas during 2019. It has been a while but areas we have visited in the past include Crex Meadows, Mead Wildlife Area, Buena Vista Grasslands (including Prairie Chicken viewing), Green Bay area, Prairie du Chien area, Horicon Marsh, Cable area, Duluth area in



the winter and the list goes on. Any ideas out there among club members? Any ambition to tackle organizing at least one trip? Having these opportunities for the club members is both fun and rewarding. Every species ever added to our Life List or Annual List is on the list because they all were found because somebody took the initiative to organize us for every one of those outings. Without such leadership there wouldn't have been any success at all. Were it not for those leaders, the bird club would have dried up and disbanded years ago.

## **Photo Journal**

*These next series of photos are from Guy David and Mark Westphal, as noted.*

Guy has shared some additional photos from his trip to Bosque del Apache.





This next series of photos are from Mark Westphal taken during the Sax-Zim Bog trip.



