

BIRD SONGS

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Discovery Center Bird Club

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President's Message

by Mark Westphal

For the past year, even with the lack of a president, our Bird Club provided a full season of great birding activities and programs. I would like to express my gratitude by saying a much deserved "Thank you" to my continuing fellow board members, our past president, and all the volunteers who have kept our club on an even keel during the past twelve months. Through their efforts we have had enjoyable outings, educational programs, and timely communications. Financial updates and meeting minutes have kept our membership informed on a regular basis. Those who document our bird sightings not only confirm the success of our outings, but also serve as valuable record keepers of bird population trends in our area. Our quarterly publication, "BIRD SONGS", continues to provide a platform for club members to share bird related thoughts, information, travels, and photos. Last

but not least, thank you to those who generously provide tasty treats and other refreshments for our club meetings. As a 3-year member of the Bird Club, I have always appreciated how smoothly the operations of our organization seem to run...almost like magic. As president I now get to peer behind the curtain and see the inner workings of the Club. It is now plain to see that it is not magic that keeps our Club going, it is our dedicated members.

While October is the final month of the year for regularly scheduled Bird Club programs and outings, we still have a great program on October 7th at the Discovery Center by Sarah Besadny regarding the "Breeding Bird Atlas". Our outings coordinator, Donna Roche, still has several fun trips planned, including our annual visit to the "Birds in Art" exhibit in Wausau. So be sure to check our schedule, grab an extra layer or two of clothing, and join us for more October birding adventures. Even though there are no scheduled club activities for the winter, don't forget about the Annual Christmas Bird Count. Traditionally, there have been two counts in the area; one in Minocqua and one in the Manitowish Waters area. Christmas Bird Counts are a great way to reconnect with fellow birders and at the same time, participate in a long-term, Citizen Science project dedicated to monitoring winter bird populations. The Minocqua count is tentatively scheduled for December 19th. Donna Roche will provide us with more details as the date grows closer.

While it is true that cold weather will send many of our birds southward, along with some of our human neighbors, "birding season" is never really over. If you travel south for the winter, you will no doubt enjoy some of our northern migrants on their wintering grounds. Species more suited to the southern regions of the United States will bring fresh birding opportunities to those escaping the snow and the cold. If, like me, you remain in the Northwoods for the winter, winter birding takes on a whole new perspective. Bird feeders come out of storage in anticipation and appreciation for the birds that have adapted to our winter climate. Chickadees, with their summer families grown, will become some of our most cheerful friends during those cold, crisp mornings of January. Those of us who stay here may look even further north, wondering if we can expect visits from crossbills or evening grosbeaks. Might we catch a glimpse of a great gray or snowy owl? While a good portion of our birding may be done from the inside of our comfortably heated homes, birding can still be enjoyed from cross-country skis, snowshoes, or just a stroll down a newly plowed road. So, wherever you are this season enjoy whatever nature has to offer, especially the birds!

House Finch Eye Disease

By Sarah Besadny

In 1994, participants in Project Feeder Watch started reporting House Finches with eyes that looked infected. It was found that the birds had *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*

a bacterial disease affecting the eye of birds. The disease is commonly referred to as Mycoplasma Conjunctivitis or House Finch Eye Disease.

I had seen several House Finches with the disease when I lived in Philadelphia, but I hadn't seen a bird with this disease ... until this summer. I was watching a Purple Finch at one of my feeders and the head/cheeks looked odd so I grabbed my binoculars to get a closer look. Unfortunately this male Purple Finch had very red swollen eyes and it looked as if the bird had scratched many of the feathers off his head surrounding the eye area. I wasn't aware until this summer that this disease affects several species besides House Finch. So, I decided to do some research and share with you what I learned.

This disease is contagious and has been found primarily among the finch species including House Finch, Purple Finch and Goldfinch. Research has found that many other species of birds are exposed to the bacterial disease but it's only finches that show signs of the disease.

Because the eyes of an infected bird can become so swollen that they basically shut, leaving the bird blind, birds may die from starvation or predation but not from the disease itself. If you see a bird that looks sick, whether from Mycoplasma Conjunctivitis or some other disease, be sure to take down your feeders for a few days so that the birds disperse. Be sure to clean your feeders while they are down, and it's important to clean your feeders routinely even if you don't see any sick birds.

When the disease was first reported in 1994 it was among House Finch in the eastern US. Since then, the disease has spread westward and by 2006 the disease was seen west of the Rockies and it has continued to spread throughout the West. The good news is that the disease is no longer at epidemic proportions and seems to be restricted to about 5% - 10% of the eastern House Finch population.

Species Profile: Eastern Kingbird (Tyrannus tyrannus)

Article and Photos by Mark Westphal

Tyrannus tyrannus means "tyrant, despot or king". What's in a name? Plenty if you are referring to the Eastern Kingbird. The Eastern Kingbird is known for its energetic, aggressive defense of its territory and nest. While guarding its domain, it doesn't hesitate to attack and route birds many times its size, including crows, blue herons, hawks, or even ospreys. This large flycatcher, about the size of a robin, has a dark head, gray upper parts and white under parts. It's the only songbird in the U. S. with a white terminal tail band.



One of eight species of kingbirds that breed north of Mexico, the Eastern Kingbird is the most commonly distributed kingbird in the United States. Despite its common name, the Eastern Kingbird can be found on both sides of the Mississippi River. However, they are generally not found in the southwestern region of the United States. In Wisconsin the Eastern Kingbird can be found throughout the state.

An aerial hawking insectivore, the Eastern Kingbird frequently dines by perching on a branch, snag, fence post, or utility line, and sallying out to snatch a tasty bug in midair. Smaller insects are often swallowed on the wing. Larger insects are frequently taken back to a perch where they are beaten until ready to be swallowed whole. Flies, wasps, bees, locusts, grasshoppers, and dragonflies are all part of the menu. Eastern Kingbirds can sometimes be seen hovering low into the wind in order to feed off insects resting on bushes or tall grass. When it's cold and rainy and insects are just not interested in taking flight, kingbirds may have to resort to hopping around on the ground in search for a meal. One of the characteristics of being an insectivore is that both adults and nestlings regurgitate pellets of insect exoskeletons. Given its food preferences and foraging style, the kingbird needs to live in open habitats, such as uncropped open fields, roadsides, forest edges, or along the edge of lakes, rivers, or marshes. Orchards, parks, or even golf courses can provide suitable habitat.



The Eastern Kingbird is a Neotropical migrant. It rarely arrives in Wisconsin until late April. It may not occupy its northern Wisconsin territories until early June. Being late to arrive, it is also one of the earlier fall migrants. A ready supply of flying insects as well as a late summer supplement of small fruits is the key to maintaining its presence. When cool weather causes the flying insect population to dwindle, it's time for the Eastern Kingbird to fly south.

While in its northern breeding territory, the Eastern Kingbird vigorously defends its home against all other kingbirds and feeds mostly on insects. When it returns to its wintering grounds in the western Amazonia region of South America, it becomes much more laid back, traveling in flocks and eating mostly fruit.

Breeding kingbird pairs are monogamous. If both birds survive to the following season, they usually remate and reuse former territories. Pairing up and territory establishment involves plenty of chasing, displaying, vocalizing and occasionally battle.

The female builds the nest over the course of a week or two while the male provides security. The exterior of the relatively large disheveled nest (up to 7 inches across and 6 inches deep) is constructed of small twigs, coarse roots, strips of bark, and dry weed stems. The interior cup of the nest is only 2 to 3 inches across and an inch or 2 deep. A softer lining of materials such as fine rootlets, cattail down, cottonwood fluff, catkins, and hair is prepared for the 2 to 5 eggs that will be laid and incubated by the female. The sturdy nest, located in the branches of a tree, is rarely well hidden. The parents rely upon personal defense tactics, rather than camouflage, to protect their young.

Although Eastern Kingbirds are monogamous, it is not uncommon for them to mate outside of their pair bond. DNA testing confirms that it is not unusual to find chicks from different males in the same nest.

White, heavily blotched eggs are incubated for 14 to 17 days. The young are fledged after another 16 to 17 days. The parents provide 3 to 5 weeks of post-fledging care. This extended period of care allows only enough time for one brood each year. While the Eastern Kingbird still maintains an abundant, wide-spread population, its population has decreased by 47 percent between 1966 and 2015 according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Declines may be due to the loss of habitat as some formerly open areas transition to more mature forests or other open areas are lost to development. A reduction in the insect population due to insecticides could also be a factor.

Bird club members enjoyed several good sightings of Eastern Kingbirds during the 2019 season. The most memorable sighting was of a nest with two nestlings along the Bearskin-Hiawatha state trail near Lake Nokomis. This sighting was a great example of Eastern Kingbird habitat and nesting activity. The birds proved their courage by never retreating far from the nest. The dragonfly filled beak of a devoted parent clearly illustrated their diet and flying skills. A special sighting like that served as good motivation for me to select the Eastern Kingbird for this article. Did you know that the male Eastern Kingbird actually does have a “crown”? There is a small patch of reddish orange feathers on the top of his head that is normally concealed and seldom seen. So the next time you see an Eastern Kingbird, grab your binoculars and take a closer look. You may or may not get a glimpse of a crown, but you will definitely see a feisty bird, worthy of our admiration.



Sources for this article include information from The Cornell Lab of Ornithology-All About Birds, National Audubon Society, Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas, and several miscellaneous field guides.

Life List Quarterly

By Sarah Besadny

Well, as Guy mentioned in the last Life List Quarterly column, this may be the first year that the Bird Club does not spot a new species to add to our Life List but the year is not over so there is still a possibility of adding at least one new species. But as Guy also noted, adding a new species to our Life List is becoming more and more difficult as many of the “probable” species in the Northwoods are already on our Life List and without going to places outside of the region it becomes less likely that we will add a new species to our list. However, there certainly are species we could find here in the Northwoods that we haven’t reported before and there are species outside of this general area that we could see if and when we have an organized trip somewhere. In a future column I will show an analysis of species on the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology list that are not on the Discovery Center Bird Club Life List.

Let’s take a look at what we’ve reported so far this year. Up through the Sept. 19th outing to the Conover area, we have 145 species on our annual list. The June Life List Quarterly (LLQ) column reported 118 species to date, but that did not include the species list from the Northwoods Birding Festival. Those data have now been tallied and they represent 17 of the 27 new species since the last LLQ report, and the other 10 were birds seen between July and Sept. 19th.

What birds were added in the last three months? Most came from a trip a bit outside of our “normal” birding area – a trip to the George W. Mead State Wildlife Area on August 8th. The species reported during that day trip that were new to our annual list were:

- American Coot
- Least Sandpiper
- Lesser Yellowlegs
- American White Pelican
- Great Egret
- Purple Martin
- Cliff Swallow
- Field Sparrow

Additionally, a Red-headed Woodpecker was added to our annual list on the 7/11/19 trip to the Hiawatha Trail and a House Wren was added just last week at the Deerview Road outing.

It’s not at all unusual for our annual lists to start out with a bang in Spring and then begin to peter out mid-summer. Here’s a brief analysis of our Annual Lists for the past several years showing new species seen by month:

New Species Seen by Month

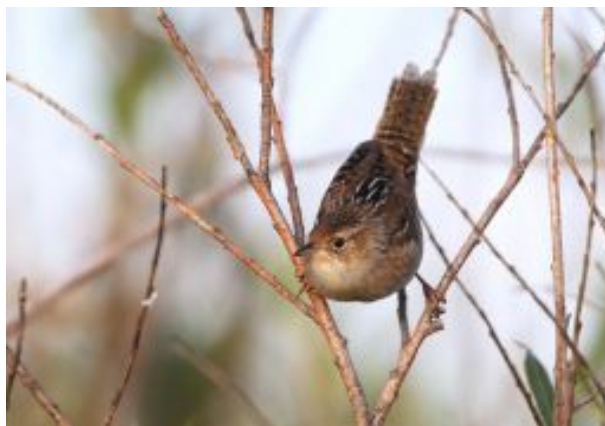
	May	June	July	August	September	October
2016	85	10	0	23	5	6
2017	127	12	1	2	11	7
2018	57	24	12	2	4	12
2019	85	29	1	8	1	TBD

There is some variation from year-to-year but these data show the drop-off in new species as the season progresses. Some of the variation can be explained by the dates of the Northwoods Birding Festival and our Club's participation in the Great Wisconsin Birdathon. In 2016 and 2017 both the festival and the birdathon took place in May. In 2018 the festival was in May but the birdathon was in June. And this year the birdathon was in May but the birding festival was on June 1st. Additionally, where we bird makes a difference in when we add new species to our annual list. The Club always heads to Ashland in the summertime and this outing always brings new species for the year. In 2018 the Ashland trip was in July whereas in 2016, 2017 and 2019 the Ashland trip was in June. This likely explains the bump in new species reported in July of 2018 compared to the other years. The high number of new species reported in August of 2016 is likely explained by some outings in spots we don't get to every year – the Necedah area and Horicon Marsh.

So, in summary, our Club's Life List stands at 271 species (plus two hybrid species) and to-date this year no new species have been added to that list. Through Sept. 19th we have reported 145 species on our Annual List. There are more outings scheduled through the end of October and then in December we have the Christmas Bird Count ... giving us the opportunity to see some new species for the year and to definitely enjoy seeing species we have already seen.

Photo Journal

All Photos by Mark Westphal



Sedge Wren



Green Heron

Trumpeter Swan



Great Blue Heron



Mallard