

BIRD SONGS

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Discovery Center Bird Club

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President's Message

by Mark Westphal

I recently had the opportunity to participate in two area Christmas Bird Counts. One count was centered around Manitowish Waters. The other count was centered around Minocqua. These two winter outings were a great opportunity to get out and about in search of whatever birds might be in our area. Those who participated in either of these two counts were able to contribute to an international, ongoing research project that attempts to measure bird populations during a specified time in predetermined areas. The data gathered over many years of counting will help us to understand bird populations and movement

trends. Regardless of the number of species found or the number of birds tallied, our two bird counts were a success. They were a success because they gathered information. Information is the key when it comes to protecting birds and their habitats. The counts were also a success because they brought people together. Fellow birders had a chance to share bird sightings, swap stories, and just have a good time. Birding is definitely about birds, but it is also about people. Thanks to all those who helped organize the people and the data for these two local Christmas Bird Counts.

With the new year upon us, now is also the time to renew your Bird Club and Discovery Center memberships. You can renew your memberships online or by calling the Discovery Center. If you happen to visit the Discovery Center in person, don't forget to check out the improvements at the Bird Club bird feeding station.

Happy New Year to All and enjoy the birds wherever you might be!

Minocqua Christmas Bird Count

By Sarah Besadny

The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is a project supported by Audubon. The history of the CBC is interesting and is a project that we can all be thankful for since we're bird enthusiasts. Prior to the 1900s there was a Christmas-time tradition called the Side Hunt. Teams (sides) would compete by going out to shoot as many birds and mammals as possible and at the end of the day the "side" that had the most carcasses won. People who were conservation-minded noticed that the number of birds was declining. Therefore an ornithologist named Frank Chapman decided to hold a Christmas bird census to count birds rather than shoot them. That first Census occurred on Christmas Day in 1900 and eventually replaced the Side Hunt tradition.

This is the 120th year that Christmas Bird Counts have been conducted and makes it the longest running citizen science project in the nation. The wealth of data acquired by this long-standing project provides researchers, conservation biologists and others with information on the long-term health and status of birds in North America.

This was the 14th year that the Bird Club has participated in the Minocqua CBC and this long tradition of participation is in large part due to the commitment and leadership of Donna Roche. This year the Minocqua CBC was conducted December 19th and it was a great day to be out birding. Five teams covered 4 quadrants centered around Minocqua. In addition there were 10 feeder counters helping to add to our species totals and bird totals. The results for this year were about average for the last five years in that we had 26 species of birds (compared to the high in 2015 of 27 species and the low in 2016 of 21 species) but we had fewer total birds (791 birds compared to the next lowest count of 862 in 2016). Whether there is open water and whether or not some of the northern species have made their way down to the Northwoods for the winter has a big impact on species as well as total count of birds. For example, some years there is more open water and we have seen Canada Geese, Mallards and Common Mergansers. This year most of the waterways were frozen over and only 1 Hooded Merganser was tallied for the waterfowl group. This year hasn't been strong for the northern species so there were no reports of Pine Grosbeaks, Crossbills, Redpolls or Pine Siskins. One of our feeder counters has had a Winter Wren present for a few months and the wren showed up on count day. The Minocqua CBC has never had a Winter Wren before! One of the teams spotted a Barred Owl and this species has only been recorded in two other Counts since 2006. This year either matched or set a new "highest recorded number" for a few species: Rock Pigeon (26), Hairy Woodpecker (29), Blue Jay (113), European Starling (10), Cedar Waxwing (5), and Northern Cardinal (6).

Many thanks to all who participated in the Minocqua CBC this year!



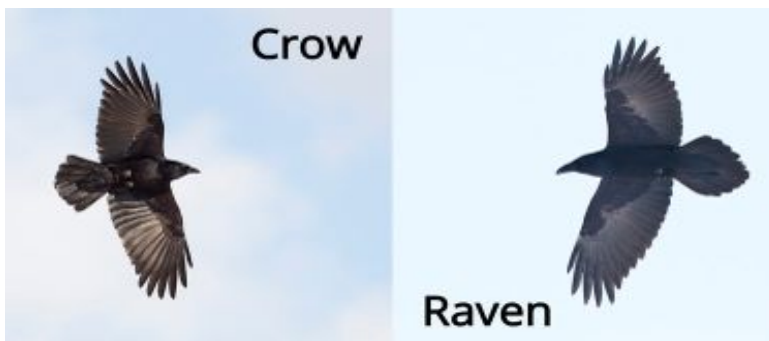
Barred Owl spotted by Ed Marshall, photo taken by Sarah Besadny (who apologizes for the quality!)

Species Profile: The Common Raven, *Corvus corax*

by Donna Roche

I find ravens intriguing. When I see a raven, it captures my attention. It causes me to stop, look, pay attention to it, and to think about it. Why is that? Well for me, there are a couple of reasons. First, when I see the bird, I need to concentrate on it in order to be able to identify it as a Common Raven. And second, I feel respect and appreciation for this bird.

I'll start to explain the first reason by saying that even though the Common Raven has specific characteristics to differentiate it from the American Crow, they both are plain all black birds that I see in northern Wisconsin year round and the size is not always clearly different. A reminder of those characteristics helps me separate the species: The adult Common Raven's mature size is 21-26 inches long with a wingspan of 45-51 inches and a weight of 1.5-4.4 lbs. The bill is large, heavy, black, 2.2 - 3.3 inches and slightly curved. Its plumage is iridescent black with shaggy feathers around the throat and above the bill. If I can see the tail clearly in flight, then I know that I can identify it as a Common Raven. The tail is longish with a wedge-shaped ending while the American Crow's tail is fan-shaped. The raven has a more stable soaring style with less wing flapping than the crow and is very agile in flight. The calls of the birds are quite different with the raven's "Croak" and the crow's "Caw" sounds. One last difference about these two birds comes from their names. The American Crow is only found in North America and the Common Raven can be found around the globe in the Northern Hemisphere. Thus the 'common' part of its name infers that the bird species is 'in common' with ones found in other countries and continents.



*Photos by Gerald
Romanchuk,
Edmundton and Area
Land Trust*

Both the ravens and crows do share the same genus group as members of the Corvus group of birds. There are 7 other recognized species of just ravens around the world. While I didn't read that they interbreed, there are studies that the DNA of sub-species are closer to one another in different areas of the world. The Standard Bird Species Code for the Common Raven is CORA. I like thinking of the bird as CORA!

The habitat of the Common Raven is very diverse. The bird occurs over most of the Northern Hemisphere in conifer and deciduous forests, beaches, islands, chaparral, mountains, deserts, grasslands, agricultural fields, tundra and ice flows with an exception in the United States of eastern forests and the Great Plains of the mid-west. The Wisconsin Breeding Bird Survey of ~2000 shows CORA is considered of no breeding concern, increasing in northern Wisconsin and hopefully the new survey will show a continuing trend.



Common Raven

*Photo courtesy of the Connecticut
Beardsley Zoo*

For the most part, the Common Raven has done very well co-existing with humans over long history and studies show their range is expanding. Average life span in the wild is 10-15 years. Part of the bird's success is due to its omnivorous diet... they are extremely versatile and opportunistic in finding sources of food including carrion, insects, cereal grains, fruit, small animals, and food waste.

Adult birds generally are presumed to mate for life. Courtship is often a combination of posturing, spreading their wings and bowing, but males can often be found diving, rolling and chasing the female in the air. Vocalization is another attention getting device. There are usually 3-7 eggs laid in a nest of sticks and various materials in high locations. The nest usually will have some sort of overhang above it. Although the male stays and is attentive to the female and the brood, only the female incubates and broods the young. Young ravens are safer from predation because of this care. Adult Common Ravens have few natural enemies.

Common Ravens are however the subject of lore, literature and art. Most depictions allude to evil and death because of its black plumage, croaking call and diet of carrion. From the time of the Greeks, through the middle ages and in religious texts, the raven is mentioned specifically. The symbolism is complex due to the bird's intelligence, vocalizations, and cleverness. Folklore shows ravens as bad omens and yet native populations use the raven as an animal mediator, see it as a 'trickster' and as a clan symbol. According to legend, the Kingdom of England will fall if the ravens of the Tower of London are removed. So even today, about 6 ravens are cared for and kept in the Tower of London. Artwork of ravens is plentiful and can be realistic and very stylized. We have seen ourselves over the years of visiting 'Birds in Art' at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau how often the raven is the subject matter.

The Common Raven has found ways to succeed in this world without the usual cute-ness, complicated beauty, delicacy, and love that other birds often garner. It is truly worth the respect and appreciation that I have enjoyed in knowing it.

Sources:

National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America, 6th Ed.

WIKIPEDIA, the free on-line encyclopedia, various websites

Cornell Lab of Ornithology, All About the Birds - on-line

The Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas I - 2000

Hope and Gratitude

Thoughts of a Winter Birder

By Mark Westphal

Let's face it, winter bird watching in northern Wisconsin can seem rather quiet, especially when compared to the abundance of species that fill our forests when temperatures are warm, and leaves are green. Some years we can look forward to certain species from the far north that may visit our area in search of better feeding opportunities. Unfortunately, this winter's "finch forecast" predicts that few redpolls, pine siskins, or evening grosbeaks will find their way to our feeders. Their lack of presence is due in part to a bumper crop of seeds in the northern forests of Canada. The chances of seeing a rare or unusual bird this winter seems rather slim, but as birders we always have hope. We still watch our feeders, treetops, and patches of exposed earth for any new shape or unique splash of color. I personally look forward to the newspaper column by our friend and expert naturalist, John Bates, to learn what birds he or his readers have seen. His column provides a great snapshot of what birds are in the area. If anyone has seen a snowy owl, crossbill, or any of the northern finches, I will then be on the alert, just in case any of those species visit my neighborhood.

While the birds from the far north may be a special "tweet"(yes, I did just say that), my deepest gratitude is for the birds that, despite the snow and freezing temperatures, remain here throughout the winter. Chickadees, nuthatches, blue jays, downy, hairy and pileated woodpeckers all bring much appreciated activity to our bird feeders. Croaking ravens or the explosive flight of a ruffed grouse along a snowshoe trail help to bring life to what might be an otherwise silent walk. Those rare patches of open water may still provide a winter haven for trumpeter swans or a few hardy mallards. The calls of barred and great horned owls help to break the silence of a winter's night. I am constantly amazed at the ability of these small feathered creatures to survive conditions that cause us mere humans to bundle up under multiple layers of clothing or retreat to houses heated by fireplaces or furnaces. Our winters would be much less enjoyable if not for the company, color, and spirit of birds.

Regardless of forecasts or whatever others have seen or not seen, I will continue to hope for the sight of one of those special visitors from the far north. In the meantime, I will continue to be grateful for the chatter of chickadees, the boisterous call of the blue jays, and the company of all the other birds that choose to spend this challenging season in the Northwoods.

Life List Quarterly

By Sarah Besadny

Well, as we sort of expected, this was the first year since the beginning of the Discovery Center Bird Club in 2004 that we have not added a new species to our Club's Life List. That's not surprising since the Club didn't travel outside of our "usual" birding locations this year. If the Club is interested in building it's Life List we can challenge ourselves to target some species that are more commonly seen elsewhere in Wisconsin but not commonly seen in the Northwoods and possibly organize a birding trip to a new area of the State next year. Before I jump into what some of those target birds might be, let me recap our annual species list and the life list. In 2019, the Bird Club recorded 156 species of birds and our Club's Life List stands at 271 species plus two hybrids. When I wrote this column for the September edition of BIRD SONGS we stood at 145 species of birds seen through 9/17/19. Since then, the Club visited/revisited Little Turtle Flowage, Ashland Area, Willow Flowage, Bearskin Trail, Powell Marsh, Bluegill Bay in Wausau and participated in the Minocqua Christmas Bird Count.

Ok, so after analyzing our Club's data compared to the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology's Checklist of Wisconsin Birds, here are some species to think about possibly targeting for some future outing. Do any of these interest you? Might you be willing to organize/co-organize a trip to head elsewhere in the State where we might possibly spot one or more of these species? If so, please let me and/or Mark Westphal know.

The *Checklist of Wisconsin Birds* is published by the Wisconsin Society of Ornithology (WSO). Currently that checklist stands at 441 species (compared to our Club's Life List of 271 species). Many of the species on the WSO checklist are rare or infrequently seen birds. While I was

comparing the WSO checklist to our Life List I decided to focus on birds that are considered “regular” in the State but have not been recorded by the Bird Club. There are 14 species in that group:

- Greater White-fronted Goose
- Cackling Goose
- Long-tailed Duck
- American Avocet
- Glaucous Gull
- Red-throated Loon
- Eastern Screech Owl
- Long-eared Owl
- Northern Saw-whet Owl
- White-eyed Vireo
- Philadelphia Vireo
- Louisiana Waterthrush
- Connecticut Warbler
- Hooded Warbler

If there is a topic you’d like presented in the Life List Quarterly column in the future, please let me know. Guy David has kept meticulous records for the Bird Club since 2004 and that rich database offers the opportunity for interesting comparisons and insights.

Photo Journal
Photos by Mark Westphal

