

# BIRD SONGS

Newsletter of the North Lakeland  
Discovery Center Bird Club

---

June, 2020; Volume 16,  
Issue 2

Sarah Besadny, Editor  
[sbesadny@gmail.com](mailto:sbesadny@gmail.com)



## **Officers**

Mark Westphal, President  
Debby Wilson, Secretary  
David Foster, Treasurer  
Sarah Besadny, Membership Director  
Duanne Swift, Program Director

## **President's Message**

*by Mark Westphal*

Bird watching is a simple pleasure. It can be done almost anywhere. You can bird watch with friends or alone. The return of birds in spring signals a time of renewal. Their songs fill the air with music, even if you cannot always see them. Their color and energy add life to every season. Their flight, from the tiny hummingbird to the soaring eagle, inspires awe and sometimes envy.

Bird watching gives us a connection to our environment. When life seems more challenging, nature helps to bring a sense of joy and peace.

The natural world—air, water, and land, although sometimes forgotten or ignored—is the ultimate thread that binds us together. Whether you lace up your boots and go for a hike or just look out the window at your own back yard, take time to enjoy the simple pleasure of watching birds.



*The photo of this striking male Rose-breasted Grosbeak was taken by Mark Westphal out his front window*

## **Bird Club Members Share Some Bird Highlights**

**On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Carol Maki and Scott McConnell shared the following:**

We have been doing a big garage addition and who was to know that a grouse had built her nest so close to construction. Scott recently took a short walk into the woods and discovered this beautiful nest. Mother grouse did not fly off, but easily disappeared into the woods as Scott approached. He quickly snapped a shot of the lovely eggs, and we now have been watching via binoculars. Nothing has hatched yet, but "we" are expecting babies very soon! We love Spring!



*Scott's picture of the Ruffed Grouse nest on June 3<sup>rd</sup>*

**And on June 12<sup>th</sup>, Carol and Scott provided this update:**

I had sent you the previous photo of the grouse nest with 7 eggs. Well, it turns out Mum was not done and laid 2 more!! Yesterday, when I went to check on how things were going, I discovered 2 more eggs had been laid (one was pure white)!! Unfortunately another had rolled out of the nest, or so I thought. I probably did what I shouldn't have, but I put the 9th egg back in! Afterward I worried that perhaps it hadn't "rolled out" and that maybe "Mum" pushed it out on purpose. Perhaps she new something was wrong with it. SO, I went back a second time in the afternoon to see if things were going ok. Thankfully I found her sitting on all of them. It was a cool rainy afternoon, so she had her wings spread out over them to make sure they were all warm and dry. Whew. They have got to be hatching any time now.

**On June 3<sup>rd</sup>, Debbie Simek shared the following recap of one of her birding experiences in Texas along with some photos:**

I just returned from a morning of birding to find your email. I am a member of the DC bird club and also on the board in charge of field trips for the Fort Worth, TX, Audubon Society. We spent 10 weeks in Presque Isle this winter/spring and had fun watching the start of spring migration and ice out. When we returned to TX in mid May I was reminded how wonderful the birding is within 10 minutes of our home here. On my first day back we saw 62 species of birds and today it was 47. We have a core group that are practicing social distancing while sharing our love of birds and getting the camaraderie that we are missing in these crazy times. I keep thinking of having visitors from the North woods and in my head devise different birding days. We are on the central flyway, here in Arlington, TX, and could easily spend 4 days birding within a 10 minute drive of our house. Take a look at [ebird.org](http://ebird.org) and put in the Village Creek drying beds, tarrant county or River Legacy, Tarrant County. If you do come to Texas you may want to continue down to South Texas where you could visit the 9 World birding centers in the Valley or go to the NWR in Winnie (Houston area) and the Bolivar peninsula. In other words take some time in winter or next April and take a birding break in Texas. But birds are not the only draw. If you like art we have world class museums and Architecture by 5 of the Pitzker prize winners. That oil money had to go somewhere!

Today fun birds of note that we saw were: lots of immature little blue herons, white faced ibis, black-necked stilt, dickcissel, Mississippi kite, yellow-billed cuckoo, yellow-crowned night heron, Least grebe parent with 4 chicks, scissor-tailed flycatcher, snowy and great egrets, painted and indigo buntings, and blue grosbeak. For our entire list you could check out ebird.

We are looking forward to getting back to cool country soon!



*Immature Little Blue Heron*

*Scissor-tailed  
Flycatcher*



Yellow-crowned Night-heron



Dickcissel

Painted Bunting



## **Birds and Wildlife Festival 2020**

*By Annie McDonnell, NLDC Naturalist and NLDC Liaison to the Bird Club*

Dear Bird Club Members – Thank you for your continued support of the Discovery Center and the Northwoods Birding Festival! The Discovery Center has augmented many of its activities, programs, events, and scientific surveys throughout the spring and summer of 2020 due to the Coronavirus pandemic, and the 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Northwoods Birds & Wildlife Festival was no exception. The Festival was a totally Virtual Event that spanned ten plus days in early June, with over ten hours of educational programming provided by natural resource experts, volunteers, and DC staff.

The Festival had a variety of presentations from keynote speakers, John Bates, and Bill Volkert as well as programs from Bruce Bacon, Colleen Matula, Ian Harding, Mike Porter, Chris Cold, Licia Johnson, Emily Heald and myself. The programs spanned a range of environmental topics from Bird Banding to Geology to the Fisheries of Lake Superior, we are proud to announce that despite the unusual format, the Festival was a great success. The Discovery Center would like to thank our volunteers, Bird Club members, and Festival participants that contributed to the event by spending time birding and sharing their sightings with our online forum. Our volunteers observed 73 species of birds throughout our Northwoods Field Trip locations, and our Festival participants added another 13 species from outings in the Northwoods and beyond! The Discovery Center is already looking forward to Bird Fest 2021! We are optimistic that we will be able to host a traditional in-person event with live warbler walks, field trips, bird banding, presentations and activities for kids and families. If you have any comments or recommendations please feel free to contact Annie McDonnell at [annie@discoverycenter.net](mailto:annie@discoverycenter.net)

The Discovery Center wishes all Bird Club members a very happy and healthy summer, full of time outdoors. Happy Birding!

*Editor's Note: On behalf of the Discovery Center Bird Club I'd like to thank Annie for organizing a terrific virtual event! While I know we all REALLY enjoy being together as a group to spot birds on field trips and listen to fascinating programs from experts, the "festival" Annie put together this*

*year was extremely informative, easy to access, allowed us to participate from wherever we were at the time and to learn about a whole host of topics at our own pace over the course of ten days. We too are optimistic that next year's event will be "in person"!*

## **Species Profile: American Bittern** **(*Botaurus lentiginosus*)**

*Article by Sarah Besadny*

Sometimes it takes a while to connect the dots. I was driving up a hill on our road back on May 8<sup>th</sup> of 2018, it was raining and the sky was dark from clouds and what is in the road up ahead?? ... two American Bitterns ... in the road! I'm thinking to myself, what in the world are these birds doing HERE? Then on July 25<sup>th</sup> of that same year, I flushed an American Bittern from the side of the lake we live on while I was out kayaking. I'm thinking, where did that bird come from? Then on June 29<sup>th</sup> of last year I again flushed an American Bittern from the side of our lake while I was out kayaking, and again I'm thinking to myself, where are these birds coming from? Well, since May 16<sup>th</sup> of this year, I have heard or seen an American Bittern (AMBI) on the lake at least once a week. Might they be nesting here? I really didn't think the area around our lake was suitable habitat, but I didn't know much about this species so I decided to do some research and share what I learned.

American Bitterns are a medium-sized heron with a stocky body, thick neck and short greenish-yellow legs. AMBIs have brown backs and their neck and breast are heavily streaked in brown and buffy white. The long vertical streaking of the bittern allows it to blend in with the reeds that it may be standing in to stalk prey and it certainly works as great camouflage against a predator. Their breeding range is the northern US and over a great portion of Canada. Research indicates that the AMBI is declining in the US likely due to habitat destruction of wetlands and that their breeding range is moving north.





*American Bittern*

*photo by Mark Westphal*

The majority of the shoreline around the lake we live on is dense with Leather-leaf, Labrador Tea, Bog Rosemary and Bog Laurel, with Black Spruce/Tamarack bog further away from the shoreline. What I read about the preferred breeding habitat for American Bitterns is freshwater marshes with tall vegetation. I am thinking that the dense “fields” of Leather-leaf wouldn’t be a draw for AMBIs but maybe they can maneuver through them or maybe there is a hidden grassier/marshier area that I can’t see from my kayak. I read that their nests are usually built among thick stands of cattails, bulrushes and sedges and less commonly they nest on dry land in grassy areas dense with tall herbaceous plants. Their clutch size is 2-7 eggs with an incubation period of 24-28 days and the nesting period is 7-14 days.

You may have witnessed an interesting behavior of the American Bittern while hiking around Powell Marsh or some other wetland. The description of this behavior in All About Birds (a Cornell Lab of Ornithology website) is so illustrative that I will quote it: “Possibly the most famous aspect of bittern behavior is the stance it assumes when it perceives a threat. It points its bill skyward, elongates its body, and even sways with the breeze, all to blend in with its reedy surroundings. This pose is so ingrained that bitterns sometimes adopt it even when they’re out in the open”. Have you been at the right place at the right time to see this?

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I have heard or seen an American Bittern on our lake since mid-May. If you don't know what the American Bittern sounds like, I encourage you to do a web search – there's really nothing like it that I've heard before. This strange sound coming out of the American Bittern has led to some interesting nicknames for the bird: “stake-diver”, “thunder-pumper”, “water-belcher” and “mire-drum”.

I have certainly enjoyed hearing/seeing this striking bird and appreciated the impetus for learning more about a bird I haven't had much engagement with in the past. I still don't know if they are nesting here but maybe in time I'll see a family foraging along the shoreline.

Resources used to learn more about the American Bittern are:  
All About Birds, Cornell Lab of Ornithology ([allaboutbirds.org](http://allaboutbirds.org))  
Birds of the World, Cornell Lab of Ornithology (this requires a paid subscription: [birdsoftheworld.org](http://birdsoftheworld.org))

## **My 2020 Great Wisconsin Birdathon Adventure**

*Article and Photos by Mark Westphal*

Spring 2019 was my first time participating in the “Great Wisconsin Birdathon”. I was a member of Team “Up North Hammerheads”, named in honor of our bird club's mascot, the Pileated Woodpecker. An enthusiastic group of people, including some excellent birders, spent the better part of a morning and afternoon attempting to find as many bird species as possible. We likely visited a half dozen different birding hotspots. Many sets of eyes and ears, combined with experienced birders, led to a respectable bird count and a fun experience. It left me looking forward to next year.

Along came 2020 with Covid-19. The “Great Wisconsin Birdathon” would indeed take place again this year, but with social distancing. For me this meant going solo. I must admit I was disappointed that I was not going to enjoy the company of my bird watching friends. Despite this new format, I was determined to make the best of things. On May 19<sup>th</sup> I crawled out of bed earlier than usual, and headed to Powell Marsh,

my favorite local birding destination. The day started out cold and blustery. With hood up and gloves on, I ventured out. I spent most of the morning roaming around the various flowages of Powell Marsh. I watched constantly for movement, taking note of every chirp, whistle, and call. Trumpeter swans, loons, sandhill cranes, and various other waterfowl were easily spotted. Several species of warblers foraged among the alders and willows. Eventually the sun's warmth allowed me to peel back a layer or two of clothing, and the walk became more comfortable. After spending several hours around the flowage area, I decided to explore the road on the western side of Powell Marsh. This area provided a much more forested habitat. A whole new set of birds teased me with their calls and songs, often remaining unidentifiable silhouettes flitting among the tree branches. Despite the many hours I spent around Powell Marsh, I realized I had only scratched the surface of all the different types of habitats to be explored. Each habitat, each level of the forest canopy, would attract different species of birds. There are even more birding opportunities at Powell Marsh than I had previously imagined!

Although I knew more birds would have been identified had I been with a group, I enjoyed the sense of solitude. Time passed quickly. There was always a sense of anticipation about what bird might be around the next bend. Like "gold fever", I was getting a little "bird fever". Part of me just wanted to keep on looking for just one more bird. Eventually daylight and my tired feet told me it was time to call it a day. Back at home, I had to check outside one more time after sunset. The distant call of a whip-poor-will would identify my last bird of the day.



Yellow Warbler

Trumpeter Swans



White-throated Sparrow

Sandhill Crane



*A note from Sarah Besadny: As team captain, I'd like to thank the 16 individuals/couples that participated in the Great Wisconsin Birdathon as a member of the Up North Hammerheads. In total, the team spotted 134 species on May 19th. I'd also like to thank everyone who supported our team with a donation; so far we have raised \$1115.00! The Great Wisconsin Birdathon supports various bird protection initiatives here in Wisconsin. The entire Birdathon has to-date raised \$82,516.25 and that puts it at 83% of it's overall goal of \$100,000. It's not too late to donate – do a web search for Great Wisconsin Birdathon. If you want your donation to be associated with the Up North Hammerheads, look up our team name under the "Birdathon Teams" link and scroll down the list to Up North Hammerheads. Many thanks!*

## **An Interesting Bird Sighting by Mark Westphal**

*Photos by Mark Westphal, notes by Sarah Besadny*

Mark and I happened to be chatting about birds recently and he mentioned seeing a Willet at Powell Marsh. I exclaimed, "What!?! A Willet!!!!. Wow!!!". This is an extremely unusual sighting for Vilas County and I encouraged Mark to submit his observation in eBird. He did and with the excellent photo documentation Mark was able to provide, the eBird reviewer has accepted this record and confirmed that the bird is of the "western" subspecies. The two subspecies of the Willet are the "eastern" that breeds along the east coast of the U.S. and the "western" subspecies that breeds in marshy grasslands in the Interior West.

How unusual is this sighting? Well, there are only two records in eBird of a Willet in Vilas County (Mark's is one of the two) and only one in Oneida County – and that's for ALL years of data in eBird, not just this year!! Mark saw his Willet at Powell Marsh on May 16, 2020. The other Willet reported in Vilas County was in the Voyager Lake Area on May 12, 2016. The only Willet reporting from Oneida County was at the Rainbow Flowage on April 30, 2011. How wonderful for Mark to have gotten the opportunity to see a rare bird at a spot he loves to bird!

And how wonderful for us that Mark had his camera and takes such terrific pictures! Enjoy Mark's photos of the "western" Willet.





## **Life List Quarterly**

Due to the fact that the global pandemic has prohibited us from having weekly bird outings, there are no species records to report at this time.