

BIRD SONGS

Newsletter of the North Lakeland
Discovery Center Bird Club

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President's Message

by Mark Westphal

The "Bird Songs Newsletter" is many things. It is a place for members to report on club activities and share special sightings. It provides club members with an opportunity to share some of their local, national, and even international birding adventures. Contributors can also share facts and information about specific bird species as well as birding experiences that have encouraged or inspired them.

The "Bird Songs Newsletter" is also the place where club records are published regarding the number of birds and bird species officially

counted during a particular birding year. In short, the newsletter is not only informational but is also an ongoing history of our club activities and birding in the Northwoods. As I compose this "Message From The President", I am keenly aware that I am writing this during one of the most unusual times in our Club's history. Earlier this year, due to concern for the health and safety of our members and the general public and in keeping with State mandates, our board voted to cancel all club meetings and postpone all outings until further notice. To date we have had no formal club activities during the year 2020. There will be no official Bird Club birding records for this year. The inactivity of our Club and the gap in our extensive birding database will now be a part of our Club's history.

As of October 2020, our Bird Club remains in a holding pattern. We all want to know when things will return to "normal", but unfortunately no one seems to have the answer to that question. In the meantime, I can assure you that the Bird Club continues to look forward to the future. A full board consisting of Sarah Besadny, Duanne Swift, Debby Wilson, David Foster, and myself, continues to monitor finances, maintain membership records, and plan for future programs. We especially look forward to getting back to those Thursday morning bird walks organized by Donna Roche. When circumstances allow, we want to be prepared to resume our normal activities as quickly and as safely as possible.

Despite the negatives brought on by Covid-19, I continue to be grateful for the many birding opportunities available to us here in the Northwoods. Whether you walk a local trail or monitor your backyard feeder, birding is an activity that can bring joy to our daily lives. Hopefully, the "Bird Songs Newsletter" issues of 2021 will once again be filled with bird count statistics, club activities, and the return of wonderful group photos.

Species Profile: Ruffed Grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*)

by Elizabeth Stone, Photos from eBird



Nothing says fall like watching my Irish Setter Reilly in the brilliant foliage with his nose in the air, casting back and forth to pick up the scent of his favorite bird, the Ruffed Grouse. This species is a favorite bird of people, too, as it is one of the few species with an entire organization dedicated to its welfare - in this case, The Ruffed Grouse Society.

Sometimes incorrectly called partridge by Northwoods old timers, the Ruffed Grouse is found in the Northwoods year-round. One of the sure signs of spring is hearing the ritual drumming of males from deep in the woods. In summer and fall, these birds may be flushed out from dense young aspen stands, with an unmistakable whirring of their wings. And in winter, ruffed grouse may burrow into fluffy snow for warmth, then surprise the unsuspecting snowshoer when they burst out of the snow.

Although most birders prefer to observe Ruffed Grouse rather than hunt them, hunting season for this popular game bird is taking place right now, and will continue until early January in our area. Wisconsin is a

top state for Ruffed Grouse hunting, and over 90,000 hunters harvest approximately 340,000 Ruffed Grouse each fall. Populations of Ruffed Grouse drop for unknown reasons about every 10 years, and then recover. Grouse are distributed across all Canadian provinces and in 38 of the 49 continental United States. The Sibley Guide to Birds describes them as uncommon, but eBird lists them as a species of least concern. Grouse are relatively plentiful in Wisconsin, occurring in all areas of the state except the southeastern counties.

In addition to their human predators, Ruffed Grouse may fall prey to hawks and owls, foxes, weasels, raccoons and skunks. However, there are many agencies at work to protect these popular birds. The DNR manages grouse on public lands, Forest Tax Law Programs and the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service encourage private woodland owners to manage forests for wildlife, and The Ruffed Grouse Society advocates for habitat protection. A Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership has been created to coordinate efforts between these groups.

Early successional forest habitats, specifically stands of aspen, are critical for Ruffed Grouse. In recent decades, maturation of the northern forest into hardwoods and conifers has decreased suitable habitat for this species. In December 2019, the Wisconsin DNR created a 2020-2030 Ruffed Grouse Management Plan, with a goal of increasing the acreage of young forest throughout the state. You may have noticed that stands of the Northern Highland American Legion Forest have been almost clearcut in recent years, with a goal of aspen regeneration. After an area of forest has been logged, if slash (branches and small logs unwanted by loggers) remains on the ground, grouse will not move in right away, as hens and their young cannot easily walk through the slash. However, within a few years, the slash decomposes, and as young aspen sprout into dense growth, the forest stand will become perfect habitat for grouse to raise their young. As aspen stands age, they remain attractive to Ruffed Grouse, who feed on the buds, catkins, newly sprouted leaves, and twigs of the mature trees.



Ruffed grouse belong the Order Galliformes, which includes turkeys, pheasants, chickens, and quail, and the Family Phasianidae. Their closest but more rare relatives in Wisconsin include the Spruce Grouse, Sharp-Tailed Grouse, and Greater Prairie Chicken. The Ruffed Grouse species name, *umbellus*, comes from the Latin word for sunshade, a reference to the umbrella-like ruff of feathers around the neck. The female grouse builds her nest at the base of a stump in a shallow depression lined with leaves. She lays a clutch of 10-12 eggs that are incubated for 23-24 days, hatching in late May or early June. Grouse chicks leave the nest almost immediately after hatching and within 24 hours, they can walk, hop, and run. Within 7-8 days, they can fly a short distance. After feeding on insects for the first month of life, the chicks will feed on the leaves and fruits of succulent plants until their brood disperses in early September. Only about 3-4 chicks from a brood survive until the time of dispersal, yet at the end of summer, about 80% of the Ruffed Grouse population will be juvenile birds. About 3/4 of the juvenile grouse disperse within a mile from their brood areas. In fall, grouse prefer berries, sumac, grapes, and acorns. In winter, their favorite food is aspen buds, but they will also eat catkins and buds of certain other trees and shrubs.

Hopefully, you will have plenty of opportunities to see Ruffed Grouse this fall and winter, whether you have an Irish Setter to find them for you or not. They feed most actively in the morning and late afternoon. In between, they spend much of their time roosting. As winter approaches, the grouse will reduce their daily activity to conserve calories. Adult grouse remain solitary through much of the year, but may form small groups during winter to feed on preferred foods or shelter in choice cover. Happy Ruffed Grouse birding!

A Bird in Hand

By Ed Marshall

My neighbor, Dale Falesch, was resting in his lounge, door open, when something crashed into the screen door. When checking to see what happened, he found a small bird in a very dazed condition. He rescued the bird, brought it inside and wrapped it in a paper towel, and waited for it to recover. While waiting, he took a photo.



photo by Dale Falesch

Recover it did in 30 minutes or so; he then took it outdoors and released it. It disappeared into the forest. We live on a lake with rolling forest terrain with scattered bogs.

He then sent the photo to me and inquired about it's species. I got into my Audubon app and books for research. It was a nondescript little bird, I came up with about 3 that I thought it could be. My favorite was a Tennessee Warbler. The back and wings were a very olive color; top of head was gray and there was a very definite dark eye line. If I am correct that little guy is on his way to South America now.

Sarah thinks it could be a Red-eyed Vireo. Anyone else in the club have an opinion?

Do I Really Need to Take Another Loon Photo?

Article and Photos By Mark Westphal

When I am out canoeing, I usually have my camera with me. Despite the possibility that I could take a spill and potentially lose or damage my equipment, I take the risk of having my camera out on the water. I am willing to take that risk with the hope of capturing a good photo. I have seen many wonderful sights and captured numerous images from the seat of my canoe.

One of the birds we are privileged to see on our northern Wisconsin lakes is the common loon. If I am on the water and the loon is nearby, my camera will likely be at the ready. Through the years I have taken dozens if not hundreds of loon photos. Most of those photos are deleted. Poor lighting, operator error, wave action, or uncooperative "models" account for many of these photos never seeing the light of day. Every once in a while, I will get an acceptable image. Through the years I have accumulated a few "keepers". Despite my occasional successes, I keep on taking more loon pictures. I cannot seem to help myself. I am always trying to get a photo of a loon with better lighting, a better expression, and/or a more unusual pose.



In reality, there is no shortage of loon photos. Both amateurs and professionals have taken thousands of great images. So, with the availability of all these images, I recently asked the question of myself “Do I really need to take another loon photo?”. The answer for me is “yes”. I still enjoy the challenge of trying to capture a good image. I enjoy the time I spend observing loon behavior while waiting to press the shutter button. Most important to me, as long as I continue taking loon pictures, I know that I will not be taking their presence for granted. For many years the common loon has been relatively easy to find on our Northwoods lakes. Residents and visitors alike have enjoyed their haunting calls and the sight of loon parents tending to their fuzzy chicks. During the past 20 years, the loon population on northern Wisconsin lakes has been steadily declining. The exact cause of this decline is unclear. Some of the contributing factors may include the increased presence of black flies during the nesting season, habitat degradation, lead poisoning from the ingestion of lead fishing tackle, and potential changes in the quantity and quality of their food source. Even the increased presence of bald eagles is not good news for young loon chicks. For unknown reasons, loons are raising fewer and smaller chicks. The mortality rate of chicks continues to rise. Fewer young loons are returning from their wintering grounds to replace their aging parents. As summers grow warmer, our local loon population is likely

to move further north. According to an Audubon model reflecting the effects of climate change, “Loons are projected to be much less abundant in northern Wisconsin by 2050 and gone altogether by 2080.” While the “Loon Project” organization states that this “projection is likely to provide a crude estimate of the impact of climate change on loons, not a precise one”, the long-term future of loons in northern Wisconsin is in question. Hopefully, the research being done by organizations like “Loon Project” will lend greater insight into the specific reasons behind the decline in our loon population. If we can find the causes of this decline, perhaps we can take the needed steps to protect this beloved symbol of our northern lakes.

As I contemplate whether to take another loon photo, I realize that the common loons I see on my favorite wilderness lakes may not always be so “common”. So, I will continue to take loon photos for my own pleasure, for my own personal memory book, and for those who may not have the opportunity to see a close-up image of this fascinating bird. For more information about loon research in Wisconsin, go to loonproject.org.



Photo Journal

Notes and Photos by Mark Westphal

Summer is filled with new life. Fledgling birds were all around. I enjoyed watching a blue bird family from my kitchen window from the time the adults battled with tree swallows over possession of the nest box , to the time the youngsters had left the nest. Young king birds were spotted along the shore of a nearby lake as they foraged for food. This year's young bald eagle surveyed its territory from a branch of a dead white pine that held its nest. Two weeks later the 30 to 40 year old nest would collapse into the lake below during the heavy winds of a thunderstorm. The young eagle was not harmed.

Eastern Bluebird



Eastern Kingbird

Bald Eagle



Like everywhere else in the northwoods, Powell Marsh gets a little quieter this time of year. A few birds linger into September or are now just passing through. Sedge Wrens were still chattering during my last walk around the refuge area on August 31st. Several Great Blue Herons have lingered into September. A pair of Trumpeter Swans still guard their territory from interlopers, and migrating Northern Flickers search for food along the gravel pathways.



Sedge Wren

Great Blue Heron



Trumpeter Swan

Northern Flicker

