

BIRD SONGS

Newsletter of the North Lakeland
Discovery Center Bird Club

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President's Message

by Mark Westphal

Our Club has once again had a modified 2021 birding season due to Covid. Thanks to the energy and planning skills of Donna Roche we were able to maintain a full schedule of Thursday morning outings. Along with our birding activities, we had the opportunity to see old friends and welcome some new members. No regular monthly meetings were held, primarily due to the lack of available meeting facilities and concerns related to large gatherings. Hopefully, 2022 will once again give us the opportunity to hold regular meetings along with the ability to invite various speakers. As

always, if you have any ideas or suggestions, feel free to reach out to any of the Board Members.

I would like to welcome Amy Sheldon to our Board of Directors. She has been appointed to fill the unexpired term held by Duane Swift. Duane and Ann Swift will be moving to western Wisconsin. We are currently in the process of filling the treasurer's position. There is at least one willing volunteer, but the modified election process should be completed before any official announcement is made. It is good to know that we will have a full Board of Directors to help keep our Club moving forward in a positive direction. A big thank you once again to Duane Swift and David Foster for their years of service to the Bird Club.

Please note the included photo of the new water feature at the Discovery Center feeding station. The water feature is the result of the hard work and ingenuity of Bruce Bacon, Carne Andrews, Julie Hellwig, and Jim Zedler. In an effort to make it more attractive to both birds and people, these volunteers, along with Donna Roche and myself, are continuing to work to improve the bird feeding area. We have a good start, but it is a work in progress.



Fall colors will soon reach their peak in the Northwoods. Many of our birds, along with some of our club members, are already in the process of heading south. Although our regular Bird Club season is winding down, we still have more birding opportunities to look forward to. Trips are still on the schedule to Wausau (Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum, Birds In Art Exhibit), Woodruff Fish Hatchery area, North Lakeland Discovery Center, and Powell Marsh. The outing at the Discovery Center will include a bird walk along with our first opportunity to see and use the newly remodeled main lodge. After the walk, we can meet and enjoy lunch together. Please watch Donna's outing updates for further details.

Other birding activities to look forward to are the annual Christmas Bird Counts. Club members have been participating in this ongoing Citizen Science Project for many years. Club members are valued participants in the Minocqua count organized by Donna Roche and the Manitowish Waters count coordinated by John Bates. The Minocqua Christmas Bird Count is tentatively scheduled for December 16th. Please watch for further details this coming December.

I have not yet heard the annual "finch forecast" that predicts the presence or absence of northern visitors such as Evening Grosbeaks, Crossbills, and Pine Siskins. Will Wisconsin have another Great Gray Owl interruption? Will Snowy Owls make an appearance? For me, the possibility of unusual visitors adds a dash of anticipation to the winter birding season. Even if we are not visited by any of the far northern species, I am confident that the Chickadees and resident Blue Jays will be a welcome sight at our feeders. Speaking of feeders, are your bird feeders clean and ready for winter feeding? Cleaning your feeders with a mild bleach solution is a great way to help keep birds healthy and reduce the spread of disease. You can check online for more thorough cleaning recommendations.

I know many of you feed birds year-round. I personally have been waiting for cooler temperatures. I know I can put my feeders up during the day and put them inside at night, but I am always trying to determine that magical time when the black bears decide they are ready for the "big snooze". I have lost several feeders to those hungry, determined critters. Now I tend to be on the cautious side. Nevertheless, I am anxious to get my feeders out. Perhaps I could put up a sign at my feeders, "For Birds Only".

Although our Club activities may take a break, birding season never really ends. Whether you take a wintery walk or just watch the feeders outside your window, you never know what you might see. Keep those binoculars handy!

DC Bird Club Thursday Outings - Summer & Fall 2021

Recap of Outings with Some Photos of the Birders!

By Donna Roche

From the earlier Bird Song Spring Review of outings, Bird Club Thursday outings continued into the summer of 2021 without a hitch! Every week there was an outing and every week there were birders who participated. Every week the announcement that I wrote was faithfully sent out to the membership by John Randolph. Thanks you so much, John, for keeping us connected! My request for members to suggest and to lead outings was accepted by two. Thanks to Carne for leading us to Van Vliet and thanks to Jenna who led a paddle on the Manitowish River. There were several times this year when I was not able to lead and each time the participants took it upon themselves to get around, keep species lists, and sometimes take photos! For each and every outing there were volunteers who kept the ebird species lists, brought their scopes and cameras, helped carry the club's scope, helped with the route and generally participated in active birding. A saying goes something like 'if you build it...they(he) will come'. I'm so pleased to say that DC Birders come and THEY DO LOTS MORE THAN JUST COME!



We started the 'summer' of our birding season with a return to Powell Marsh on **July 1, 2021**. For a change, we made a circular trip around Powell

Marsh trails started with a short shuttle from the Vista to Marsh Road. Ten club members participated, with eight going the full route and two going back and forth from their start points... all was fine and all worked out. The weather was perfect for a delightful birding walk! Tree Sparrows occupied every birdhouse along the Marsh dike.... appreciate them now because they leave us earlier than we think. There were good numbers of Sedge Wrens, Marsh Wrens and Common Yellowthroats who were busy carrying food and warning us with their songs and calls that they were guarding their nests. A pair of Northern Harriers skimmed the grasses and we could tell the distinctive color differences between male and female. I believe there was least one colt seen of the 5 Sandhill Cranes noted. We did see the infamous adult Trumpeter Swans with 1 cygnet, but there were no conflicts today. (Be sure to read Mark Westphal's article with photos in the June issue of the Bird Songs or in Friday's issue of the Lakeland Times). However on this day, the killer was a busy Belted Kingfisher who used the wooden slats on a dike structure as a cutting board for his fish catch.

Thanks Amy for eBird list - Total species 27.



Recap for **July 8, 2021:** WOW, TERRIFIC, GREAT DAY, DIDN'T DISAPPOINT... Our group of 11 BC members may have used these words to describe our outing to Deer View Lane. It was another beautiful, sunny, warm day for us to be out birding and for the birds to be active. We were successful in finding our target birds with several sightings of male and female Bobolink and good glimpses of the Dickcissel. Hurrah! We don't

always appreciate seeing European Starlings, but several times this day we were impressed when 30-40 birds would lift up all together to form a small cloud, maneuver around and then land elsewhere, reminding us of their group name -- a murmuration of starlings. It was a good opportunity to work on sparrow identification with 6 species and 4 species of swallows, including Bank Swallows that Sarah B. lead us to in another location nearby. We also walked a road where we heard Indigo Bunting and watched and heard an overhead Red-tailed Hawk. **Thanks Sarah for eBird lists of 37 species!**



Recap for **July 15, 2021**: On this Thursday, the Bird Club added another location to our large list of outing destinations. I think we were pleasantly surprised that Winter Park in Minocqua turned out to be a good walk and a good spot for many species of birds. Our species list totaled 20 species with an Eastern Bluebird and Eastern Phoebe being stars that have been hard to find this year. After our visit, I found out from Barb Blow that Winter Park has developed a 'Bluebird Monitoring Trail' and is working on other ways to attract birds. We'll have to keep Winter Park's birding commitment in mind for another time! Our group was 12 with one guest. **20 species recorded by Liz!**



Recap for **July 22, 2021**: On this Thursday, our group totaled 14 with 2 new participants. We hiked the Nokomis area section of the Bearskin Trail. The day was overcast with some threat of storms, but it stayed dry for us. Perhaps some birds that we hoped to find stayed hidden, but our total of 29 species was very satisfying. At some spots along the trail, it was hard to keep up with young birds flitting from tree to tree across our path. Several folks have a new birding tool from the Merlin app which helps to identify birds by call and song. It helped to confirm some, but confused us with others. However, we will still depend on our protocol of two DC members agreeing on each bird for our records. At the end of our walk, we enjoyed great ice cream treats at the Windmill Ice Cream Shop! **Thanks, Liz, for keeping the species list of 29 species.**



Recap for **July 29, 2021**: It was quite cool this morning, but twelve paddlers in ten boats had a good time birding Allequash Lake last week.

Actually, Mark W. intended to hike, but thanks to a kind offer to share Dick and Liz's canoe, he took a boat ride instead. We found a number of species of birds around the boat landing both at the beginning and ending of our visit... hummingbird being the first and catbird the last. We heard what we thought was a young eagle as we paddled in the larger, deeper lobe, but couldn't find this bird or a nest. We did find eagles in flight along with a gull, vulture and some goldfinch. The ducks and loons were still in family groups on the water and other birds along the shoreline demonstrated that they didn't want us too close to their possible families! At the far end of the shallow lobe of Allequash we were rewarded with views of 3 Trumpeter Swans at the far end. **Thanks Denise, for keeping the species list of 23 species and for the above photo!**



Recap for **Aug 5, 2021**: It was great to walk the Little Turtle Flowage trail from the parking area to the woods with a more expansive view than we had in 2019. You may remember that trees were removed early this spring in an effort to retain a more prairie-like landscape in the LTF's management plans. Our walk started with an overlook of the almost grassed-over main pool. It was pretty quiet with a few ducks and just 4 Tree Swallows remaining from the many we saw nesting here in early summer. For many in our club group, this was their first walk in the woods to the bridge. It was a nice walk and a lovely view at the bridge. However, once again it was pretty quiet. And although it should not be surprising that by the first of August the breeding bird activity and chatter is no longer in evidence, it is still a letdown. I didn't notice until later that we didn't note any warbler species! So we must have enjoyed the chickadees, waxwings, blackbirds and even jays that made up the larger numbers of birds we saw or heard. There weren't any complaints! **Thanks Liz for your eBird list of 22 species.**



Recap for **Aug 12, 2021**: Our group was not scared off by the early morning rain that seemed a repeat of our earlier trip this year to Ashland. It stopped before we left from Mercer. Five club members and one guest spent the great weather day searching and finding birds along the shore of Chequamegon Bay. We didn't find Common Terns on the nesting site, but our eagle-eyed guest, David, saw a group fling over us later. There were plenty of cormorants on the breakwater and a few ducks and geese in the water. At Bayview and 9th Avenue, we found warblers and vireos. Maslowski Beach was a high point with several shorebirds and immature Herring Gulls. Hope you saw Mark's photos sent out by John on Saturday. Prentice Park was good for an early outdoor lunch and 19 bird species! There was still time to move on to Washburn's Lakefront Trail. It was really getting warm. We enjoyed the good breeze, but I'm sure we missed some birds who kept low and quiet. It was a great full day and we were grateful for it!!

Many thanks to Carne for keeping all those lists!



Recap for **Aug 19, 2021** by **Debbie Simek**: As a result of the wonderful directions that our normally fearless leader, but on this day absent, Donna sent; we were able to find our way around the Rainbow Flowage. The day was beautiful! Good start. However, the bridge over the WI river was rather quiet, until.... Linda spotted shorebirds. Four, not so solitary Solitary Sandpipers. From there, we continued to the end of Oxbow Road where there was a little inlet with some downed trees. Here was our jackpot.... birds flitting everywhere. Lots of Yellow-rumped Warblers, a Red-eyed Vireo out in the open and a Baltimore Oriole. Walking back a bit on the road, we were rewarded with an assortment of warblers along with chickadees and sparrows. From there we all decided to go to the north side of the flowage where we got to see the "dancing" eagle. For some reason it was swaying from side to side! It was also nice to see 2 phoebes since it seems like we just aren't seeing them much this year. **BIG thanks to Debbie for also keeping the species list.**



Recap for **Aug 26, 2021**: Seven DC Bird Club members, including Jon and Judy Cassady (great to see you!), gathered for a little picnic birding before

doing some walking around 'town'. While enjoying our carried in suppers, we saw several species of birds.... a possible kingbird family at the top of a tall spruce, vireos in the shrubs, pigeons on the ground and hummingbird in the private yard. We have made 'friends' with the folks in that yard... they waved and then came over to show us their photo of a Sandhill Crane taken that morning by the pond next to Save More. We thanked them for that info and then walked the trail bridge. There were chickadees, blue jays and more yellow-rumps in the trees at the far end of the bridge. From there, we followed streets on the west side of Hwy 51 where we found goldfinch, the Nashville and a number of sparrows. After crossing over to the neighborhood on the east side of 51, we had a flyover of 3 loons! We continued to the backside of that pond by Save More where we found 1 and probably more Wood Ducks. As we looked for more, we saw a heron flying towards us from the west and land in the pond; and surprise, surprise with our view to the western sky in came 2 Sandhill Cranes! With twilight and the coming little rain, we were in the right spot at the right time. We did not see any nighthawks or swifts, but it was a good time regardless. **19 Species of birds from Donna's list.**



Recap for **Sept 2, 2021**: It was a beautiful day for the Bird Club's full morning of birding to several places along the shore of Lake Superior with a first stop at Giles Flowage. Even with scopes set up at the flowage road, it took some time to verify 4 Ring-necked Ducks that were far out near the reeds. This study set the tone of the day to carefully look and relook at birds, in order to be confident and comfortable with each species identification. I am proud of us! The sunshine warmed the day quite a bit

and we found Lake Superior to be very calm as we drove into the restored area of Saxon Harbor. It was quiet with very little boating activity, and as we found out later, less bird activity than we have experienced here in the past. However, Common Mergansers were fun to watch having quite the feeding frenzy moving as a raft from area to area off the shore. In a new camping area we found woodpecker, vireos, chickadees, nuthatches and warbler! From Saxon Harbor, we drove into Michigan via the lakeshore road. Little Girls Point County Park is a new destination for us. There were a few gulls along the sandy beach and we were grateful to find a robin, crow and sparrows in some nearby shrubs to our meager list. Later with help of a photo, we added 1 Herring Gull. Hurrah! The last stop of our tour was the main park area with picnic area, another trail down to the beach and a good spot for an early lunch. **Thanks to our new member, David for keeping the lists and eBirding the results including the HEGU!**



Sept 9, 2021: Recap and photo thanks to Denise Herzberg: The morning started out chilly, but the overcast skies gave way to brilliant sunshine. Eight Bird Club paddlers came out to enjoy the day, the birds and each other. There was an array of colorful kayaks, but Carne and Mark canoed in the USS Uff Da - a very sturdy Norwegian vessel. Bird activity was pretty limited, except for the Blue Jays who called every 10 minutes. Was it just one following us down the river of 20 well-spaced individuals? A Great Blue Heron posed next to a group of cavorting otters and Debbie and Julie tagged far behind us to listen to the beavers chew. It was surprising that we didn't see any Bald Eagles, but we were treated to a soaring Red-tailed Hawk. The Manitowish River is a peaceful, easy paddle. In fact, it was

easier paddling upstream than down because the wind picked up on our way back. **Thanks to Jenna for suggesting and planning this paddle**, and thanks to everyone for helping others unload and load kayaks and move the 80 pound USS Uff Da! (I don't have her list, but Deb Wilson birded at the NLDC, thanks for participating!)



Recap for **Sept 16, 2021**: Well... this was completely different! After arriving in the Powell Marsh Vista parking area I thought to myself "with this strong wind in the open space of Powell Marsh.... this isn't going to be fun or productive". When our group of 12 was all there, we decided to move to the Powell Trail! We did not hear or see many birds, but we were very comfortable being protected from the wind by areas of young aspen and areas of large pine trees along a nice wide trail. As the sun warmed the morning there were a couple of places with chickadees and warblers actively feeding in the pines. Later, Julie noted that this might be a good place for spring warblers... so, it will be on my list for next year! I forgot to take a photo of Jim, Julie, Linda, Debbie, Laura, E.M., Mark, Denise, Deb, Carne, Ed and Donna. **Thank you, Denise, for keeping the list and recording to eBird the 11 species we found.**



Recap for Sept 23: Sometimes I find that fate and destiny work together for some special times. It was a nice coincidence that the Cassadys, who had originally suggested this outing, were able to join the group this day. But what we seven other birders didn't know was that it was Jon's 81st birthday! They brought doughnut holes and cider to celebrate and start our outing. The sunny morning warmed up as we walked along the Wisconsin River with only a few gulls and mallards at Memorial Park. After we used the underpass for 4th Street, we found more activity with lots of American Robins flitting in the vegetation. For most of the walk we found one of this and one of that species that added to a nice list. Thanks to Denise who carried her scope for the group, we were able to get better looks at the grebe and merganser. The landscape architects who designed this trail incorporated good access, just enough nooks and crannies of landscaping and river views, plus personal touches of a Girl Scout gardens to make this river walk a special place. For us birders, there were a couple of great 'deliberation moments' where several species were discussed to determine exact identity!! A soaring large bird held our attention for some time before we decided that it was a 2nd year Bald Eagle as did the Merlin. On the walk back from Sara Park, we found a grosbeak and yellow-rump. **Thanks to David for eBirding the 22 total species**



Thanks Denise, for this photo of Donna taking a photo of others at the Little Turtle Flowage bridge. However, the important point is, Donna will be looking for YOU at the next DC Bird Club Thurs. outings!!

HERE IS THE SCHEDULE PLAN FOR THE REMAINDER OF THE BIRD CLUB THURSDAY OUTINGS SEASON;

September 30 - Willow Flowage

October 7 - Wausau Day trip - hike, visit 'Birds in Art', and lunch!

October 14 - Woodruff's Fish Hatchery grounds and area

October 21 - NLDC Birding Trail route ** BC meeting and social to follow

October 28 - Powell Marsh Vista

*December 16 - Minocqua Christmas Bird Count

Arizona or Bust

Article and Photos by Debbie Simek

Last fall I received an email list from my birding teacher and mentor. It included 12 species of hummingbirds! Wow! I thought that only Central America had such wonderful hummingbirds. (In Ecuador I was lucky to see 38 of their 68 species). Then, a few months later, when I read Guy's article in the newsletter, I knew I had to go to SE Arizona. His tempting descriptions of birding in SE Arizona, where he now resides, pushed me over the top. Once I got vaccinated I vowed to go!

Luckily I was able to go for spring migration in April, 13-27. First destination - Portal, AZ. I booked a week at a ranch in their 2 bedroom guest house. The thing about Portal that was so unique was that EVERYBODY that was there was there for the birds. Residents hosted "sits"

in their yards for birding with donations accepted to help with the cost of bird food. The Portal area also has varied habitats to draw many different species. There's desert, woods, creeks, and mountains. While at the guest house our wake up call each morning was from Curve-billed Thrashers. Once awake we went out on our porch daily to see Canyon Towhees, and Cardinals. By going into the backyard of the big house we got to see their resident Western Screech Owl, Cardinals, Bullock's, Hooded and Scott's Orioles, Lazuli Buntings, Lark Sparrows and Green-tailed Towhees.



Western Screech Owl



Lark Sparrows with White-crowned and Chipping Sparrows



Scott's Oriole

After a morning of birding on the property we headed out to the Chiricahua Mountains. Depending on elevation we would see either Mexican or

Steller's Jays. You always knew when Mexican Jays were around because they stay together in small flocks and do a lot of group calling/communicating. I got to see my first Yellow-eyed Junco together with Painted Redstarts - an active flashy warbler. Here I also saw the Arizona and Acorn Woodpeckers.

Arizona Woodpecker



Acorn Woodpecker

Going up into the Cave Creek canyon we were hoping to see an Elegant Trogon and Mexican Chickadees. Apparently we were a bit early for the Trogons so a trip back will be a must! The Mexican Chickadees evaded us too. I couldn't believe we missed them. Everywhere else I've seen chickadees they are always very social and curious. I'll have to go back for them too! However I didn't know anything about the Red-faced Warblers and lo and behold looking for chickadees we saw these cool warblers - both Red-faced and Black-throated Gray.



Red-faced Warbler

Vermillion
Flycatcher



Living in TX for half the year I get to see titmouse on a daily basis. I have tufted at my backyard feeder and Black-Crested at my daughter's 3 hours South. In Arizona they have Bridled, which are so darn cute!

OK. Now for the hummingbirds. At everybody's backyard feeders we saw oodles of hummingbirds - no Ruby-throated but did see: Allen's, Anna's, Black-chinned, Blue-throated Mountain Gem, Broad-billed, Broad-tailed, Calliope, Costa's, Lucifer, Rivoli's and Rufous. Our favorite "sit" spot was in Paradise, AZ, where a young biologist had set up 24 feeders! We sat for hours on 3 different occasions. While there we also got to see Turkey Vultures. You say "Yeah so". Well in SE AZ the Zone-tailed Hawk hangs with the TVs as camouflage, until he spots his prey, and then quickly flaps his wings, breaking from the group to swoop down on an unsuspecting prey.



Wilson's Warbler



Pyrrhuloxia

From Portal and Paradise we went West to Sierra Vista where we visited Ramsy and Miller canyons and San Pedro. We had a pair of Cassin's Finches and Cactus Wrens that awakened us outside that house. We added a few lifers there and confirmed many of our new AZ species. On our way back to TX we headed up to Saguaro National Park. It was really cool to see the Gila Woodpeckers that make the cactus their home. Each cactus can weigh up to 4,800 pounds when fully hydrated. During storms a saguaro can absorb 200 gallons per minute through their surfaces. This water works as insulation for the birds that nest in them by keeping them cooler in the summer and warmer in the winter.



Gila Woodpecker

After 2 weeks it was time to leave the desert and get homeonly 10 hours. We'll be back!

Species Profile: Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*)

Article and Photos by Sarah Besadny



Seeing as this was a banner year for Dickcissels, I thought I'd write this quarter's Species Profile column in their honor. As you may have read in various publications, this was considered an irruptive year for Dickcissels across the upper Midwest and here in Wisconsin, for the first time ever, they were reported in all 72 counties.

Dickcissels like overgrown pastures, savannahs and croplands and are most commonly found in the central Great Plains during the breeding season. Here in Wisconsin, they are usually seen in the southern counties but less often seen in the northern counties due to the largely forested habitat in this area. I checked eBird data for the Oneida, Vilas and Iron county areas and found the following:

2015 – no Dickcissels reported

2016 – no Dickcissels reported

2017 – two reports in Oneida and one in Vilas

2018 – four reports in Vilas

2019 – one report in Vilas

2020 – 4 reports in Vilas (including confirmation of breeding), 6 in Oneida, 3 in Iron

2021 – seven reports in Vilas, 6 reports in Iron, 6 reports in Oneida

Because not all birders use eBird, this likely doesn't reflect all sightings of Dickcissels but it does reflect the well-documented influx of Dickcissels this year, including here in northern Wisconsin. The Bird Club reported Dickcissels on their July 8th outing to Deer View Road. The only other report of this species by the Bird Club from records dating back to 2004 was on June 5, 2010 when the Club took a trip down to Horicon Marsh. (Once again, thanks to Guy David for having kept the Club's species records for most of those years and allowing us to get some great insights into what species were seen, and when and where!)

If someone asked me how large I thought the Dickcissel was I guess I could have said 7 inches or so. Well, these birds are only 5.9 inches – about the size and weight of a House Sparrow. Their wingspan is 9.8 inches and they weigh 0.9 ounces. Maybe it's the large bill that makes me think they are a larger bird than they are? Besides a very large bill, the male Dickcissel has a prominent black "V" on its neck with a white throat above the V and a wash of bold yellow under the V on the breast. The males have rich rust patches on the wings and yellow, gray and white markings on the face. Female Dickcissels are more muted in their coloring than the males and females lack the black V entirely.

Dickcissels aren't hard to pick out if they are in the area that you are birding during their breeding season. The males seem to find the highest perch on shrubs or trees, or on a wire or fence post from which to sing their loud, repetitive and distinct song -- "dick dick ciss ciss ciss" or "skee-dlees chis chis chis". In my experience, they aren't skittish at all, staying put on their perch for long periods of time, letting me take in their beauty ... and even giving me a chance to practice my digiscoping!



The Wisconsin eBird team* wrote that Dickcissels are a late migrant to Wisconsin – usually arriving in late May. By late May this year reports seemed normal for Dickcissels but by early June the numbers were increasing and by mid-June the numbers were reported as “staggering”.

There are theories about why there were so many Dickcissels in the Wisconsin, Minnesota and upper Michigan area this year. One possible reason is drought. Other irruptive years were considered drought years. The Wisconsin eBird team also noted that it might be due to loss of habitat in their usual nesting areas.

Cornell’s All About Birds usually has some interesting facts about bird species. This bird must be somewhat understudied because there wasn’t much, but here goes. “While the Dickcissel is currently classified as part of the cardinal family (Cardinalidae), it has vexed taxonomists trying to determine its closest relatives. In the past, it has been placed in the New World sparrow family and also in the oriole and blackbird family.”

What a treat it was to see so many Dickcissels here in the Northwoods this summer. It will be interesting to see what next summer brings!

Resources:

Sibley Field Guide

Cornell Lab of Ornithology: All About Birds

*Tom Prestby and Nick Anich: "The Summer of the Dickcissel" written for Wisconsin eBird and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology

A Visit to Hawk Ridge

Article and Photos by Mark Westphal

Despite being retired, it has been a challenge for my wife, Tina, and I to find a small string of free days with which to plan a short trip. A few weeks ago, we found a brief window of time and decided to hit the road. Although we had little time for advanced planning, we were fortunate to find a space at a small RV park in the Superior/Duluth area. So, off we went.

There are many fine sights to see in the Duluth area, but for bird enthusiasts Hawk Ridge is a must-see destination. Hawk Ridge is one of the major sites in the United States to view the fall raptor migration. Each fall tens of thousands of raptors, along with other birds, funnel along a narrow strip of land in Duluth within sight of Lake Superior. Birds migrating from the far north would prefer not to cross the open waters of Lake Superior. So, as they journey south, they tend to hug the western shoreline of this great lake. The location and elevation of Hawk Ridge make it the perfect place to observe an impressive number of raptors as they skirt around Lake Superior.

We made several visits to Hawk Ridge during our multi-day trip. Each day at Hawk Ridge was different. Weather conditions, including precipitation, temperature, and wind direction all influenced the amount of bird activity. Some days were relatively quiet, while others provided an abundance of activity. On the quietest day it was not uncommon to hear the phrase "You should have been here yesterday". During our visit we had both what might be considered a busy day and a quiet day. The sunny day with winds out of the northwest produced a greater number of raptors, but they tended to fly much higher. The day with calm southerly winds produced fewer birds, but the ones that we did see flew lower and provided better up-close views. By

coincidence, the annual “Hawk Ridge Weekend Festival” provided additional opportunities to attend various programs, as well as hear talks at their outdoor classroom located right at Hawk Ridge.

During the weekend hundreds of people filtered through the observation area. Some were serious birders, many of which were happy to share their knowledge. Others appeared to be first-time visitors to the Ridge, curious to see what all the activity was about. Some visitors stopped in for just a short while, while others like Tina and I brought folding chairs and stayed for hours at a time, enjoying the sighting of raptors, chatting with fellow birders, and just taking in the beautiful view of Lake Superior. Even if you don't visit Hawk Ridge during the festival weekend, naturalists are on-sight at the Nature Reserve every day from September 1st to October 31st between 9:00 am and 4:00 pm. Naturalists often bring up live raptors caught at a nearby banding station. Visitors get an opportunity to get an up-close look at the birds and watch them be released back into the wild. Naturalists also help to point out and identify some of the raptors as they fly by as well as answer any questions you might have.

When is the best time to visit Hawk Ridge? It depends on daily weather conditions, what you might want to see, and how many layers of clothing you are willing to put on. Our mid-September visit provided mild weather, and plenty of sightings of Sharp-shinned Hawks and spectacular kettles of Broad-winged Hawks. Bald Eagles, Ospreys, and two Peregrine Falcons were also spotted. Later in October, as temperatures drop, the total number of raptors may be fewer, but you will have a greater chance of seeing more of the larger raptors, such as Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks and Golden Eagles. If you visit hawkridge.org, you can view comprehensive daily records of migrating raptors, dating back to 1972. These records not only make for interesting reading, but they may also help you determine which stages of the migration you would like to see.



Visitors had the opportunity to get a close-up look at this mature Sharp-shinned Hawk prior to release. Note the bright red eye.

Tina and I have been to Hawk Ridge in both September and October. Each month provides it's own special viewing opportunities. During our recent visit to Duluth, one of the days was cloudy and rainy. We chose to play tourist and visited a few shops and the Great Lakes Aquarium. The total raptor count at Hawk Ridge that day was 172. The following day we needed to head home but were able to spend a few morning hours at the Ridge. That day's total count was 15,178 primarily due to a major influx of Broad-winged Hawks. What a difference a day makes.



Skilled, professional birders count raptors along with other species from their "perch" at the top Hawk Ridge.

I highly recommend a trip to Hawk Ridge. Sometimes all the right conditions come together, and you enjoy the benefits of ideal winds and weather. Some days mother nature hits the pause button, and fewer birds choose to fly. When visiting Hawk Ridge, it is easy to be impressed by the days with large raptor numbers. It is also possible that the quieter days of October will provide you with closer views and equally memorable sightings of your favorite raptor. There is still time to visit Hawk Ridge this year. Just remember to pack an additional layer or two of clothing. It can get a bit breezy up on the Ridge.

A program at the outdoor classroom featured an opportunity to get a close up look at this Peregrine Falcon



Jacquelyn Fallon gave visitors a rare look at a Gyrfalcon , our largest and most powerful falcon.



A close-up of the Gyr Falcon. Note the distinctively shaped beak designed to efficiently dispatch prey.

I was amazed that I was able to catch this image of a migrating peregrine falcon. Notice the pointed wings that can help this species reach speeds of over 240 miles per hour, making it not only the fastest bird in the world, but the fastest member of the animal kingdom



A Red Tailed Hawk catches a thermal over the visitors at Hawk Ridge



An Osprey takes advantage of a warm breeze out of the north west

Light dances through the wings of an immature sharp shinned hawk.



This Broad-wing hawk is often seen in large groups called "kettles" as they take advantage of energy saving thermals.

A naturalist points out the characteristics of this newly banded sharp shinned hawk



Life List Quaterly: Third Quarter 2021

By Sarah Besadny

The Bird Club had amassed 87 species for the year by the end of June. Numerous outings later and we're up to 110! Certainly time of year and also location provides opportunities for spotting new species for our annual list and that was the case this year.

The Club usually targets an outing to farmland and grassy fields in hopes of seeing species different from those we hope to see during our woodland or marsh outings. The was the goal of the July 8th outing to Deer View Road and indeed, it offered several new species sightings for the year: Rock Pigeon, Barn Swallow, Cliff Swallow, House Wren, Vesper Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, Bobolink and Dickcissel. Several trips to the Lake Superior area offered sightings of Semipalmated Plover, Semipalmated Sandpiper, Lesser Yellowlegs, Herring Gull and Double-crested Cormorant. The Club went to Rainbow Flowage in mid-August and picked up Solitary Sandpiper for the annual list. Rainbow Flowage can be an excellent spot for shorebirds in Aug/Sept if the water levels are low enough to reveal mudflats.

Species added to the Bird Club's Annual List since July:

Rock Pigeon	7/8/21
Eastern Phoebe	7/8/21
Bank Swallow	7/8/21
Barn Swallow	7/8/21
Cliff Swallow	7/8/21
House Wren	7/8/21
Brown Thrasher	7/8/21
Vesper Sparrow	7/8/21
Savannah Sparrow	7/8/21
Bobolink	7/8/21
Dickcissel	7/8/21
Downy Woodpecker	7/15/21
Eastern Bluebird	7/15/21
Eastern Wood-Pewee	7/29/21
Semipalmated Plover	8/12/21
Semipalmated Sandpiper	8/12/21
Lesser Yellowlegs	8/12/21
Herring Gull	8/12/21
Double-crested Cormorant	8/12/21
Green Heron	8/12/21
Solitary Sandpiper	8/19/21
Common Merganser	9/2/21
Merlin	9/23/21

No new species were added to the Club's Life List, which still stands at 271 species plus two hybrids but the year isn't over!