

BIRD SONGS

Newsletter of the North Lakeland
Discovery Center Bird Club

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President's Message

by Mark Westphal

The calendar suggests that Spring officially began on March 20th. When I stepped outside on the 23rd, I was definitely receiving mixed messages. The trees surrounding my house were bowed under the weight of the prior night's helping of freezing rain and snow. Our electrical power was out. What I thought was the sound of gun shots, was in fact the snapping of tree limbs as they gave way under the weight of the accumulated ice and snow. I walked the slushy path to my bird feeders so that I could chip away the ice and restock them with fresh, dry sunflower seeds. Dozens of common redpolls, along with the resident chickadees and nuthatches, eagerly took

advantage of the free breakfast. Among the redpolls was one lone slate colored junco. Was this a sign of Spring? A few minutes later, after returning to the house, I looked out the window and saw a mixed flock of grackles and red-winged blackbirds gathered in the trees above the feeders. They would soon glide to the ground searching for the spilled seeds. Despite the snow still falling from the dull gray sky, another sign of spring had appeared. Since that day, I have also heard the faint, distant call of a sandhill crane as well as the song of a robin. Based on my way of thinking, these early migrants are certainly taking a risk, but a natural instinct beyond human logic encouraged these birds to press northward, despite the current weather conditions. I am sure by the time you read this message, more “first of the year” sightings will have been reported. For bird club members, these truly “early birds” are a welcome sign of things to come. Soon the real spring will catch up to the calendar. Sandhill cranes will return to the marshes. Loons will lay claim to their favorite lakes and warblers will decorate our trees.

After two years of having no or limited Club activities, there is hope that we will be able to continue not only our Thursday morning bird outings, but also return to holding in person meetings and programs. A full roster of speakers has been lined up for the first Monday (or Tuesday) of the months from May to October. Our first program, scheduled for May 2nd, will feature avid birder and author Lynn Barber. She will share insights and adventures about her completion of a “Big Year” in the USA, Texas, and Alaska. Her books *Extreme Birder: One Woman’s Big Year* and *Birds In Trouble*, along with books highlighting birds in Texas and Alaska will be available for purchase. The program will be held in the newly renovated Discover Center’s main lodge. A brief meeting will be held at 6:30 p.m. with the program to follow at 7:00 p.m.

It will be great to see some familiar faces at our programs and Thursday morning outings. With a new birding season on the horizon, now is also a great time to share our love and enthusiasm for birds with others. The Discovery Center Bird Club gives anyone interested in birds a great opportunity to increase their knowledge, improve their birding skills, and learn more about north woods birding hotspots. Perhaps you know someone who might like to know more about birds and the Discovery Center Bird Club. People of all ages and interest levels are welcome.

Species Profile: Barred Owl - *Strix varia* (BADO)

Article and Photos By Debbie Simek

Who Cooks for You? Who Cooks for You All?

One night, years ago, while sleeping with the windows open, I was awakened by this loud : hoo-hoo-ho, hoo-hoo ho-hoooooaw. Phonetically rendered: Who Cooks for You? Who Cooks for YOU ALL? I lay there for a while going over the call so that in the morning I could remember it and figure out what it was. Finally I just decided that I should get up and just do it. I was pleased to find that we had Barred Owls in the backyard! Reading about the habitat, that checked out. They are usually in mature trees with an open understory and near water. They have been historically found East of the Great Plains and down into Texas and Mexico. Recent studies have reported them in Southern Canada and into the NW United States. They seem to be adapting to human activities and their spread farther North and West is thought to have been brought about by fire suppression, which has created an increase in mature forested areas farther West and North. This is causing an overlap with the Spotted Owl and there is concern that Barred Owls may displace them.



Adult Barred Owl with Fledgling

Not long after my initial birding by ear we were treated to the birds at close range. Steve, my husband, was going to meet with friends for breakfast one

early Saturday morning. When he walked into our second story bathroom a pair of Barred Owls greeted him sitting on a branch 3 feet from the window! Of course he had to wake me up so that I could see them before they took off. It was really cool to see the pair in such detail sitting side by side. They are a 21" tall gray-brown owl with a large round tuftless head, a barrel-shaped body, and a short tail. The dark brown eyes and bright yellow bill are framed by large gray facial disks. They have dark barring on the upper chest that separates the head and upper chest which have dark vertical streaks. Dull yellow toes are feathered in the North but naked in the South. There's no sexual difference in plumage but the female is about 1/3 larger than the male. It is suggested that this size difference serves as an incubation energy reservoir because females may lose up to 30% of their body weight during incubation. Following my hour of observation upstairs one of the owls flew down and sat on our deck railing to have breakfast with me!

Since our initial observation of the Barred owls I have been fortunate to cohabitate with these cool birds! We have a big ash tree with a wonderful horizontal branch that they seem to favor. I frequently have company while I work in the flower beds below the tree. I think that the female tends to be very curious and will sit on that branch for hours. One time I was returning to the flower bed, after making a trip to dump my buckets in the compost pile, and out of the corner of my eye I caught movement and when I looked up I had a Barred Owl flying 4 feet over my head. I have had many other encounters in our backyard. One thing that I have heard but haven't read about anywhere in my research is their high-pitched whistle that they use to keep in contact with each other while perched in trees not too far from each other. I often know when they are nearby by this soft whistle.

Last summer the parents decided that one afternoon was what appeared to be "hunting training" time in our backyard for their juvenile. The adult sat in the ash tree while the juvenile sat on our deck railing - looking, looking, and looking. It spotted a squirrel on the ground, took off, landed about 6 feet behind the squirrel and ran after it, without success. Darn! So he flew up and sat in a branch concealed by leaves rather than out in the open. Still no luck! But the young one wasn't going to go hungry that day. Shortly afterwards Mom shows up with lunch, a mouse, 10 feet from our kitchen window. I thought it was just a "dumb" juvenile hunting by running along

the ground but apparently Barred Owls do also run along the ground while hunting.



Adult Barred Owl with Fledgling

Barred Owl Fledgling



My most recent experience with a Barred Owl was just this past February. We were having a cold winter day with freezing rain. I was sitting having breakfast when I heard a great ruckus being made by 6 American Crows. My thoughts: "Mmmm, what are they fussing about?" Looking at the tree that they were all in I could see a bulge in the trunk that looked questionable. I grabbed my binoculars and yep, a Barred Owl was all puffed up sitting right next to the tree trunk about 15 feet above the ground. He didn't move at all during the 5 minutes of abuse from the crows. But, what happened next was a total surprise. A Red-shouldered Hawk (we've had a pair of red-shoulders for the 30 years that we've been in our house, but that's another story), flew in and started to dive bomb the

crows. Which I took as "Get away and leave my friend alone!" The Crows did leave and the Owl never budged! According to Pete Dunne: Barred Owls cohabitate with Red-shouldered Hawks, Spotted Owls, and Pileated Woodpeckers, so maybe they were friends.



Red-shouldered Hawk

When we first came up to the Northwoods, in 2018, I was pleased to once again be sitting with the windows open and hearing the now familiar sound "Who Cooks for YOU?" As I sit here writing during my winter stint in the Northwoods I wonder if I'll return to Texas to find our most recent fledgling?

Bibliography:

Birds of the World by the Cornell lab

Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion by Pete Dunne

The Sibley Guide to Birds by David Sibley

National Geographic Field Guide to Birds of North America by Dunn and Alderfer

A Trip to Cumberland

Article and Photos by Frank Schroyer

It had been over two years since Meg and I made a trip to Georgia to see her family. This past February, we felt things were good enough with the pandemic to get on a plane headed south to see everyone. As part of the trip, Meg's parents treated us to a day exploring one of the natural gems of the state - Cumberland Island. The island is Georgia's southernmost, and largest, barrier island. It has nearly 10,000 acres of congressionally designated wilderness that holds a multitude of bird species, including some that are threatened or endangered. The possibility of finding rarities like Wilson's Plover made the trip a highly anticipated one. We found a good number of species (72!), and lifers (3 for me, 4 for Meg), but the highlight of the day came from an unexpected and, sort of, familiar face.



Willet

Low tide was peaking on the coast of Cumberland, and the shorebirds appeared to know it. Doves of Sanderlings and Red Knots speckled the beach, with Willets and Ruddy Turnstones here and there. While combing southward, we spotted a group of small shorebirds foraging away from the water. Clearly, they were different from the species we'd been watching in the surf thus far. As we moved closer, it became apparent they were a species of Plover, but we couldn't yet tell exactly which. When we were

finally close enough the group of 5 suspects revealed their identities – Piping Plovers. We watched as they skittered along the beach looking for a bite to eat and noticed one of the Plovers legs appeared to be more colorful than others – bands! I crept close enough to get a photo of the Plover’s banded legs, and then slowly backed away.



Piping Plover

Once home from our trip, we sent the photo to the Great Lakes Piping Plover Banding team at the University of Minnesota. Scientists keep close tabs on these birds in the Great Lakes, as they’re considered regionally endangered. The researchers returned to me with the following message:

“Thanks for getting in touch about your recent sighting. This female wasn't banded as a chick so we don't know when or where she hatched. She began breeding in 2013 at Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, MI near Sleeping Bear Point and was banded at that time. She has moved around more than usual for breeding, spending 2014 farther south on the mainland of Sleeping Bear Dunes, 2015 and 2016 at Silver Lake State Park, MI, 2017-

2020 back to Sleeping Bear but on North Manitou Island, then 2021 back to Silver Lake. She has spent every winter since she was banded at Cumberland Island, with a few visits reported near the FL border in Nassau County.”

How cool is that?! Meg and I had spent the past three years living in Michigan, and the whole time this female had been spending her summer days no more than a few hours car ride away from us. It was an oddly nostalgic experience getting to see this Piping Plover on Cumberland, like accidentally bumping into someone from your home state half a world away. Maybe someday our paths will cross again. Until then, I hope the Piping Plover’s journeys between Michigan and Georgia continue to go off without a hitch!

Watchers of Birds

Article and by Mark Westphal

I believe there are three basic categories of people who watch birds. First there are people who consciously or unconsciously just watch birds. There is a good chance that almost everyone to some degree is a bird watcher. Birds are all around us. You can’t help but notice them. We are naturally drawn to their sounds, color and movement. The neighbor who announces that she has spotted her first robin of spring, is a bird watcher. The family checking out the ducks at the local park, are bird watching. A farmer who casts his eyes skyward to follow a flock of migrating geese is also a birdwatcher. There are plenty of people out there who watch birds but would never consider themselves “birdwatchers”. These casual observers of birds often have no concern for species identification or plumage details. They only know the simple pleasure and sense of relaxation that comes from taking a moment to enjoy the birds in their neighborhood.

Then there are those who happily take on the title of “birdwatcher”. These are people who actively welcome birds into their lives. They typically have a pair of binoculars, a field guide, and a feeder or two outside their window. They enjoy attracting birds and have a feeling of excitement when a new visitor comes to check out the sunflower seeds and suet cakes. They

appreciate the activity that birds bring into their lives and are eager to learn more about different species of birds and the habitats they occupy.

Finally, we come to the last group of avian observers known as “birders”. Their interest and enthusiasm for birds is unmistakable and sometimes even intense. These are people whose love of birds will motivate them to travel countless miles and brave all sorts of weather to see a particular bird or to add to their bird species life list. Birders typically use multiple field guides, birding apps, and other electronic and visual aids to track and identify birds. They often keep and share detailed records of what they have seen as a matter of personal satisfaction and to help in the cause of bird conservation. What particular species was sighted, when and where the bird was seen, and how many birds were seen is all invaluable information to those working to manage and protect birds and the habitats they need to survive. Birders strive to improve their bird identification skills and continually expand their knowledge about bird behavior and what birds need to survive and flourish. Birders often plant trees, shrubs, and flowers in their own backyards to provide havens for birds and enhance their own viewing opportunities. Last, but not least, birders enjoy the fun and challenge of “the hunt”. It is amazing how many bug bites they will tolerate and how many tired muscles and cold toes they will endure just for the mere chance of seeing a new bird species.

While I have described these three different groups of people who watch birds, there are, in fact, no truly defined categories. There is only a gradual continuum from those who take a brief moment to enjoy the birds around them to those who include birds as a significant part of their lives and activities. I personally wander back and forth along this simply described bird watchers’ path. Sometimes I am a serious birder, reading articles, checking reference guides, and wanting to stay on the trail just a little while longer to catch a glimpse of one more species. Sometimes I am just an observer, finding simple pleasure in watching a pair of Bald Eagles soaring high overhead or a Great Blue Heron hunting for its dinner along the shore of a nearby lake. Whether you are a serious birder or an observer, birds brighten our days and help us connect to a world beyond ourselves. For this gift, no labels or categories are required.

Life List Quarterly – First Quarter 2022

By Sarah Besadny

Since we haven't started our birding season together as a club, our slate is clean. Clean slates hold so much potential and excitement. What species will we see together this coming season? Will we add a new species to our club's Life List? Will we observe a record number of species in a year? Will we see more species than we saw last year? Time will tell. Stay tuned to your email for announcements on when Thursday Bird Walks will begin for the season.

Photo Journal

Photos by Mark Westphal

Editor's Note: I am keeping some of these photos rather large so that you can see the magnificent detail of the birds and appreciate Mark's photography skills in being able to capture that detail.



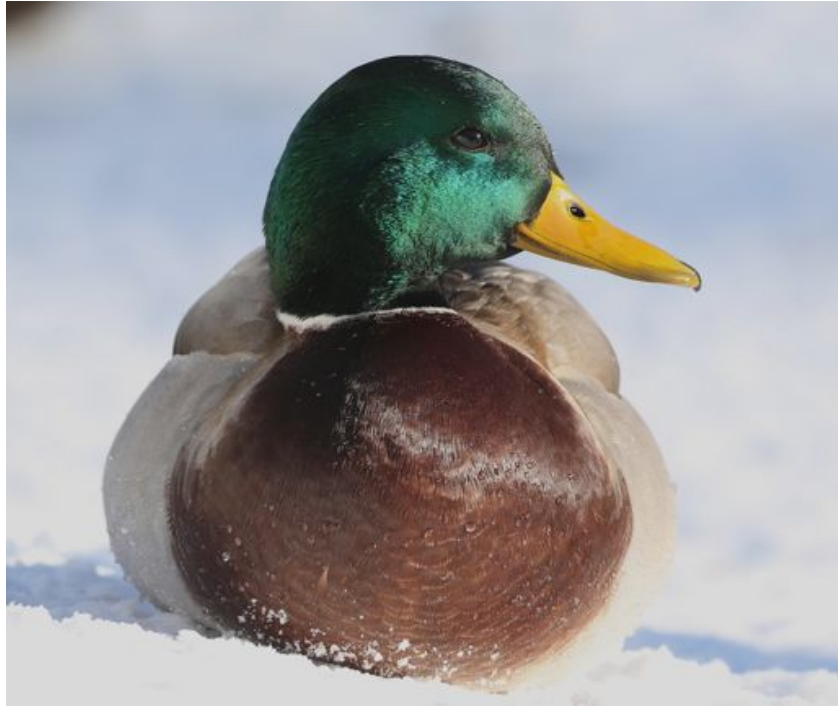
Male Purple Finch – photo taken through Mark's window



Feathers: above - Female Mallard

below - Male Mallard





Male Mallard



Canada Goose



Trumpeter Swans



Black-capped Chickadee



Downy Woodpecker

Common Redpoll





Common Redpoll

Trumpeter Swan



Pine Grosbeak