

BIRD SONGS

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Discovery Center Bird Club

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President's Message

by Mark Westphal

For those of you who have both enjoyed and endured a Northwoods winter, March is a month of anticipation. Ryan Brady's birding report as of March 8th indicated that many bird species were already beginning to find their way to southern Wisconsin. Some of our birding friends in both southern and central Wisconsin are reporting the presence of bluebirds, robins, and sandhill cranes. We know that it is only a matter of time until our summer resident birds make their way to the forests, lakes, and wetlands of northern Wisconsin.

The month of March can also be a tease. One day the power of the sun can be melting our snow banks. The next day Mother Nature insists on adding a few more inches to our total annual snow count. But optimism and experience assure us that spring is indeed on the way. Soon we too will be hearing the ancient call of the sandhill crane, and redwing blackbirds will be claiming their territories from atop last year's cattail stems. Lakes will shed their frozen crusts making way for the return of loons, ospreys, and an assortment of waterfowl. The newly exposed earth of spring will welcome foraging sparrows and robins. Some of the early arrivals will call the Northwoods home for the season while others will continue their journey further north. Throughout April and into May our resident summer birds will continue to arrive, bringing more sounds and color for us to enjoy.

For those of you who appreciate the science of bird migration or would just find it interesting to know when, where, and how birds migrate, I would encourage you to check out a bird migration map which can be found on the internet at *birdcast.info*. While this site does not track individual species, it does show in real time the volume, direction, and altitude of birds as they migrate north through the United States right to our own back yards. You can even learn the estimated number of birds passing through a specific county on any given night. Some of the information provided by this site and maps is truly amazing.

As the birds return to northern Wisconsin, our Bird Club will also awaken from its long winter's nap. Our popular bird walks will resume in May and the final touches of our meeting and program schedule will be completed shortly once all details have been finalized. A copy of our meeting schedule will be sent out to all members.

Other activities to keep in mind include the Annual Crane Count to be held on Saturday, April 15th. If you would like to participate in this year's Crane Count, please contact Hannah at the Northwoods Discovery Center. The Discovery Center will once again be hosting the Northwoods Birding and Wildlife Festival on May 12th and 13th. The Festival will include presentations by experts as well as field trips to nearby birding hotspots. There will also be a bird banding demonstration. Check out the Discovery Center website for further information. Advance registration is encouraged as field trips fill up fast. Many of our members also enjoy participating in the Annual Birdathon sponsored by the Natural Resource Foundation.

Funds raised by the Birdathon benefit both the Natural Resource Foundation's bird conservation efforts as well as our Bird Club. More details will be furnished once the Birdathon date has been selected.

Whether you are a beginning birder or a seasoned veteran, the Discovery Center Bird Club welcomes people of all backgrounds and birding abilities. The comradery and sharing of birding skills and knowledge are what make participating in Club activities so enjoyable. As the first bird walk in May draws near, we look forward to reconnecting with Club members. We also appreciate the opportunity to share our love of birds with others who may be new to the area or friends and acquaintances who would like to learn more about birds. Perhaps you know someone who might like to join us for one of our bird walks or programs. A friendly invitation may just make someone's day.

Tufted Titmouse in Vilas County

Article and Photos by Liz Stone

The Tufted Titmouse, a common backyard feeder bird in the southern Great Lakes region, may be coming more of a regular sighting in the Northwoods in years to come. In December, Discovery Center Bird Club member Jean Hanson had a Tufted Titmouse visiting her feeder regularly, and another Arbor Vitae resident, Jean Wiggins, reported a Tufted Titmouse at her feeder for the Minocqua Christmas Bird Count. By January, "Jean's bird" had moved about a half mile west and became a regular visitor to our feeder. Whenever I reported the Tufted Titmouse to eBird, the little feeder guest consistently triggered a Vilas County Rare Bird Alert.



Because any excuse for a party is a good one in January in the Northwoods, my husband Dick and I hosted a Tufted Titmouse Open House for Discovery Center Bird Club members. Twelve bird club members came, added the TUTI to their Vilas County 2023 bird list, and had a good time!

Investigating the range of the Tufted Titmouse in Wisconsin convinced me once again that eBird is an invaluable tool for anyone interested in birds. Go to eBird.org and open an account if you don't already have one. Then, go to eBird.org/atlaswi, and you can observe the range of any breeding bird species in the new Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas 2, or WBBA2. Drop down from WBBA2 to WBBA1, and you can compare how the range of a species has changed since the late 1990's. In the case of the Tufted Titmouse, note that this species has really expanded its range in recent decades. However, there are no reports of breeding in our part of Wisconsin. Because we only saw one TUTI at a time at our feeder, and the males and females look alike, we don't know if our little feeder visitor has a potential mate. For now, we hope it survives the winter and we hear its song in the spring. As you wait for the snow to melt, you can explore how other bird species such as Sandhill Cranes and Wild Turkeys have expanded their breeding range between WBBA1 and WBBA2. Thanks to all of our Discovery Center Bird Club members who contributed data to make the Breeding Bird Atlas such a useful reference tool!





Editors Note: many thanks to Liz and Dick for opening their home to the Bird Club in order to have the opportunity to see the Tufted Titmouse. As Liz noted, this is a rare bird for Vilas County and I know it was a new "Vilas" bird for many of us. Additionally, Liz made delicious cookies, had hot coffee and tea – and add that to watching the many birds that visit their feeders while visiting with fellow Club members – it all made for an exceptional way to spend a cold January afternoon.

New Year Big Day

by Frank Schroyer

New Year's Day is a great day to bird. For those who list (tracking the birds seen each year) you start fresh when the calendar turns. Meg and I have a tradition where we do a Big Day on New Year's Day, which we continued in 2023. A Big Day is where you attempt to find as many bird species as possible in a 24-hour period.

Our strategy was to focus on recent rare bird sightings across the Northwoods, beginning south and working our way back north. There's always some anxiety associated with what your first bird of the year will be, and as we started traveling just before sunrise our focus was on what might be the first species of 2023. In the past, I've had great first of year species like Red-tailed Hawk, or White-winged Crossbill, but I have also seen species like European Starling. This year our first species of the year was American Crow. A fairly common sight, but at least it's a native species.

An Eastern Screech Owl spotted during the Antigo CBC about a week prior was our first target. The owl was nowhere to be found, but our day did start off well with 10 species. An unidentifiable raptor that could have made it 11 snuck away just as we lifted our binoculars. From there, we explored the vast agricultural country surrounding Antigo. The combination of low winds, light snow cover, and good visibility made for the most productive birding that day. In total we found 17 species, including our first Snowy Owl in Wisconsin, a flyover Snow Bunting, and a surprising 4 individual Red-tailed Hawks.

After Antigo we moved north to Rhinelander. The Wisconsin River remains open year-round beneath the dam, and is a reliable place to find Mallards and American Black Duck. Additional birds we found around the City included both species of Waxwing, Northern Shrike, and a group of 5 Trumpeter Swans clinging to the last bit of open water at a boat launch.

Our biggest learning experience of the day came when we attempted to chase the Canada Jay sightings at Minocqua Winter Park. We both love cross-country skiing, but found it's not very conducive to birding, especially when the birds you're seeking were spotted far down the trail. Unfortunately, we didn't find the jays, but we did get our exercise! After a lunch break and rest we finished our day scouring the national forest east of Three Lakes. We didn't see any new species there, and made one last ditch effort for owls after sunset, also to no avail.

When the day was over, we had found 29 species - not bad for the Northwoods in January! We learned a lot and found some new and exciting places to bird in the future. Hopefully in 2024 we can break the 30 species threshold!

Species Profile: Bohemian Waxwing **(*Bombycilla garrulous*)**

Article and Photos by Sarah Besadny



Winter birding may not be for everyone, but I'm guessing those reading this article are happy to bird in any season. There are birds that only come to the Northwoods in the winter months and one species I especially look forward to seeing is the Bohemian Waxwing (BOWA). Wow, what a gorgeous bird! Cedar Waxwings (CEDW) have always been a favorite of mine (don't they look like velvet???) and the Bohemian Waxwing is also a strikingly gorgeous bird. The BOWA has many similarities to the CEDW: a crest, black markings on the face that looks like a mask, yellow-tipped tail, and yes, those feathers that make them look buttery soft. Some of the markings that differentiate the BOWA from the CEDW are that they appear darker/more grayish overall, they have a grayish belly (versus a pale yellowish belly on the CEDW), rufous-tinged face and rufous undertail coverts (the CEDW has whitish undertail coverts), and bold white markings on the wings. Additionally, the BOWA is 0.8 inches larger than the CEDW, a difference easily seen when both species are near each other. Both of these species can be seen in the Northwoods during the winter-time but the BOWA is more prevalent.



Even when the lighting is bad (as in this photo), you can see the size difference between the one Cedar Waxwing (circled in red) and the Bohemian Waxwings above and below it

This winter seemed exceptional for seeing Bohemian Waxwings. In Eagle River I often spotted a flock of hundreds of birds and my estimate on January 22nd was 300 birds and that may have been a conservative estimate. I would often see a mass of birds flying around making big sweeping circles in the sky and then the entire flock would alight together in a cluster of trees. In flight BOWAs could easily be mistaken for European Starlings. They both have short tails and both have triangular-shaped wings. The BOWA is 0.5 inches smaller however and when in flight the BOWAs make a constant flight call. Even though the flight call isn't very loud, when you have hundreds of birds making a fast trill sound it's easy to hear.

Eagle River is the closest town to me so I have acquainted myself with many of the berry trees/bushes in town so I know where to look come winter-time. BOWAs are experts at finding berries and this is their primary food source all winter. A tree might be loaded with berries one day and then absent of berries soon after a flock has found them.



The bold color markings on the wings of the Bohemian Waxwing



The rich rufous-colored undertail coverts is an easy field mark to spot

Bohemian Waxwings travel about in large groups in search of berries/fruits. These birds are non-territorial and this is thought to be because their food sources are usually abundant. Additionally, because they are non-territorial they don't have a true song, not needing this tool that other songbirds use for defending a territory.



*There are over 200 Bohemian Waxwings that landed on these trees
– an example of how non-territorial they are and how they travel
in large flocks looking for food*

BOWAs breed in boreal forests in far northern Canada and Alaska. They also breed in Eurasia but I'm not covering that population in this article. In the winter they can be found in the northern states, including the northern third of Wisconsin. Here in Wisconsin they typically arrive by November, increasing in number to mid-December and then typically leave our area by March.

You may have to wait until next winter to see these gorgeous birds again, but isn't it a wonderful thing that different seasons bring different birds to enjoy during our birding adventures.

Life List Quarterly – 1st Quarter 2023

by Sarah Besadny

With a new year comes a new Annual List for the Discovery Center Bird Club and also the potential for adding a species to our Club's overall Life List. This year is already off to a great start with the Tufted Titmouse seen by numerous bird club members at Liz and Dick's house (see separate article in this newsletter for more details). With that bird our Annual List stands at 1! Our weekly Thursday bird outings will resume by early May at the latest so it won't be long before our Annual List begins to grow by leaps and bounds. What species are you anxious to see again? Might we add a new species to our Life List? It's been several years since a new species has

been added. It's always exciting to start the season with so much potential. Be sure to check back here in our June issue of BIRD SONGS to see the variety of birds reported by our Club via the Thursday Bird Walks.

Photo Journal

Photos by Mark Westphal

Here are a few photos to get you thinking about Spring!



Trumpeter Swans and Canada Geese who found a bit of open water in early Spring



Sandhill Cranes

Mark Your Calendar

Here are a few events that will be happening in the next few months:

- Weekly Bird Walks – beginning by early May, or earlier depending upon the weather. Information regarding the Bird Walks will be sent via email to Discovery Center Bird Club members.
- Bird Club Program: Identifying Wonderful Warblers, presentation by Tom Schultz. Monday, May 1st Club meeting at 6:30, presentation beginning at 7:00 in the Lodge at the Discovery Center
- Discovery Center Birding and Wildlife Festival: Friday and Saturday, May 12-13. More information at the Discovery Center
- Up North Hammerheads – Great Wisconsin Birdathon, tentatively scheduled for Monday, May 22nd (rain date Tuesday, May 30th). More information will be sent via email to Discovery Center Bird Club members