

# BIRD SONGS

Newsletter of the North Lakeland  
Discovery Center Bird Club

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## **Officers**

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Judy Cassady, Secretary  
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Amy Sheldon, Program Director

## **President's Message**

*by Mark Westphal*

“Unusual”, “abnormal”, and “historic” are all words that could describe the winter of 2023/2024. For me it has been a uniquely strange experience to see bare ground and feel springtime temperatures at the end of February and into March. Despite the veiled appearance of spring, the fields and forests remained eerily quiet. The sounds and sites of birds normally associated with the arrival of spring would not be heard for weeks to come. The usual winter birds (chickadees, several woodpecker species, Blue Jays, Red-breasted Nuthatches) all provided some much-appreciated activity around my home feeders. A persistent flock of more than 50 American Goldfinches managed to drain my feeders on a regular basis. As a special treat, I also managed to catch a glimpse one day of a

small flock of White-winged Crossbills as they foraged for seeds atop nearby spruce trees.

Although this winter's birding activities were for the most part unremarkable, there were a few notable exceptions. Our Bird Club members once again participated in several area Christmas bird counts. The results of the Minocqua count are included in this issue of BIRD SONGS. The success of these bird counts is not only measured by what birds are seen, but also, in part, for what birds are not seen. Tracking of long-term trends is the ultimate goal of these nation-wide annual counts. The information gained, good or bad, can be used to help shape bird conservation efforts. I am always grateful for the chance to get together with fellow birders in December regardless of how many birds are seen.

With encouragement from Donna, our Bird Club outing coordinator, a few dedicated Club members traveled to Ashland in February in search of a rare visitor. Once again, this was a welcomed adventure during this most unusual winter.

As the "real" spring approaches, our Club has much to look forward to. The 2024 Crane Count will be coming up on Saturday, April 13<sup>th</sup>. Hannah at the Discovery Center will be coordinating the count for Vilas County. Our usual Thursday morning outings will resume in May. With the unusual early spring, there is always the possibility of earlier bird walks in the event any Club members have suggestions and would like to get together sooner. Our program planner, Amy, has once again done an excellent job of putting together a full schedule of programs for this coming season. The first program will be on May 6<sup>th</sup> at the Discovery Center. Our guest speaker will be Alaina Roth of the Wisconsin DNR. Her presentation will be on the natural history, ecology, and biology of wild turkeys and ruffed grouse. She will also cover habitat requirements and management techniques for these two popular upland game species. Details about future programs will be announced within the next few weeks.

We also have the annual Birdathon to look forward to. This full day of birding is not only fun, it is also a great fundraiser for the Natural Resources Foundation and our club as well. Sarah will reach out to club members with more details once an official date has been selected.

The North Lakeland Discovery Center will be holding their 19<sup>th</sup> annual Northwoods Bird and Wildlife Festival on May 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup>. The Festival will include a variety of guided hikes, tours, bird-watching expeditions, speakers, and inter-active workshops. Check out their website for further details. There will also be a number of volunteer opportunities which can be found on their "ivolunteer" website. The Festival is a great way to expand your knowledge of the outdoors and enjoy the company of fellow birders and nature enthusiasts. The Discovery Center is still looking for additional items for raffle baskets. Any additional support you can provide will be greatly appreciated.

As of the middle of March, I have already heard the call of Sandhill Cranes and the songs of Red-winged Blackbirds. An American Tree Sparrow was spotted at Powell Marsh. Flocks of Snow Buntings have also been spotted at Powell Marsh foraging through the snow bare landscape as they make their way to the far north.

There is no doubt that the “real” spring is on its way. Grab your binoculars and enjoy!

## **Species Profile: Gray Catbird** *(Drumetella carolinensis)*

*Article and Photo by Bruce Bacon*

The Gray Catbird, is a common Neotropical songbird in Wisconsin. A member of the Mimidae family along with thrashers and mockingbirds, catbirds are well versed in song. And of course the Gray Catbird often sounds just like a cat. They are a medium sized dark gray songbird. Their black cap and rusty undertail coverts make ID easy.



Gray Catbirds nest in all the lower 48 except the SW, including California, Nevada and Arizona. They winter in Eastern, SE and Gulf coast states plus into Mexico and Central N.A to northern Columbia. Ebird has rare reports of Gray Catbirds in Wisconsin into early winter. The frequency of Wisconsin eBird reports with

catbirds is less than 0.1% in November, December and early January. The same holds true for April. For February and March eBird listed the frequency as 0%. And most of these late or early reports are from southern Wisconsin. Their ability to eat berries keeps these “out of season” catbirds alive. Gray Catbirds are listed as a species of “Least Concern” and based on eBird’s 6,535,749 (as of 3/3/2024) reports with Gray Catbirds in them, an abundant species.

Preferred habitat includes brushy areas and forests with healthy understory. Edge habitat with abundant insects and berries are frequented. Gardens and shrubs around houses are often used. Some sources report wetland habitat preferences but catbirds are certainly common away from wet habitats. They forage on the ground, scratching through leaf litter. This habitat use makes viewing catbirds easy as often they are at eye level or below. However, they can be secretive such that you may not know about your neighbors. They feed on insects and other small invertebrates. They also feed on some seeds and berries. Gray Catbird nests are usually 3 to 10 feet high in young tree or bush. Nests have been found on the ground and up to 60 feet high. Nest is bulky cup constructed with sticks, weed stems, leaves and grasses, lined with finer materials like rootlets, shredded bark or needles. Clutch size is normally 4 dark blue to greenish blue eggs, sometimes 3 to 5. Incubation takes 12 to 13 days and nestlings fledge at about 11 days old. Both adults tend to the chicks and continue feeding their young up to 2 weeks post fledging.

I had the rare opportunity in late 2023 to have a Gray Catbird frequent my berry bushes and bird feeders. I first saw the catbird on November 17 feeding in a high bush cranberry next to my house. Late for an insect eating songbird. After deer hunting season I found it again in the bushes and under feeders, scratching through the leaf litter. Later I realized it was usually under suet feeders. It never tried feeding on a hanging suet feeder so I laid a suet block flat on a mesh platform. The Gray Catbird did feed directly on that suet. In the time it was here, I sent 38 eBird reports listing its presence. During this time we did experience some near 0°F weather overnight and several snowfalls but overall a mild early winter. Snow cover only lasted a couple days. The last day I saw this catbird was January 3, 2024 at 8:12 AM. Later that day at 1:50 PM I saw a Northern Shrike hunting my feeders. The next day I caught the shrike (I have a banding permit) and it was a recapture from February 5, 2023 here. Did the shrike have something to do with the catbird’s disappearance or did the catbird finally get tired of the cold? It would take a shrike with a big ego to think it could take on a catbird! I never saw the shrike again and I was looking diligently for the catbird for several more weeks with no luck.

# **Minocqua Christmas Bird Count**

*By Sarah Besadny*

The National Audubon Society has conducted Christmas Bird Counts since 1900. This amazingly long-term, volunteer-powered project has amassed an enormous amount of data used by the Audubon Society and other organizations to assess the health of bird populations and to help guide conservation actions.

Basically a Christmas Bird Count (CBC) where a group of volunteers heads out to bird a pre-determined area (a Count Circle) to count as many bird species as they can on a date selected by the leaders of a Count Circle anytime between December 14<sup>th</sup> and January 5<sup>th</sup>. A Count Circle is a geographic radius of 7.5 miles and for the Minocqua Count Circle this center point is the intersection of Hwys 51 and 70 West. In addition to the field counters, individuals who reside within the Count Circle can also count birds at their feeders

The Discovery Center Bird Club has sponsored the Minocqua Christmas Bird Count since 2006. On December 28, 2023, 13 birders hit the roads and trails while 5 individuals counted birds at their feeders. We've experienced all kinds of weather on our CBCs – freezing cold temps, high winds, blizzards. This year was an anomaly in that there was virtually no snow on the ground, many rivers and creeks were free of ice and the temperatures were “mild” for a mid-December day. The fact there was open water in many areas resulted in some unusual data for this years CBC. Donna (Minocqua CBC Coordinator) and I (Data Coordinator) would like to thank all those who participated in the 2023 Minocqua CBC.

## Results of the 2023 Minocqua Christmas Bird Count

Pileated Woodpecker	15
Downy Woodpecker	26
Hairy Woodpecker	19
Red-bellied Woodpecker	6
Red-headed Woodpecker	1
American Goldfinch	182
White-breasted Nuthatch	57
Red-breasted Nuthatch	30
Black-capped Chickadee	182
Blue Jay	79
American Crow	87
Common Raven	24
Bald Eagle	22
Mourning Dove	11
Rock Pigeon	17

Ruffed Grouse	5
Barred Owl	1
Northern Cardinal	3
Bohemian Waxwing	54
Pine Siskin	5
Snow Bunting	7
Mallard	135
Canada Goose	7
Common Merganser	38
American Black Duck	2

## **Species Profile: Fieldfare (*Turdus pilaris*)**

*By Amy Sheldon*



**Encounter:** February 14, 2024 Tim Oksuita discovered a Fieldfare in Prentice park, Ashland Wisconsin. According to official state records this was the first sighting in the state and only the second sighting in the Midwest. These birds occasionally occur as vagrants on the east coast, but rarely make it into the Midwest. The chase was on! Birders from across the state and states flocked to Prentice park. Our own club members made an appearance (see article Life List Quarterly).

Tom and I drove up from the Appleton area on Friday (2/16), but the weather had changed to winter with strong north winds and snow squalls. Expert Nich Anich was there along with 30 or so other birders from as far away as Kentucky and

Alabama. Luck was not on our side that day, five hours of searching went without the Fieldfare. A merlin had been patrolling the area and we wondered if the Fieldfare had been killed or just vanished.

Sunday offered another chance, with Ryan Brady walking a field perimeter, we stayed close to Nich Anich and a group watching the power lines. Sure enough, at the predicted time, with raucous blue jays, the Fieldfare flew to the top of a tree and “teed” up for several minutes. What a beauty. We were able to appreciate key identification features. Cheers and high fives went round the group. How special for us to see a new Wisconsin bird and a new life bird at the same time!

**Taxonomy:** The Fieldfare belongs to the genus, Turdus, latin for thrush. There are approximately 90 species of thrush which range from 4.5 to 13 inches in length, and share features of rounded heads with slender bills, short rounded to pointed wings, and medium sized tails. They are all omnivorous. The Fieldfare is monotypic, descended from North African ancestors who initially populated the Caribbean prior to arrival in Europe. “Fieldfare” is an 11th century Anglo-Saxon word roughly translated as “traveler of the fields”. Often seen in large flocks with the onset of cold northern weather, heralding first snows, the Swedish fittingly called them “snow magpies”.

**Description:** This distinctive Thrush initially reminded me of a young robin. They are 9.8 inches in length with wingspan of 15 to 16.5 inches and weigh between 2.8 and 4.9 ounces. Their heads are rounded bluish gray, with black lores and dark eyes. The bill in the male changes from brown based and tipped with central yellow-orange in winter to entirely yellow in summer.

The bill is slightly decurved with a notched tip. Legs and feet are dark. The back is dark chestnut brown, which contrasts sharply with gray of head and rump. Their tail is black with a rounded edge. Chin, chest and belly are creamy with bold arrowhead streaks. Very identifiable in flight is their striking white underwing coverts. Females are somewhat browner than males and juveniles are described as overall duller. Sociable, in groups. They typically hop on the ground.

**Voice:** Many descriptions are given, I liked their sound being likened to a magpie croak, a “large pair of garden shears” - chak-chak-chak chacharr. Sibley describes it as “harsh chr-chr-chr, a descending series of scold notes like the Blue-headed Vireo “. They may also produce a dry rattle similar to a gray catbird. During migration or in flight they give a squeaky “gih ” or “zreep” . When pursuing crows, they maintain a furious chatter.

**Diet:** Omnivorous able to forage from a diverse supply of foods from all kinds of insects. Worms are heard, not seen, prior to extraction. In fall they switch to fruit/berries. European favorite species which include hawthorn, holly rowan, yew juniper and dog rose. In harsh winters they may resort to gleaning grain in fields or mollusks in marshes. People will coax them into their yards with fruit.

**Habitat:** Ranges widely making use of fields, tundra, forests and urban gardens.

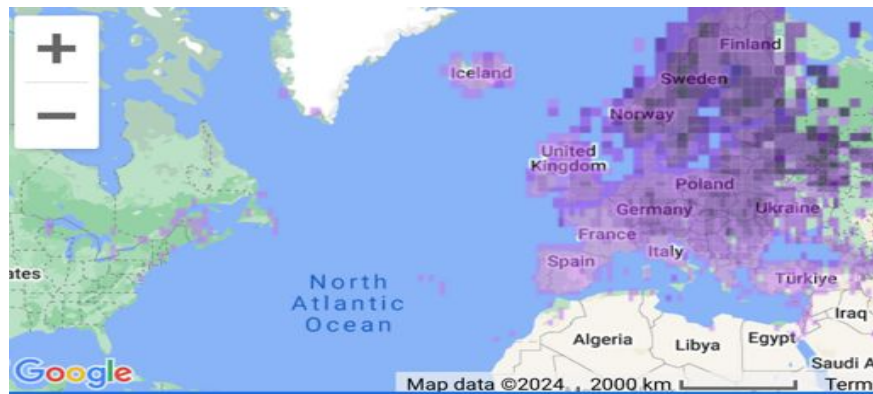
**Breeding:** Breeding begins in May. They are territorial with only a brief courtship display and song. Nests may be made in trees, shrubs, on the ground or even on manmade structures. They may sometimes nest in colonies to deter crow and other predation. Grasses, moss, weeds with few twigs and mud lining make up a cup shape which holds 3-8 eggs. Eggs vary in coloration from bright blue, to speckled and even brown. Incubation is two weeks with chicks tended to by both parents for another two weeks until fledging. If conditions are right they can nest twice in a season.

**Behavior:** They move much like robins, with forward dynamic hops. During migration they form flocks with other thrushes. When attacked by predators, particularly at nesting time, they will mob and defecate on their foe. If fruit/berry crops are plentiful in the Northern range they may not migrate. They will defend food sources such as fallen apples.

**Distribution:**

Fieldfares are normally found in northern Europe and migrate south to England and the middle east in the fall. They form large flocks with Redwings.

Vagrant reports are rare and largely restricted to the East coast of North America.



credit: Merlin App

**Status:** Least Concern. (Global IUCN, 2020, red list category).

**References:**

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology (Merlin App and Ebird App)

Wikipedia

National Audubon Society the Sibley Guide to Birds, first edition 2000

Birds of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East Lars Johnsson 1993

Birds of Europe Lars Svensson 2009 2nd edition Princeton Field Guides



## **Life List Quarterly: 1st Quarter 2024**

*By Sarah Besadny*

Well, the year has started off with a bang for the Club's Life List. Another "lifer" has been added. On February 21<sup>st</sup>, Donna and a handful of Club Members headed up to Ashland to try to see the "mega rarity" Fieldfare. As noted in Amy's article about seeing the Fieldfare (earlier in this newsletter), this Fieldfare, first spotted on February 14<sup>th</sup>, was a first since records have been kept for the state of Wisconsin. The Fieldfare brought the Club's Life List up to 275 species. The Fieldfare wasn't the only species of bird spotted, another 26 species were seen on the Ashland trip, so we're off to a great start on our Annual List as well.

There's always great anticipation as we head into Spring to welcome back the migrants and retrain our ears for a wide-variety of bird songs. It will be fun to see what species are added to our Annual List and especially fun to see if there might even be another "lifer" added to our list before the year's up!

### **Photo Journal**

*Photos and Captions by Mark Westphal*



*A welcome winter visitor to northwood's bird feeders*



*This American Tree Sparrow was spotted on March 3rd during a visit to Powell Marsh with a group of birders who came from Texas as part of a winter birding tour.*

*This pair of Snow Buntings was spotted taking a dip in the waters of a thawing cranberry bed near Boulder Junction.*



*Can you guess Whooooo Whooo this is?....*



*This trio of Trumpeter Swans found food and refuge in the icy waters of the Manitowish River*

*A Bald Eagle came in for a landing at Powell Marsh in search of food in the melting ice.*



*Some of the Snow Buntings in a flock of 150 or more at Powell Marsh*