

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
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EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



JANUARY 10TH FIELD TRIP

For the Saturday, January 10th field trip, meet at 8:00 a.m. in the parking circle near the bird blind at Walnut Woods State Park. We will view the activity at the feeders in the park and we'll also travel to Maffitt Reservoir. Dress for conditions, wear warm boots for cold weather and bring a beverage and snack for break. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! *Contact field trip leader, Dennis Thompson at 515-254-0837 for more information.*

According to the Des Moines Water Works website, Dale Maffitt Reservoir is a 200-acre lake primarily located in Polk County with corners that reach into Warren, Dallas and Madison Counties. The reservoir was constructed in the early 1940s, as a backup water source and named in honor of then General Manager of Des Moines Water Works. For decades, birdwatchers, nature lovers and anglers have enjoyed the serenity of the lake, as ducks, geese, river otter and a multitude of fish species call it home. In addition to the land used for the lake itself, Des Moines Water Works maintains hundreds of acres surrounding the lake in an effort to protect the watershed. Today, Des Moines Water Works owns and maintains nearly 1,500 acres that comprise Dale Maffitt Reservoir and Park. A nature trail of approximately 4.5 miles leads hikers around the lake.



TUESDAY, JANUARY 20 PROGRAM **Bats by Russ Benedict**

Russ Benedict is a Professor of Biology at Central College, teaching courses in Mammalogy, Ornithology, Conservation Biology, and Tropical Ecology. He studies bats, and also studies methods of restoring tallgrass prairie in manner that benefits nature and agriculture. This presentation will introduce people to the amazing and little-known world of bats, focusing mostly on species found in the Midwest. Here is a quick bat quiz from Russ; you will have to attend the presentation to check your answers. How many different kinds of bats are found in Iowa? Which Iowa bat may disappear from the earth within our lifetimes? For one local bat, only adult females have been caught in Iowa; which bat is it, and where are the males?

Meetings of Des Moines Audubon Society begin at 7 p.m. and are held in the lower level of Westminster Presbyterian Church which is located at the corner of Beaver and Franklin Avenues in Des Moines. Parking is available on the north and west sides of the church and an elevator can be accessed at the west door. For information about this program, please contact Jane Clark at jlclark@radiks.net or 515-223-5047.

Owl Prowl
Friday, January 16, 5:30 - 6:30 p.m.
Jester Park, Camp Area #5

Bundle up and join a naturalist for a campfire program to learn about owls. After a brief discussion about these flying predators of the night, we will go for a hike and learn how to call three different species of owls.

What's Happening With Iowa's Barn Owls?
By Bruce Ehresman

Even in states where it is considered a common species, the Barn Owl holds the reputation of being elusive. Since it is such a nocturnal species and because it remains quiet most of its life, it can exist in very close proximity to humans without being detected. There are several instances of Barn Owls nesting within 50 yards of an occupied house without the residents being aware of the owls. That situation almost always changes, of course, when the young Barn Owls start screaming for food from their parents. That is the point at which our office is notified with a question such as, "what in the world kind of animal is making such an infernal racket that it keeps me up half of the night?" To which I enthusiastically respond (once I know what animal the distraught person is describing), "I am happy to tell you that you have Barn Owls nesting at your place. It is one of Iowa's rarest birds, and you are one of very few Iowans privileged to have this endangered owl nesting on your property." Now, you might expect the typical response to be, "well if you like 'em so much, why don't you just come and get 'em." Instead, I have found that most landowners who encounter Barn Owls nesting on their land are respectful of the owls and grateful for their presence. Many even put up nest boxes so the owls will return to nest. It is especially because so many have put up Barn Owl nest boxes that DNR is able to somewhat track the nesting of this species.

It has been a couple years since the last report was provided on Iowa's Barn Owl status. While the species seems to alternate between having good years and bad, its population seems somewhat stable. When we consider that Iowa has lost another million acres of grassland to row-crop conversion since 2000, it is remarkable that this owl continues to exist in Iowa. During the last nine years previous to 2014, there were about 5 nests (average) reported each year for Iowa Barn Owls. There were 13 reports of Barn Owls in 2013, 5 of which were nesting reports. These reports came from 10 different counties, with 2 nests reported in Washington County and one nest each in Decatur, Ringgold, and Monona counties. It appears that a total of at least 11 young fledged from those nests. The other counties with single owls or pairs were Wapello, Fremont, Mills, Lucas, Adams, and Guthrie.

The winter of 2013-2014 was cold and snowy, and as often happens following brutal winters, Barn Owl nesting was off in 2014. Because Barn Owls maintain very little body fat, those owls that remain on nesting or wintering sites often starve/freeze to death during such winters. After such a harsh winter, only 3 Barn Owl nests were recorded in 2014. A nest was reported with 2 young in Story County, 5 young were found in a metal grain bin in Guthrie County, and at least one youngster fledged from a nest box in Decatur County. Many previous Barn Owl nesting sites were visited, and in most cases no sign was detected of any Barn Owl presence. On a more positive note, there were 8 additional reports received of Barn Owl presence in 7 other counties; including Ringgold, Dallas, Taylor, Lucas, Keokuk, Tama, and Franklin. Of particular interest is Franklin County. When the site was visited, it was learned from the landowner that Barn Owls had nested successfully in a hollow tree in his woodlot in 2009 and 2010. So while Iowa's very best habitat still appears to be in extreme southern Iowa, the Barn Owl continues to defy logic and finds places to nest in the most unexpected places, even in a northern Iowa woodlot in a landscape dominated by corn and soybeans.

Many thanks to the growing number of people who value the Barn Owl and who encourage its presence on their properties. If you wish to report a barn owl sighting or would like information on how to build and place your own barn owl nest box, please contact me by phone (515-432-2823 ext. 106) or email (bruce.ehresman@dnr.iowa.gov).

From: Wildlife Diversity News
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Winter Finch Forecast

Ron Pittaway who is based in Ontario publishes a winter finch forecast for the winter. His reports take into account a vast array of information to figure out which irruptive species might show up where. According to Pittaway, this winter's theme is a "mixed bag" of finch movements. More locally, during the Story County Christmas Bird Count, Doug Harr found a Pine Grosbeak at the ISU Horticulture Farm on December 20. It was in a thicket near a good crab apple supply, a favored winter food for this species. Suggestions from Ron Pittaway about birds to watch for this winter and their food preferences are summarized below. Key trees affecting finch movements in the boreal forest are spruces, birches and mountain-ashes.

PINE GROSBEAK

Pine Grosbeaks should make a small flight into central Ontario because mountain-ash berry crops are low in northeastern Ontario. However, mountain-ash crops are excellent in north-central Quebec and in northwestern Ontario with excellent crops extending west across the boreal forest to Alaska so Pine Grosbeaks there may not move far from these areas. At feeders they prefer sunflower seeds, and also watch for them feeding on European mountain-ash berries and ornamental crabapples.

PURPLE FINCH

Last winter many Purple Finches stayed in the boreal forest because of bumper seed crops there. This fall most Purple Finches should migrate south of Ontario because many coniferous and deciduous tree seed crops are much lower in central and northeastern Ontario. At feeders purples prefer sunflower seeds. Old-timers remember when Purple Finches were much more common than they are today. The principal cause of the decline may be the absence of large outbreaks of spruce budworm.

RED CROSSBILL

Red Crossbills will be scattered in the Northeast this winter because cone crops are generally poor.

WHITE-WINGED CROSSBILL

White-winged Crossbills move east and west like a pendulum across North America searching for bumper cone crops. They are unlikely to irrupt south in numbers because the excellent spruce cone crops in Quebec, northwestern Canada and Alaska should keep this crossbill within the boreal forest.

COMMON REDPOLL

Expect a moderate to good flight south this fall and winter because birch seed crops are variably poor to average in the boreal forest. At bird feeders redpolls prefer nyger seeds in silo feeders. Watch for redpolls in weedy fields.

PINE SISKIN

Siskins will move east and west this fall searching for areas with excellent spruce cone crops. Siskins should winter in Alaska and north-central Quebec where spruce crops are excellent. However, those that fail to find adequate cone crops will probably wander south where they will frequent bird feeders with nyger seeds in silo feeders. Siskins are often detected by their wheezy clee-ip call, which is the best way to identify them in flight.

EVENING GROSBEAK

Very small numbers of Evening Grosbeaks should move south this winter into southern Ontario and the Northeast because tree seed crops are generally poor farther north. This past summer, Tyler Hoar reported the lowest number of Evening Grosbeaks that he has seen around Lake Superior and in Quebec's Laurentians in four years. Breeding populations are now much reduced from the population peak during the 1940s to 1980s linked to large outbreaks of spruce budworm. At feeders Evening Grosbeaks prefer black oil sunflower seeds.

RED-BREASTED NUTHATCH

Movement of the Red-breasted Nuthatch is often linked to the boreal finches. This nuthatch is a conifer seed specialist when it winters in the boreal forest. Cone crop failures cause irruptions. It began wandering southward in mid-summer indicating that boreal finches could also move this fall and winter. Many but not all Red-breasted Nuthatches should move south this fall because white spruce cone crops are generally low to average (some bumper crops) across much of the boreal forest. At bird feeders Red-breasted Nuthatches prefer black oil sunflower seeds, chopped peanuts and suet.

Boreal Forest (Taiga)

The boreal forest or taiga exists as a nearly continuous belt of coniferous trees across North America and Eurasia. The forest is mosaic of successional and subclimax plant communities sensitive to varying environmental conditions. Taiga is the Russian name for this forest which covers so much of that country. However, the term is used in North America as well.

In North America it covers most of inland Canada and Alaska as well as parts of the extreme northern continental United States (northern Minnesota through the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to Upstate New York and northern New England) and is known as the Northwoods.

The taiga corresponds with regions of subarctic and cold continental climate. Long, severe winters and short summers are characteristic, as is a wide range of temperatures between the lows of winter and highs of summer. Mean annual precipitation is 15 to 20 inches, but low evaporation rates make this a humid climate.

Coniferous trees are the dominant plants of the taiga biome. A very few species in four main genera are found: the evergreen spruce, fir, and pine, and the deciduous larch or tamarack. In North America, one or two species of fir and one or two species of spruce are dominant. Across Scandinavia and western Russia the Scots pine is a common component of the taiga.

Broadleaf deciduous trees and shrubs are members of early successional stages of both primary and secondary succession. Most common are alder, birch, and aspen.

According to information found on several websites, while typically low on biodiversity, Canada's boreal forest is home to 85 species of mammals, 130 species of fish, some 32,000 species of insects, and 300 species of birds. Of the 300 bird species that call Canada's boreal forest home during the summer, only 30 stay through the winter.

Among birds, insect-eaters like the wood warblers are migratory and leave after the breeding season. Seed-eaters such as finches and sparrows and omnivores such as ravens tend to be year-round residents. During poor cone years, normal residents like the Evening Grosbeak, Pine Siskin, and Red Crossbill leave the boreal forest in winter and may be seen at bird feeders.

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