

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
VOLUME XXXII, NUMBER 4
APRIL 2026
EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



Des Moines Audubon Field Trip
Saturday, April 11, 2026, 8 a.m.

We will meet in the parking lot of Grimes Waterworks Park at 8:00 a.m. The parking area is just north of the corner of 100 North James Street, Grimes, IA 50111 (where we have met before). From there we will head to Guthrie County and visit Marsh Farm Wetland on the way to Bays Branch, and Springbrook State Park. Our primary focus will be on waterfowl and any early shorebirds. Beginners are welcome and this is a great way to improve your birding skills by joining a wide range of birders. Dress for conditions and bring binoculars if you have them. Contact Denny Thompson at 515-229-9615 or cdnthomps@gmail.com for more information.

Des Moines Audubon Program Meeting
Tuesday, April 21, 2026, 7:00 p.m.
Birding and Wildlife at Sax-Zim Bog

Doug Harr has been to Sax-Zim Bog in northeast Minnesota four times over the past several years. It is a very popular place for anyone to find winter birds and mammals that are rarely or ever seen in Iowa. His most recent trip was in March 2025, getting photos and videos of a Great Gray Owl and an American (or "Pine") Marten. This program will cover many other different birds seen there along with some mammals, and the unusual habitat that makes Sax-Zim Bog such a great place being preserved to protect so many north country creatures.

Doug lives in Ogden, and is a retired Iowa DNR Wildlife Biologist and Wildlife Diversity State Program Coordinator. He is currently the president of Iowa Audubon and serves on the advisory board for National Audubon's Upper Mississippi River regional office. Doug has previously given other presentations for Des Moines Audubon.

Des Moines Audubon meetings begin at 7:00 p.m. and are held in the lunchroom of the Northwest Community Center, which is located at 5110 Franklin Avenue in Des Moines. The Center is just west of Franklin Library. If you have questions about the meeting place or the program, please Jane Clark at jrclark@radiks.net or 515-707-7648.

Mississippi Kite by Carl Nollen

This elegant southern rarity in Iowa is featured in a 10-page spread in the January 2026 Wyoming Wildlife magazine. Replete with a 2-page photo of a soaring kite, a full page closeup of a resting kite and six other photos, this story has inspired me to write about it. That a western state would give this hawk such a spread shows how it has expanded its territory. A recent updated range map can be found on the National Audubon Society's Field Guide website. It shows how it has advanced north all the way from Ohio to Wyoming. Fortunately, human civilization has helped this most watchable bird. Shelterbelts in the plains states and trees in towns attract kites to nest among us. Golf courses, parks and cemeteries are especially favored in its new territories. One reason for this preference is due to fewer predators in urban areas. In Iowa, breeding populations have been noticed in suburban Des Moines, northeast Des Moines, Ottumwa, and Burlington. Other sightings have been noticed all the way from Decorah to Council Bluffs. The first sighting in recent years was in 1991 when nesting kites were noticed in the Clive backyard of Des Moines Audubon Society and Iowa Ornithologists Union member Fred Crane. Phil Walsh documented a nest in 1995 nearby in Windsor Heights. Jane Clark picked up an injured kite in Urbandale in 2012 and it was taken to the Iowa State Wildlife Care Clinic located at Iowa State University, College of Veterinary Medicine in Ames. It was later photographed by raptor rehabilitator Kay Neumann. Greenwood Park in Des Moines has been a popular site to view these kites because these soaring birds are easy to spot.

This kite's beauty is due to its long, forked tail, long pointed wings and classy white, gray, and black plumage described as a white or off-white breast and head, black tail and wing primaries, dark gray coverts, and white secondaries. The white underparts may sometimes be light or slate gray. Juveniles with rusty, streaked breasts might be mistaken for one of our young *buteo* hawks or falcons. Bright red eyes are supposed to help it spot insects in the air. Grasshoppers, dragonflies, and cicadas are in its favorite diet, but it has been known to go after small birds and other small creatures. Kites will also be interested in insects stirred up by herds of bison or cattle or prairie fires.

Watch this beautiful bird soar aloft for hours. Acrobatic with quick turns and adjustments, notice its flap-flap-glide style. *Ictinia*, its genus name, comes from the Greek for kite, and *mississippiensis*, its species name, refers to the type locality where it was first named by ornithologist Alexander Wilson in 1811 at Natchez along the Mississippi River. Although it is a southern bird, it is more common in Texas and Oklahoma.

Tall trees are best for Mississippi Kites to lay two white eggs in a bulky twig nest with some green vegetation to line it. One clutch a year takes about 30 days to hatch and 30 more days for the young to fledge. Kites are long distance migrants to southern South America. In 1998, an estimated 186,000 kites of this species were noticed at Vera Cruz, Mexico, which was determined to be 79-90% of the U.S. population.

Let's hope this sleek and graceful hawk will return safely to increase its presence in Iowa.

AGEING AND BIRDING

According to a study published last month in *The Journal of Neuroscience*, birdwatching has the capacity to reshape the brain in much the same way as learning a language or a musical instrument does. The researchers concluded that experienced birders have more structurally compact attention-and-perception-related brain areas, seemingly linked to more accurate bird identification skills.

To understand whether birding also shapes the brain, Erik Wing at York University in Toronto and his colleagues analyzed brain structure and function in 48 hobbyist birders, half experts, and half novices, as judged by a screening test. Participants were aged 22 to 79, and both groups were similar in terms of sex, age, and education.

Of course, more experienced birders could ID birds better than novices. (On average, they accurately identified 83% of local bird species and 61% of non-local ones. In contrast, novices correctly identified 44% of both groups of birds.) While identifying non-local birds, activity in three important brain regions increased among experienced birders, but not in novices. These brain regions are involved in object identification, visual processing, attention, and working memory. "It speaks to the wide range of cognitive processes that are involved in birding," commented Wing.

Remember, this study is only a snapshot in time. It might be that people who develop an interest in birds already have structural changes in their brains, or that there are other lifestyle factors related to brain changes that happen to be more common among bird enthusiasts.

Nonetheless, this is still interesting to consider!

Iowa DNR Wildlife Diversity News, March 2, 2026

The 2025 Iowa Monitoring of Owls and Nightjars (MOON) Annual Report

In 2016, the Iowa DNR implemented its first Monitoring of Owls and Nightjars (MOON) survey following protocols developed by the Illinois Natural History Survey. MOON was established because of a need for data on nocturnal bird species, such as owls and nightjars, which are not detected by other IA DNR surveys. Eight owl species and three nightjar species breed in Iowa (see the table below). The MOON survey provides an opportunity to gather current baseline population data, document changes in species populations over time, and link species occurrence to habitat management.

Three MOON survey routes were established in 2016, with another added in 2018. These routes were placed in areas with favorable habitat for owls and nightjars, near forests, and have been surveyed most years since establishment. In 2024, 10 new survey routes were added within Iowa Bird Conservation Areas (BCAs) with another 3 added in 2025, with the goal of adding at least one MOON route to each of Iowa's 24 BCAs.

Iowa MOON surveys have documented seven owl and nightjar species; Barn Owl, Eastern Screech-owl, Barred Owl, Great Horned Owl, Common Nighthawk, Eastern Whip-poor-will, and Chuck-will's-widow. Although Common Nighthawks are detected by MOON and reported on below, this survey is not ideal for detecting this crepuscular species (active at dawn/dusk) which is not typically active in the middle of the night, and MOON likely underestimates presence of this species.

MOON surveys are 10-stop driving routes surveyed twice each year between April and June. Surveys are conducted at night when the moon is 50% or more illuminated to increase detection of nightjars. In 2025, these survey windows were May 4-20 and June 3-18. At each survey stop, the surveyor listens for owls and nightjars for six minutes then listens for four more minutes after broadcasting Eastern Screech-owl and Barn Owl calls to increase the likelihood of detecting these two species.

Of the 18 MOON routes surveyed in 2025, Barred Owls were detected on 17 routes, Eastern Whip-poor-wills were detected on 12 routes, Great Horned Owls were detected on 11 routes, Eastern Screech-owls were detected on 6 routes, Common Nighthawks were detected on 4 routes, Barn Owls were detected on 3 routes, and Chuck-will's-widows were detected on 1 route.

On long-term routes, maximum counts each year indicate that Barred Owls are stable to decreasing, Eastern Whip-poor-wills and Chuck-will's-widows are decreasing, and all other species have unclear trends.

The Iowa DNR plans to continue to expand the MOON survey in the coming years so that there will be at least one survey route in each of Iowa's 24 BCAs. By increasing the spatial coverage of MOON in Iowa, we will be able to expand our understanding of owls and nightjars in the state and repeated annual surveys will allow us to detect species trends over time for all routes. Although we can only make inferences at the scale of the survey, there are some concerning negative population trends emerging from our long-term routes, particularly with nightjars.

More years of MOON data and additional data on habitat management are needed to draw specific links between owl and nightjar species occupancy and habitat management in Iowa. However, we have identified four routes where Eastern Whip-poor-will and Chuck-will's-widow are declining, indicating that these areas may need additional habitat management to maintain the species at those sites. These nightjar species are declining across their range, and additional research is needed to determine exactly what is causing these population declines, though quality habitat is key to stabilizing populations.

Iowa DNR State Forest Nursery

Add spring color to your yard with quality native Iowa seedlings

AMES - The Iowa DNR State Forest Nursery offers spring delivery in April and May for high-quality, well-adapted and affordable hardwood, conifer, and shrub seedlings. Seedlings can be ordered through May 15.

Customers can choose to have their order shipped or they can pick it up at the State Forest Nursery in Ames. The bare-root seedlings are packaged in bundles of 25 inside sealed and labeled plastic bags. Tree varieties include 23 species of native hardwoods, eight conifer species and 15 smaller trees and shrubs. Prices range from \$1 to \$1.30 per seedling. Seedlings are sold in three age classifications, and range in size from 10-30 inches depending on the species.

The State Forest Nursery in Ames was established by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1937 and has operated continuously ever since. All trees are grown from Iowa seed sources to harvest the bounty of native genetics that have thrived in our soils and weather against disease, insects, droughts, and floods for many thousands of years.

For more information visit the online sales site at <https://nursery.iowadnr.gov> or call 1-800-865-2477 during regular business hours, 8 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., Monday – Friday. Iowa DNR's expert nursery staff can assist with species selection and answer questions about your tree needs and nurser

**Des Moines Audubon Society membership is for one year, from July to June.
Dues should be mailed to: Jane Clark, 9871 Lincoln Avenue, Clive, IA 50325.
If you are unsure of the status of your membership, please call 515-707-7648.
Please make checks payable to "Des Moines Audubon Society"**

Membership Levels and Dues:

Student (under 18).....\$1.00

Individual Adult..... \$15.00

Family..... \$20.00

*Additional Contribution for Conservation Projects _____

*Additional Contribution for Bird Feeding Projects _____

Name _____

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Telephone _____ E-mail _____

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