

# Jack Pine *Warbler*

*THE SPRING ISSUE:* Bird-friendly Communities Coming of Age ■ Rusty Blackbirds in Peril ■ Audubon in Poetry ■  
Are You Ready to Get Rusty? ■ 2014 Was a Challenging Season at WPBO



# Jack Pine Warbler

## CONTACT US

**By mail:**  
PO Box 15249  
Lansing, MI 48901

**By visiting:**  
Suite 200  
2310 Science Parkway  
Okemos, MI 48864

Phone 517-580-7364  
Mon.-Fri. 9AM-5PM

## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**Jonathan E. Lutz**  
jlutz@michiganaudubon.org

## STAFF

**Wendy Tatar**  
Program Coordinator  
wendy@michiganaudubon.org

**Kristin Phillips**  
Marketing and Communications  
Coordinator  
kphillips@michiganaudubon.org

**Rachelle Roake**  
Conservation Science Coordinator  
rroake@michiganaudubon.org

**Joanne Foy**  
Membership Assistant  
jfoy@michiganaudubon.org

## EDITOR

**Laura Julier**  
julier@msu.edu

## PRODUCTION

**Kristin Phillips**  
Marketing and Communications  
Coordinator  
kphillips@michiganaudubon.org

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Cover Photo ■ Rusty Blackbird

Photographer: Darlene Friedman ■ [www.flickr.com/photos/darlenefriedman/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/darlenefriedman/)

Darlene Friedman snapped this shot of a Rusty Blackbird at Whitefish Point in September of last year. She used a Canon 7D camera and the Canon 500 f/4 lens with 1.4 teleconverter. Shutter speed: 1/800 second, Aperture: f/8, ISO: 320.

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## MICHIGAN AUDUBON CONNECTS BIRDS AND PEOPLE FOR THE BENEFIT OF BOTH ...

... through conservation, education, and research efforts in the state of Michigan. Formed and incorporated in 1904, it is Michigan's oldest conservation organization. Michigan Audubon supports bird surveys throughout the state, publishes survey data, provides educational opportunities, and preserves nearly 5,000 acres of land within 19 sanctuaries as habitat for birds and other wildlife. The 41 chapters of Michigan Audubon focus on local conservation issues and provide educational programs within their communities. Contributions to Michigan Audubon are tax-deductible.

Visit [MichiganAudubon.org](http://MichiganAudubon.org) for more updates, and follow  
*MichiganAudubon* on social media



# Executive Director's Letter



## BIRDING...IT'S SCIENCE!

When birders participate in Christmas Bird Counts, we are helping to provide researchers a picture of how the continent's bird populations have changed over the past hundred years—a long-term perspective that is vital for conservation. When birders collect data for the Great Backyard Bird Count, we are helping scientists better understand what is happening to bird populations relative to climate change, avian diseases, and lethal impediments such as tall structures and feral cats. When birders submit observations to eBird.org, the data become part of the Avian Knowledge Network, which integrates observational data and increases ornithologists' understanding of the distribution, abundance, and diversity of bird life across the globe.

Michigan Audubon wants you to think globally in 2015 by turning your birding into science. Birders are the world's largest coalition of citizen scientists—gathering wildlife data through our kitchen windows, while on organized birding tours, and, dare I say, while motoring down the Interstate. If you're looking for a place to start, consider participating in the Rusty Blackbird Migration Blitz. Conservation science coordinator Rachelle Roake writes about the Blitz for this issue. You may find it surprising that ornithologists know little about the migratory requirements and habits of Rusty Blackbirds. The Blitz challenges the birding community to seek out rusties during spring migration and report the sightings via eBird. I hope you will help.

Give your eBird list a boost by birding at Whitefish Point this spring. The 27th annual Spring Fling gathering at Whitefish Point is April 24–26. The event will feature keynote speaker Scott Weidensaul, the co-founder of Project SNOWstorm—a birder-supported project that now includes four Snowy Owls in Michigan. Spring Fling highlights the full suite of research initiatives of the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, including spring and fall season waterbird counts, spring



On Friday, March 6, a fourth Snowy Owl was released in Michigan wearing a satellite transmitter. As part of Project SNOWstorm, the bird "Whitefish Point" will provide researchers with information about its location and migratory movements. Assisting with fitting the transmitter were WPBO owl technicians, Nova MacKentley and Chris Neri, and Whitefish Point residents, Carol and Raean McLean.

raptor count, and three seasons of owl study. Whitefish Point is a continentally significant migration funnel for a wide diversity of species—a great place to turn your birding into science.

During the summer months, Whitefish Point is home to nesting Piping Plovers. Beginning May 1, Michigan Audubon will co-administer a habitat technician and outreach specialist with the Seney National Wildlife Refuge and the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum. The four-month post will include at least three days monitoring nesting Piping Plovers at the Point, while off-day responsibilities will include habitat restoration and public outreach. The position is supported by a grant from the Seney Natural History Association. Special training is available if you would like to be part of the Great Lakes Piping Plovers monitoring effort. Volunteer monitors are particularly needed on the Lake Michigan shoreline from Pentwater to Sleeping Bear Dunes. Contact Michigan Audubon before April 1 if you would like to participate in a training session.

Finally, we'll be training a team of summer interns and volunteers to employ a protocol for marsh bird monitoring at the

1,000-acre Bernard W. Baker Sanctuary in Calhoun County. The centerpiece of Baker, as many of you know, is the 300-acre shallow wetland, Big Marsh Lake. Early efforts by sanctuary stewards like Larry Walkinshaw helped document the diversity of bird life at Baker. With grant support from National Audubon, we will be able to gather new baseline data to inform conservation and stewardship decisions at the sanctuary. Let us know if you would like to be involved.

The staff and I are giddy for the upcoming spring birding season. We are looking forward to seeing you on the birding trail as much as we are excited to see the birds. Be sure to visit the brand-new [www.michiganaudubon.org](http://www.michiganaudubon.org) and find an upcoming birding event using the interactive calendar. As you prepare for time on the birding trail this spring, please be sure to include "turning my birding into science" on your checklist.

Best regards,



Jonathan E. Lutz, executive director



# Bird-friendly Communities Coming of Age

BY HOWARD MEYERSON

**R**oyce Ragland is proud that her village of Elk Rapids — population 1,642—is working to improve conditions for birds. The Antrim County community has the unique distinction of being the “first community in the world” to be certified by Saving Birds Through Habitat (SBTH), the Omena-based nonprofit that promotes saving bird habitat. Elk Rapids is part of a growing movement in the U.S. to make communities friendlier for birds.

“We decided it was important to raise people’s appreciation of birds,” explains Ragland, vice-chair for the village planning commission and founder of Green Elk Rapids, a volunteer group working to raise awareness about environmental issues. “Birds are an indicator of environmental health. We are right in the middle of amazing natural attributes—beaches, woods, ponds, and streams. We’re encouraging people who live here to treasure and preserve them.”

Two Elk Rapids parks were certified in September 2014. Each is filled with native oak, cherry, and willow trees, all known to host an abundance of lepidoptera, the butterfly and moth caterpillars which neo-tropical migrant and/or resident birds often eat. Their presence, along with other native plants, made each of the parks a high-quality bird habitat, according to Kay Charter, executive director of SBTH. The organization has certified industrial and private land sites, but not municipal properties, until now.

“Our bird population is declining and the number-one reason for that is habitat loss, specifically the loss of native plants,” Charter declares. “Non-native plants don’t support the insect abundance that birds need.

“Elk Rapids took the initiative to become certified. They have native trees and bushes and committed to replace those that are not native. Some residents have (since) called and want to work with us to have their properties certified. It’s the ripple—like throwing a stone in a pond.”

Robert Petty hopes to create just such a ripple as National Audubon’s Bird-Friendly Communities Coordinator. The Montana resident was hired a year ago to develop a national initiative expected to launch in 2015.

“Communities have an opportunity and obligation to make their places healthy and sustainable for birds as well as people,” Petty said. “That ultimately boils down to assuring the community has certain things: conservation quality and people engagement.

“A lot of the activities embodied in the program are as old as the 450 chapters we have; all are involved one way or another in some bird-friendly activity. Our goal is to have all communities become bird-friendly.”

Alabama’s Birmingham Audubon Society is one example, according to Petty. Its membership works with the city parks department on native plant restoration. Audubon Society of Portland (OR) members certify backyards and work to keep cats away from important bird areas. Audubon Connecticut has a schoolyard habitat program.

Major cities, he adds, are also working to become more bird-friendly. Chicago, Toronto, Columbus, OH, and Minneapolis and St. Paul are a few examples. Some have developed bird-

Picture via pixabay.com.





Eastern Meadowlark © Daniel Behm.

friendly building and planning guidelines. All have voluntary lights-out programs through which Audubon chapters may collaborate with building owners and managers in an effort to reduce the number of birds that die from collisions with buildings.

Between 100 million and 1 billion birds die in the U.S. alone from these collisions, according to research

by Daniel Klem Jr., Sarkis Acopian professor of ornithology and conservation biology at Muhlenberg College in Allentown, PA. He reports that 225 species of birds in the U.S. and Canada have been documented in these collisions. Those findings and others can be found online at his Birds and Windows page at <http://bit.ly/17E7XDd>. Scientists studying the problem know birds migrate at night, navigating by the moon and stars. On rainy and foggy nights they fly at lower altitudes. Bright city lights and window reflections can cause birds to become disoriented and crash into buildings.

Rob Duchene and other Detroit Audubon members are working to improve those conditions in Detroit. The 65-year-old retired school teacher said 15 to 20 government or corporate entities now participate in its Safe Passage program. They are asked to turn building lights off from the fifth story up, from 11 p.m. to 5 p.m. during spring and fall migrations.

“We maintain an honor roll of confirmed participation,” Duchene said. “Wayne County has agreed to participate. The State of Michigan is participating. The Renaissance Center participates, and General Motors is very active. Our next phase is to get to local meteorologists to help us by using radar to scan the skies and see clouds of birds coming in. Most people don’t know birds migrate at night. The hazard is accentuated on rainy nights. Those might be times when they might advise those in hotels to close the shades,” said Duchene.

The city of Escanaba, in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, is also engaged in bird-friendly work, according to Joe Kaplan, principal of Common Coast Research and Conservation in Hancock. His firm received a \$50,900 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation in 2012 for the Escanaba Migratory Bird Enhancement Initiative. The project seeks to restore native plants to much of the nearby shoreline, enhancing the habitat for migrating birds.

Selling the idea to community leaders took time, according to Kaplan, but the project has become popular. Working with area volunteers and additional donations from the city, DTE Energy, Wildlife Unlimited of Delta County, and others, the group has installed nest boxes and restored critical stopover habitat for migrating birds, along with eliminating phragmites on a 1.4-mile stretch of Lake Michigan shoreline.

Elk Rapids is now working to update its wetland ordinances, according to Ragland. Community leaders are now recognizing their importance as bird habitat. A special village council meeting to further the idea of building a bird-friendly community is planned for 7 p.m. on May 18 at the village Township Hall at which Doug Tallamy, chair of the Department of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware will present “Saving the Environment, One Backyard at a Time.” Tallamy is the author of *Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens* (Timber Press, 2007).

All of this work “has brought more awareness to the discussions,” Ragland said. “It’s giving the average commission member or voter one more piece of information to help make good decisions. We focus on a lot of issues like energy and recycling. When we realized the connection between the environment and bird life, it was like a lightbulb going on. Now a number of us plan to have our backyards certified.”

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Howard Meyerson ([howardmeyerson@gmail.com](mailto:howardmeyerson@gmail.com)) has been writing about birds, nature, the environment, and outdoor recreation for 30 years. He lives in Grand Rapids. His work appears in a variety of publications.



Detroit is working to protect birds in migration by promoting lights-out to business owners and businesses. Picture via pixabay.com.

# Rusty Blackbirds in Peril

BY KIRBY ADAMS

**W**hat if a species disappeared and no one noticed? We know that happens almost daily with plants and insects in the tropical rainforest, but surely such a tragedy could never befall a common Michigan bird, right? Well, it's happening.

The Rusty Blackbird is in grave peril. Some estimates put the population decline at between 85 and 95% over the last four decades. The most maddening aspect of the crash is our inability to pinpoint a cause—or more likely, causes.

Rusties breed in nearly inaccessible wetlands across Canada. Fens, bogs, muskegs, and beaver ponds provide critical open habitat in the vast coniferous forests, but getting to those sites to assess the population is all but impossible. Their wintering grounds in southern wet bottomlands and their migration stopovers are far more favorable for observation, but suffer from a different problem: Rusty Blackbirds aren't generally noticeable.

Ornithologists have long relied on citizen science and grassroots surveying to monitor population and distribution changes in birds. The 115-year-old Christmas Bird Count, along with the Great Backyard Bird Count, Breeding Bird Surveys, and eBird have provided countless valuable data about bird trends, but not much has been gleaned from citizen sources about Rusty Blackbirds. They breed outside the range of even the Breeding Bird Surveys, and casual birders can often mistake them for Common Grackles or other blackbirds.

An effort to enlist citizen scientists in a dedicated effort to identify critical Rusty Blackbird stopover habitat was launched in 2014 with the first Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz (RBSMB). Birders were encouraged to seek out rusties in potential habitat throughout the spring and to report sightings, including negative reports, using a special protocol at eBird.org.

The results have indicated that those of us between Lakes Michigan and Huron have some work to do this spring. "We need the help of the Michigan birding community," says Vince Cavalieri, the state coordinator for the RBSMB. "Michigan birders can help by targeting important sites from 2014 and other likely blackbird hotspots and reporting all Rusty Blackbird sightings during the blitz period to eBird."

Cavalieri says Michigan is emerging as a critical part of a major Rusty Blackbird migration flyway and stresses the importance of the blitz in forming a more accurate picture of just how

important this region and its stopover habitat is.

The RBSMB is planned to run for three consecutive years. One of the goals is to determine if the same stopover sites are used from year to year. Some known sites such as Maple River State Game Area enjoy some level of protection, but others may be at risk. It's critical in 2015 that observers get out to these sites that hosted large flocks of rusties in 2014 to see if they return. A map of important areas of interest is at the Blitz website. It's likely there are some not too far from any home in Michigan.

The northeastern areas of the Lower Peninsula show few important areas as determined by the 2014 Blitz, but that's likely an artifact of the area being under-birded in general. Searching for rusties in typical habitat is still valuable, especially in areas like that. There are certainly Rusty Blackbird stopovers in Crawford, Montmorency, and Oscoda Counties. The Blitz needs you to find them.

With data in hand, federal, state, and private conservation organizations can be informed and potentially move forward with dedicated Rusty Blackbird conservation initiatives. Likewise, the birding community and nature enthusiasts in general can be engaged in the process with increased awareness about a bird that suffers in obscurity behind our more charismatic spring migrants.

It's unlikely any single factor will emerge as the culprit for the Rusty Blackbird population free-fall. Most ecologists looking at the problem suspect a perfect storm of different stressors. Global climate change undoubtedly has a profound effect on



Male Rusty Blackbird in breeding plumage © Don Faulkner.





Rusty Blackbird in non-breeding plumage via Wikipedia.

any bird nesting in boreal wetlands. Changes in temperature and hydrologic cycles cause more frequent drying in periodic wetlands and degradation of permanent wetlands.

Habitat atrophy at every stage of the birds' annual migration cycle is certainly at play as well. Forests and wetlands in the southeastern United States are constantly threatened by development while the forested breeding grounds are subject to massive oil extraction projects that permanently degrade the landscape. While we are just now getting a picture of migration flyways and stopover sites, there's little question that those are also vulnerable, wherever they may be. Here in Michigan, lakeshore development, invasive species such as *Phragmites* in wetlands, and conversion of wildland to agricultural use are all factors in habitat loss.

Disease is another potential and frightening component of the mix. Rusty Blackbirds on the breeding grounds have shown high levels of mercury, a known stressor of immune systems. Identifying and isolating a disease in these birds will be a daunting task. Containing and treating it will be many times more challenging.

The Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz for 2015 begins on March 1. Last year 4,570 birders participated by submitting over

13,000 checklists of Rusty Blackbird sightings. Ideally both of those numbers will be even higher in 2015, and the data will be that much more valuable.

All experienced birders are encouraged to participate. All you need is an eBird account and the ability to identify Rusty Blackbirds accurately. If your blackbird identification skills are rusty, there's an ID guide on the Blitz webpage.

Cavalieri, who is also the Great Lakes Piping Plover recovery coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, says he dreams about spring migration during the long Michigan winters. "Rusty Blackbirds help me cope, since they migrate so early," he said on a frigid January day. Blackbird migration was only a few weeks away, and hopefully an army of Michigan birders and citizen scientists will be there to greet them.

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Kirby Adams ([kirby.adams@gmail.com](mailto:kirby.adams@gmail.com)) didn't take up birding until his 30s, but he's making up for lost time. He writes the birding column for the online travel blog, *National Parks Traveler*. Kirby lives in Lansing on breaks between birding trips.

# A Challenging Spring Season at Whitefish Point

BY CHRIS NERI AND NOVA MACKENTLEY

## Whitefish Point Bird Observatory Report

The Whitefish Point Bird Observatory (WPBO) is the longest-running institution of its kind in the Great Lakes. Founded more than three decades ago by a group of dedicated volunteers, WPBO has gathered a wealth of data about waterbird and raptor movements through the region. In 2016, WPBO will become a formal program of Michigan Audubon, which has housed the organization under its tax-exempt status since its inception.

The annual Spring Fling at Whitefish Point takes place April 24–26. The keynote speaker, Scott Weidensaul, is the co-founder of Project SNOWstorm—an effort to outfit Snowy Owls with satellite transmitters during the past two irruption years. Scott will also be leading bird walks during the event. Registration is now open at [www.wpbo.org](http://www.wpbo.org).

Each spring, the owl technicians of the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory (WPBO) attempt to monitor the number of migratory owls streaming through the Whitefish peninsula. The following is a summary of the spring 2014 season. To learn more about the research programs of WPBO, please visit [www.wpbo.org](http://www.wpbo.org).



Saw-whet Owl © Nova Mackentley.

**S**nowy, cold, exhausting, grueling, disappointing, brutal—these words defined the start of the 2014 spring owl banding season at Whitefish Point. As we progressed into April and May, the conditions did not change dramatically. There is simply no sugar-coating the fact that the lingering winter took its toll on the WPBO team's efforts to band migratory owls. We are confident that weather was a significant factor in last spring's capture results. We banded a total of 220 owls, including 191 Northern Saw-whets, 15 Boreals, 10 Long-eareds, and four Barreds. We also caught 16 previously-banded owls: 13 Saw-whets, one Long-eared, and two Barreds. Although we were expecting this to be a down year overall for owl movement, we were a bit shocked by how low the numbers were.

Since 2007, when the spring owl banding protocol was changed, the lowest spring total for the Whitefish Point banding station was 730 owls (all species) in 2012. The lowest seasonal number of Northern Saw-whet Owls (NSWO) banded since 2007 was 548 in 2009. Through WPBO's summer season owl banding, we know that NSWO were at the low end of their breeding cycle in 2008 and again in the summer of 2013. In the summer of 2008, only 60 juvenile NSWO were banded, compared to 538 the previous summer. In the summer of 2013, 59 juveniles were banded, compared to 480 in 2012. Based on this information we were expecting the spring 2014 results to be comparable to those in 2009, but the 191 banded this spring represent a 65% reduction from the 548 banded in spring 2009.

Although the number of previously banded NSWO was also down this spring, the 13 recaptures/encounters represent a



respectable 6% of the season's NSWOW. Nine of these were encounters of owls originally banded at other sites, and four were recaptures of birds banded at WPBO in previous years. One of these four from WPBO was banded in spring 2009, recaptured last spring, and then again this year. Two were banded as juveniles in the summers of 2010 and 2012, and the other was from spring 2013.

The number of Long-eared Owls (LEOW) banded during the spring 2014 (10) is the lowest total since 1997 and the third-lowest in the last 37 years. Although these are disappointing results, the team was very excited to recapture a LEOW banded in spring 2013. Recaptures of LEOW are extremely uncommon at migration sites, and a recapture was unexpected.

Another highlight was the 15 Boreal Owls (BOOW) banded in spring 2014. All of the BOOW this season were adults that, despite the harsh winter and spring, were in very good shape with lots of fat stores. Although BOOW occur in good numbers at Whitefish Point—when they are at the peak of their irruptive cycle, as they were last spring—they are never guaranteed to appear during down years. There is sometimes a bit of an echo that occurs the year after the peak years, which appears to be what was experienced in 2014, the seventh consecutive spring that BOOW have been banded at the Point.

The intense spring weather did provide some amazing experiences. All nine species of owls that occur at WPBO were seen this spring, including a Northern Hawk Owl perched atop the lighthouse. The drama of the freighters and their icebreaker escorts attempting to cross the frozen lake in April was incredible. The first westbound freighters stopped and spent the night

just off the Point. The next morning we watched as the icebreakers did loops around the freighters, breaking them free of the ice. Some ice remained well into May, and watching a Ruddy Turnstone and a Blackburnian Warbler feeding on beautiful chunks of blue ice was a bit surreal.

Despite the difficult spring season we experienced in 2014, we anticipate that the owl migration will return to its normal pattern this spring. February may have been the coldest on record for Michigan, but the ice depth on Lake Superior is not as severe as last year's. We expect Saw-whet Owl movements to rebound in their 4-5 year cycle, and we anticipate the same for Long-eared Owls. We do not predict Boreal Owls to make a huge appearance this year, but we always keep our fingers crossed for an appearance by a Great Gray or Northern Hawk-Owl. Every year is different, but there is one constant: spring owl migration at Whitefish Point is spectacular.

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Chris Neri is a 26-year veteran of the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, and Nova Mackently is returning for her 20th season. A lifelong birder, Chris became particularly fascinated with owls at the age of eight; since the spring of 1999 his main focus has been the owl migration at Whitefish Point. Nova's first season owl banding was in 2003 in Duluth, Minnesota. She recently spent three winters in Texas working with endangered Ocelots. Whitefish Point and its wonders have inspired much of Chris's and Nova's photography, which can be seen at [www.nightflightimages.com](http://www.nightflightimages.com).



Long-eared Owl © Chris Neri.

## We welcome the following, our newest Michigan Audubon members:

Marilyn Arace  
Chris Barden  
Sandy Crandell  
Wayne and Kris Determan  
Jennifer Ekstrom  
Mary Jane Garza  
Carol Giancola  
Bill and Sarah Gittlen  
Marylou Graham  
Kathleen Hemsall  
Mary C. Hewett  
Rachelle Hollabaugh  
M. Holtschlag  
Tracy Lintz

Charles Moore Family  
Jim and Patsy Mortimer  
John Munro  
Toni S. Nelligan  
Delia Niezguski  
Leo Paveglio  
Cory Ross  
Janis Smith  
Aryel Thornton  
Carolyn and Gary Tolliver  
Patrick Weingartz  
Mark Werner  
Nancy Yarsevich

# Book Review

## Trees of Eastern North America (Princeton Field Guides)

BY GIL NELSON, CHRISTOPHER J. EARLE, AND RICHARD SPELLENBERG

REVIEWED BY RACHELLE ROAKE

**P**icture this: You're out enjoying a group birding tour when suddenly someone shout-whispers: "Golden-winged Warbler!" You instantly follow the spotter's gaze, frantically scanning the wooded edge for a hint of movement—but where is it? The spotter whispers, "Red maple. Three-o'clock." You panic. Which tree is a red maple?

Does this dilemma sound familiar? Or perhaps you've vowed every year to learn your trees, but just haven't yet gotten around to it? Fortunately for you, a newly published tree identification guide may be just what the botanist ordered.

*Trees of Eastern North America* is an excellent resource for any birders who want to expand their naturalist knowledge. This guide covers 825 species found from Sault Ste. Marie to Corpus Christi and even the Florida Keys. Realistic colored illustrations, simple descriptions, and quick ID tips make this guide a must-have for anyone this side of the 100th meridian.

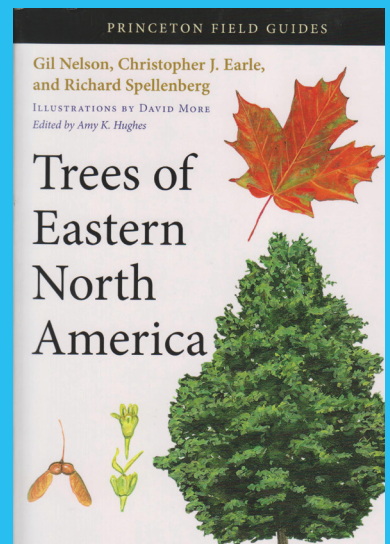
After a condensed yet thorough primer of tree biology, the book gets right to business with a fantastically helpful feature: a visual key for twigs and leaves. This visual key with colored illustrations is one of the greatest features I've come across in a botanical guide. As a beginning dabbler in botany, I slowly trudge through the foreign terminology of most plant keys. I reference the glossary, take random stabs in the dark, and then backtrack in an endless "Choose Your Own Adventure"-esque situation. This visual guide, although not complete, combines terminology with illustrations and compares 30–40 colorful twigs or leaves side by side on each page. Snap a picture, make a sketch, or just grab a leaf or twig, and this guide will steer any budding botanist in the right direction.

The format of the species accounts is simple, clean, and consistent, making this guide a pleasure to thumb through. The species name is followed by another fabulous feature of this guide: a Quick ID section. In one, all-inclusive sentence, the Quick ID section describes the most defining characteristics of the species. This is perfect for new botanists, as a full description can be overwhelming. In addition to the Quick ID, each species account includes field marks, habitat type, range map, and similar species. Opposite the species description is a full

page of brilliantly illustrated leaves, twigs, bark, flowers, and fruits. The illustrations of some species include helpful variations. For example, quaking aspen includes depictions of a twig with and without emerging catkins, fruiting catkins, and a splitting capsule. A few species include a leaf in both spring and autumn to illustrate the capacity for stunning fall color.

Given the size of this guide, it holds a remarkable amount of information. That said, this isn't the type of guide you carry in your pocket: it is perfect for the regional traveler or snowbird who is eager to learn more about his or her surroundings. Cozy up with this guide over the winter and you'll easily spot that golden-winged warbler next spring.

Rachelle Roake is the conservation science coordinator at Michigan Audubon and can be reached at [roake@michiganaudubon.org](mailto:roake@michiganaudubon.org).



Now available  
at the Michigan  
Audubon  
Bookstore  
for \$29.95.



Golden-winged Warbler © Skye Haas.



# Chapter Spotlight: Grand Rapids Audubon Club

BY KRISTIN PHILLIPS

**T**he Grand Rapids Audubon Club (GRAC) has a long and varied history, with the original club beginning in 1913 and closing during WWI. The second club, founded in 1926, lasted until 1943 when it was disbanded because of privations of WWII. The current GRAC, founded in 1951, has approximately 300 adult and Junior Audubon members.

GRAC's mission is to bring "together people to enjoy nature, especially wild birds. We seek to improve our natural environment and to advance nature education throughout west Michigan." This goal has led GRAC to host and sponsor educational programming and events such as the Birdathon and Nature Festival, hosted in cooperation with Aquinas College. Last year's event raised \$1,383 for nature education programs such as Audubon Adventures and included live animal presentations and nature walks. GRAC has also created a revitalized Junior Audubon program with new leadership, where young birders can take charge and assist with events such as the Birdathon, birdhouse building workshops, and nature tours.

As a chapter of Michigan Audubon, GRAC is dedicated to conservation. Its Conservation Committee recently persuaded the Grand Rapids airport to take steps to protect Snowy Owls near runways and is currently working to convince Grand Rapids to establish a Grassland Bird Area to conserve vulnerable grassland bird species. GRAC owns and operates the 80-acre Maher Wildlife Sanctuary in Barry County, a sanctuary of varied habitats from forest to wetlands. Scott Hutchings, president of GRAC, writes: "Volunteers from the club have worked hard to remove autumn olive, honeysuckle, and other invasive species, and have planted pin oak in our pocket prairie and burr oak in hopes of establishing an oak savannah in the future."

With extensive trails and wetland boardwalks, the Maher Wildlife Sanctuary provides excellent birding, with a nesting population of Yellow Warblers, Wood Ducks, and Screech Owls. Rusty Blackbirds and various warblers stop over during



Birdathon Trail © GRAC.



their migration season. For directions, maps, and a plant species list, see the recently launched GRAC website at [graud.org](http://graud.org).

Recent fieldtrips for GRAC include the New Year's Owl Trip during which an adult Bald Eagle was spotted. Upcoming trips include the Allegan State Game Area, Reed's Lake in East Grand Rapids, Saugatuck Dunes and Muskegon State Parks, Lake Michigan shoreline locations, the extensive Muskegon Wastewater property, a winter-bird field trip, an early spring Rail trip, and a Berrien County Warbler trip.

Kristin Phillips is the marketing and communications coordinator for Michigan Audubon, and can be reached at [kphillips@michiganaudubon.org](mailto:kphillips@michiganaudubon.org).

## Meetings:

GRAC's current meetings occur on the last Monday of the month at 7:00 p.m. at Orchard View Church, although later meetings will be held at Aquinas College. In September, GRAC will have a special presentation and birding outing with Greg Miller, birding consultant for the movie "The Big Year." Check [graud.org](http://graud.org) for updates, meeting program notes, and digital newsletters.

**Contact information:** [information@graud.org](mailto:information@graud.org)

**Website:** [www.http://graud.org/](http://www.http://graud.org/)

## Leaders:

Scott Hutchings, president  
John Chronowski, vice-president  
Matilyn Pikaart, secretary  
Norm Sevensma, treasurer  
Mary Austin, assistant treasurer

Board members: James Cross, Phil Willemstein, Cande Elchroth, Phil Pikaart

# Are You Ready to Get Rusty?

BY RACHELLE ROAKE

**R**usty Blackbirds or “rusties” are unique blackbirds known for their rusty-tipped plumage in the non-breeding season and their squeaky-hinge song. During the breeding season, rusties take on a more inconspicuous solid black (males) or slate gray (females) plumage that makes them difficult to distinguish from other blackbirds, including Brewer’s Blackbird, Common Grackle, Red-winged Blackbird and Brown-headed Cowbird. Rusties pose a serious identification challenge (especially in flight), and as a result they are often lumped into a “blackbird” category. These commonly overlooked blackbirds migrate through Michigan in large numbers during the spring and fall on their way to and from their breeding grounds in the coniferous wetland forests of northern North America. Rusties make a pit stop at a variety of habitats featuring shallow water such as flooded forests, agricultural fields, ditches, or shrubby wetland edges.



Female Rusty Blackbird © Laval Ray.

Tricky identification and a limited migration window have led to a poor understanding of Rusty Blackbirds, but one thing is for certain—their numbers have declined steeply in recent decades—more severely than that of any other once-common land bird. In 2014, the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group, in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Vermont Center for Ecostudies, eBird, and many other state, federal, and local partners, launched a three-year Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz that challenged birders to scour the landscape during Rustie’s northward migration. Between March 1 and June 15, 4,750 birders submitted 13,400 checklists containing Rusty Blackbird observations to eBird, a hugely successful first season that has allowed conservationists to start looking at potential Rusty Blackbird migratory hotspots, habitat use, and potential migratory pathways.

It’s easy to participate in the Blitz: bird as you normally do during the Blitz window and submit data to eBird.org using the “Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz” observation. Target dates

for Michigan are March 1 to April 15, which may be suitable for the southern Lower Peninsula; however, rusties may move into the northern Lower and Upper Peninsula between late April and the first week of May. Please be vigilant throughout the entire spring migration period as weather conditions may cause the birds to migrate earlier or later than expected, so be attentive. You can bird anywhere within the state, but this year there’s an emphasis on revisiting areas of interest identified from 2014 data to assess the consistency of Rusty Blackbird habitat use and migratory timing. Check out the Areas of Interest map for 2015 on Michigan Audubon’s website under Citizen Science.

Last year, Michigan birders submitted 871 eBird checklists, and this year Michigan Audubon is challenging birders to double that, and is sponsoring a contest with several Rusty-themed prizes and one grand prize: a shiny new pair of binoculars. Prizes will be awarded in categories such as most checklists submitted, most Rusty Blackbirds seen, most checklists submitted at an Area of Interest, and most hours spent surveying.

Visit [rustyblackbird.org/outreach/migration-blitz](http://rustyblackbird.org/outreach/migration-blitz) to sign up for the contest or email Rachelle Roake to learn more.

We hope you’ll join us to Blitz for Blackbirds this spring.

Rachelle Roake is the conservation science coordinator at Michigan Audubon and can be reached at [rroake@michiganaudubon.org](mailto:rroake@michiganaudubon.org).



Male Rusty Blackbird © Keith Williams.



Male Rusty Blackbird © Keith Williams.





Red-winged Blackbird © William Norton.

Audubon knew what he saw  
And knew what he knew  
In the marshes of Michigan  
He drew a Blackbird flying  
With a dash of red  
Where the wings were  
And where they whirled  
Over the green reed  
There was no need for a word  
Just to talk to a bird  
So he didn't talk  
But walked all over Michigan  
Looking at the black bird  
With a dash of red  
Across its moving wings

# Announcements



## Calendar

### March

- 28 **Spring Bluebird Festival**  
Muskegon

### April

- 24–26 **Spring Fling,**  
Whitefish Point Bird Observatory,  
Paradise
- 25 **Thornapple Woodpecker  
Festival**  
Middleville

### May

- 8–17 **Biggest Week in American  
Birding**  
Magee Marsh, NW Ohio
- 14–17 **Tawas Point Birding Festival**  
East Tawas
- 15 **Kirtland's Warbler tours begin**  
Grayling
- 22–24 **Warblers on the Water**  
Beaver Island
- 28–31 **Leelanau Birding Festival**  
Suttons Bay



#### Sunrise Coast: Home to the Next Birding Trail

On May 2, the Sunrise Coast Birding Trail will be dedicated at three points in Michigan—Oscoda, Alpena, and Mackinaw City—by members of AuSable Valley Audubon, Thunder Bay Audubon, and the Straits Area Audubon chapters. This new birding trail is approximately 150 miles long, beginning at the AuSable River mouth in Oscoda and travelling north to the Mackinac Bridge. The Sunrise Coast Birding Trail will connect with the already established Saginaw Bay Birding Trail ([saginawbaybirding.org](http://saginawbaybirding.org)) which runs 142 miles from Port Austin at the tip of Michigan's thumb to East Tawas.

Peggy Ridgway, initiator of the Sunrise Coast Birding Trail project, believes the new trail will increase birding opportunities along the coast. The trail will feature 27 birding sites, some of which are part of nine state parks and various designated Important Bird Areas. The sites encompass a variety of great birding habitats, from inland lakes and Lake Huron to streams and woodlands. This new trail represents a collaboration between the Department of Natural Resources, AuSable Valley Audubon, Thunder Bay Audubon, and the Straits Area Audubon chapters, Michigan Audubon, the U.S. Forest Service, Consumers Energy, the Northeast Michigan Council of Governments, and the other conservation groups.

Trail maps will be available after the dedication on May 2, and the website for the trail will be coming soon.

#### Spring Is in the Air

A sure sign of spring is the Michigan Bluebird Society's Spring Bluebird Festival. This event travels to different locations each year and this year will be held in Muskegon at the Collegiate Hall located on the campus of Muskegon Community College. This free event includes a program with expert speakers, the Bluebird Expo, which features all types of bluebird gear, themed gifts and apparel, a kid's activity area, and a nature hike. A lunch will be served for the nominal fee of \$7.50 for adults and \$5 for children 16 and under. There is also an optional dinner being held on Friday March 27 at the Lake House Waterfront Grille.

For more event details and to pre-register, visit the Michigan Bluebird Society at [michiganbluebirds.org/festival](http://michiganbluebirds.org/festival).



Red-headed Woodpecker © Daniel Behm.

Scott Weidensaul



### Scott Weidensaul Keynote at Spring Fling

The 26th Annual Spring Fling will occur April 24–26 at the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory (WPBO) in Paradise. The event includes guided walks, workshops, and a banquet with keynote speaker Scott Weidensaul, author and co-founder of Project SNOWstorm. Scott's presentation will be about the work that has been done on Project SNOWstorm, which began with the irruption of Snowy Owls in the winter of 2013–2014 and continued this winter with the second invasion of the species. Scott will also lead a special guided hike on the WPBO trails on both Saturday and Sunday mornings. Participation in Scott's birding hikes is limited and includes a fee separate from the event fee.

There will be a pre-event tour, Birding Paradise, held on Friday April 24 and a post-event tour, Searching for Spruce Grouse, on Sunday April 26. These tours have a fee in addition to the event registration. If you arrive in Paradise early on Friday, there will be a pasty dinner held at the Paradise United Methodist Church from 3–6 p.m. Proceeds from the dinner go to the church. Be sure to check out the Owl Roost Gift Shop for all your WPBO birding apparel needs.

Spring Fling registration is now open online and can be accessed at [wpbo.org/node/317](http://wpbo.org/node/317). The fee for the event is \$70 and includes the banquet and keynote. Online registration will close on April 19.

### Woodpecker Festival Celebrates Fifth Anniversary

The Paul Henry-Thornapple Trail provides access to the wooded areas along the Thornapple River for walkers and bikes, and is a great place to go birding. The trail travels over the backwater area that was created by the Middleville dam. This flooding of the riparian forest killed many hardwood trees, which created the perfect nesting habitat for Red-headed Woodpeckers.

Five years ago, birders in the Middleville area wanted to showcase the trail and the great birding habitat through which it passes so they created the Thornapple Woodpecker Festival. This is a great location to see numerous red-heads, and possibly all of the six other occurring woodpecker species of Michigan as well. Waterfowl of various species and marsh birds are tallied at the festival. The forested area provides a good location to see early spring migrants. This is one of the few festivals that provide birding by golf cart along the paved trail, which allows those with ambulatory challenges to go birding. For a small fee you can also rent kayaks or tandem canoes to see the birds from a different perspective.

More information on the April 25th event is available at [woodpeckerfest.webs.com](http://woodpeckerfest.webs.com) or on the Festival's Facebook page ([facebook.com/thornapple-woodpecker-festival](https://facebook.com/thornapple-woodpecker-festival)).

### Forest Service Cancels 2015 Kirtland's Warbler Tours

The Kirtland's Warbler tours that have annually run out of the Mio Forest Service Station will not take place in 2015 due to a staffing shortage. This means that the Michigan Audubon tours operated from Grayling will be the only tours offered this year. Over the last five years, the number of participants on the Grayling tours has increased, and we expect that this year the numbers will jump up again.

Michigan Audubon tours will again meet at the Forest Interpretive Center located at Hartwick Pines State Park (HPSP). We moved the starting location to the park in 2014, and it worked well for us and the HPSP. Participants usually see Evening Grosbeaks at the Interpretive Center feeders. If you're interested, tours meet daily at 7 a.m. from May 15 through July 4. On weekends and holidays there is also a tour at 11 a.m. No registration is required unless you have more than five people in your group. To make a group reservation, e-mail [wendy@michiganaudubon.org](mailto:wendy@michiganaudubon.org) or call 517-580-7364.

### Beaver Island and Warblers on the Water

As the largest island in Lake Michigan, Beaver Island is a critical stopover site for migratory birds flying up the Lake Michigan shoreline on their way to northern breeding grounds. Many species stay to nest on the island. The Beaver Island Birding Trail traverses more than 12,000 acres of state and township lands and four Little Traverse Conservancy preserves. The trail includes examples of each of the island's diverse habitats along more than 100 miles of roads.

On May 23–24, 2015, the Beaver Island Birding Trail hosts the newest Michigan birding event, Warblers on the Water. This weekend is specifically designed for all levels of birders. In addition to field trips around Beaver Island guided by expert field guides, birding presentations and social time will take place on Saturday. Check out [beaverislandbirdingtrail.org](http://beaverislandbirdingtrail.org) for more information.

Getting to the event is fairly easy but may require advanced preparations. If you plan to take your car to the island, you will need reservations on the Beaver Island car ferry. If you plan to walk during your time on the island, you do not need ferry reservations. Be sure to have binoculars ready on your ride to the island, because you may encounter water species and migrating songbirds while on the water. Contact the Beaver Island Boat Company for more information about getting to the island and current rates. There's air service to the island if you'd rather not go on the water: contact Fresh Air Aviation or Island Airways for flight information.

### Michigan Audubon's New Website

Check out our new website at [michiganaudubon.org](http://michiganaudubon.org). It had been five years since our last redesign. We hope you find the new site easier to navigate. Also check out the event calendar for the many bird-related events. We'd love to hear your feedback: write to [kphillips@michiganaudubon.org](mailto:kphillips@michiganaudubon.org) or post on our Facebook page.

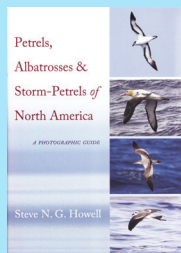
Dated Material

# Michigan Audubon Bookstore

*Your purchase from the bookstore supports Michigan Audubon's educational programs.*

Every so often Michigan Audubon needs to clear some titles out of the Nature Bookstore. The following books are on sale. Please note that there may be only one copy of each of these titles. To request a title, please call Wendy at 517-580-7364. Member discount does not apply to items on sale.

Information or phone orders **517-580-7364**



## Petrels, Albatrosses & Storm-Petrels of North America

by Steve N. G. Howell

~~\$45.00~~ **SALE: \$36.00 (hardcover)**

Released in 2012, this book contains detailed species accounts of the seabirds, which describe flight, plumage, distribution and other useful identification information. A must-have if you're heading out on an ocean voyage. Additional shipping charges are required for this large volume.

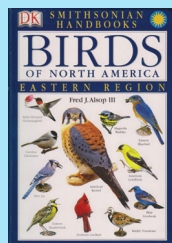


## National Geographic Bird Coloration

by Geoffrey E. Hill

~~\$27.50~~ **SALE: \$19.25 (hardcover)**

This is possibly the first book to explain in great detail why birds have the colors that they do. The book contains over 200 color photographs showing some of the most beautifully colored birds.

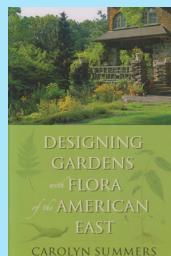


## Birds of North America Eastern Region

by Fred J. Alsop III

~~\$30.00~~ **SALE: \$22.50**

Published in 2001, this field guide is stylized in the same manner as other DK guides and uses the old taxonomy of birds (starting with loons). It is still an excellent guide but one that you'll want to keep at the house or in the car because it's quite hefty. It includes 706 species.



## Designing Gardens with Flora of the American East

by Carolyn Summers

~~\$23.95~~ **SALE: \$19.16**

A great guide for native gardening that includes information on gardening for wildlife and hints on shopping for native plants, trees, and shrubs. It includes a section on showy natives to replace common invasive plants.

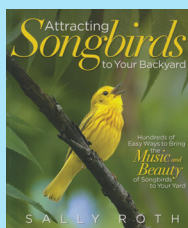


## Ready Set Grow!

Edited by Margaret Parrish

~~\$12.99~~ **SALE: \$11.04 (hardcover)**

This DK guide contains quick and easy gardening projects for children. Many projects require adult supervision but will get your kids excited about growing their own food.



## Attracting Songbirds to Your Backyard

by Sally Roth

~~\$22.99~~ **SALE: \$18.39**

This book includes lots of tips, tricks, and information on birds, their songs, and how to make your yard more attractive for them. It is part natural history, part field guide, and all useful content that will benefit the feathered visitors to your yard.

## Order online, by phone, e-mail, or mail

**Online.** michiganaudubonstore.com (Discount code: MIAudubon14)

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**By mail.** Send name, address, phone number, and payment to Michigan Audubon Bookstore, PO Box 15249, Lansing, MI 48901. Prepayment includes list price + 6% sales tax + \$4.25 postage and handling for the first item + \$.85 for each additional item.

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