

# Jack Pine *Warbler*

JULY-AUGUST: Inadvertent Bird Refuges in Michigan ■ Establishing Purple Martin Colonies ■ Record Owl Banding Season ■ Hawk Count Report ■ Spring Waterbird Recap ■ Spring Season Rare Bird Sightings



# Jack Pine Warbler

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## Cover Photo ■ Marbled Godwits

Photographer: Marilyn Keigley

Marilyn Keigley is a retired professor from Ferris State University and enjoys nature photography, especially birds and snow crystals. These Marbled Godwits were photographed on the south end of Wilderness State Park, July 5, 2013. According to Marilyn, there were four Godwits along with Common and Caspian Terns near the rocks along the shore. She enjoys learning the scientific details that are behind the photos and has given or shared photographs with Michigan Audubon, Michigan Botanical Club, Michigan Nature Association, Leelanau Conservancy, and other nature environmentally-focused groups.

*Thank you to Marilyn Keigley for submitting this wonderful image for the 2017 Jack Pine Warbler cover photo contest.*

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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.

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# From the Executive Director

## Giving Back to Birds and the Future of the Tawas Point Birding Festival

2017 marked the Tawas Point Birding Festival's 12th year. More than a decade ago, the inception of this event was inspired and fueled largely by the energy, vision, and dedication of one woman, Peggy Ridgway, and has been sustained by her, her local Michigan Audubon Chapter, AuSable Valley Audubon, and the staff of Michigan Audubon. In fact, about 50 volunteers connected with AuSable Valley Audubon work either behind the scenes or on the leading lines of guiding tours and working tables to make this event a success, and they do so with good humor, a seamlessness in working together, and a steadfast commitment to this event and what it offers visitors and the community.

At the root, what is remarkable about this event is how purely it aligns with our mission to connect birds and people for the benefit of both. At least, we humans benefit greatly from the sights, sounds, and experiential learning of attending if we have our eyes and ears open. Tawas Point State Park boasts two successful Purple Martin colonies, a plethora of warblers passing through with perfect timing for the event, numerous trails great for birding, and opportunities to see and learn about less common birds (this year, we were graced by a Painted Bunting and Fork-tailed Flycatcher). The list goes on.

I go back to the tail-end of that mission — for the benefit of both — and think often about how we are giving back. As I said to banquet attendees prior to our

keynote speaker's presentation on bird-friendly communities, what birds give us is essentially free. And their presence is an incredible gift. What are we giving back? It's an important question to keep returning to. We can find big and small ways to collectively do so by engaging in activities that make up a bird-friendly community and reach beyond the reliable tenant of "reduce, reuse, recycle."

Beyond the basics, we can raise our bird-friendly living standards by doing any number of additional, meaningful things:

- Plant native plants and remove ornamentals and invasives from our yards.
- Turn off outdoor lights — particularly during migration.
- Avoid using pesticides.
- Feed the birds and promote small and local businesses doing so.
- Limit the use and purchase of plastics.
- Drink bird-friendly coffee.
- Put screens on the outside of the glass, place decals on or hang strings in windows to prevent bird collisions.
- Buy organic.
- Keep cats indoors. Cats kill up to 3.7 billion birds annually in the United States — this is a true crisis for birds and our native ecology.

For what birds give us, what they represent, and simply in and of their own right — practicing these things is the least we can do, isn't it? Imagine if birding or birdwatching and conservation practices went hand-in-hand; that's what organizations like Michigan Audubon are



striving to support in our programs and events. We want to continue providing opportunities to watch and learn about birds while simultaneously offering education to create a stronger team of conservationists supporting the needs and well-being of birds in our state.

So, what can we expect for the next Tawas Point Birding Festival? Well, in 2016, a few staff members met with core volunteers who work with us to organize the event: Peggy Ridgway, Sue Duncan, and Jean Howard, the current president of AuSable Valley Audubon. We talked about the sustainability of this event on an annual basis, and how scaling back the event to hosting it every-other year would ensure its sustainability, and that we can continue offering a very full experience for attendees and keep this event growing in positive ways.

During alternate years, we at Michigan Audubon will be busy promoting Birdathon at both Whitefish Point Bird Observatory as well as a statewide Birdathon fundraiser for all the chapters of Michigan Audubon throughout the state to participate in. Stay tuned for future Birdathon updates and details, and mark your calendars for the next Tawas Point Birding Festival: May 16-18, 2019.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather Good". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Heather Good, Executive Director

# Serendipitous Sanctuaries

## Inadvertent Refuges for Birds

BY KIRBY ADAMS



A Grasshopper Sparrow taking refuge at Gerald R. Ford International Airport in July 2014. © Caleb Putnam

It's a cold and windswept landscape that the Snowy Owl surveys. Flat and treeless, the land is hard and rocky with just a few sparse plants. A few other small birds are the only animals to be seen. It's a barren landscape, and that's just how the owl likes it.

An apt description of the tundra, no doubt, but what if I'd added that the only thing visible on the horizon was a line of taxiing 737s? Yes, it's an airport in Michigan in January. It's not an accident that Snowy Owls are so frequently found at airports, as no other landscape this far south so accurately mimics the tundra that the owls are comfortably familiar with. Birds are not like people who take pleasure in new experiences and unfamiliar surroundings. They're creatures of habit, something worth remembering for the conservationist and the birder.

The affinity for airports by owls and various other birds is not without consequence. During the series of Snowy Owl irruptions over the past six winters some airports were shooting owls in the name of plane safety. A crash in New York caused by geese was fresh on the public's mind, and there's no doubt a bird as large as a Snowy Owl hitting a windshield or a jet intake could be disastrous. The love of owls won the day, however, and the practice was mostly stopped at local airports in favor of trapping and removing the birds.

Those incidents notwithstanding, airports do create something of a winter safe haven for tundra birds and summer refuge for grassland species such as Horned Larks, Grasshopper Sparrows, and Dickcissels. Undoubtedly the land would be best in a pristine natural state, but we need airports and they aren't going away anytime soon.

We also need, for the time being, power plants. Coal-fired plants are stalwart polluters and even the comparatively "clean" nuclear facilities release enormous amounts of water vapor, which is a greenhouse contributor, not to mention the radioactive waste. Still, birders have a love/hate relationship with power plants. Go to Marquette in the winter and the outflow by the plant on Lake Superior might be the only liquid water you see outside. That fact isn't lost on ducks and gulls that flock there to feast on fish. During the record-breaking frigid winters between 2013 and 2015, open water was hard to come by anywhere in the state and power plants were providing much needed havens for loons, grebes, and ducks. Birders had a field day, literally, ticking off all of the winter waterfowl in one field of view through binoculars. Most people would agree that power plants are not typically categorized as eco-friendly



In January 2016, a Wildlife Services biologist captured a snowy owl at the Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport. When released, the owl carried a U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) federal leg band and was the first participant in a three-year research study in cooperation with the USGS Bird Banding Lab. (USDA photo by Aaron Bowden)

enterprises, but sometimes there's an inadvertent benefit to our seeming dependence on keeping our electrical gadgets charged. Hopefully, the opportunity to get a close look at a Red-throated Loon and Surf Scoter inspires some birders to go beyond the binoculars and take a look at the problems of avian botulism, invasive carp, and lakeshore development. Some may even take a moment to ponder the irony of a coal-fired power plant providing refuge for ducks in winter while belching emissions into the atmosphere that ultimately are destroying the breeding ground of these waterfowl in the arctic.



A male Dickcissel sings on a fence at the antenna farm in Monroe County. © Myles McNally

Inadvertent conservation is also happening at an antenna farm in Monroe County. Just a mile away from the birding hotspot of Point Mouillee State Game Area is a plot of land devoted to a half dozen large communication antennas. With their attendant guy-wires and small support buildings, the antennas occupy a quarter square mile of treeless land, fenced against entrance by people and all but the most enterprising non-flying predators. This is easily the most popular, and perhaps the most reliable spot to see Bobolinks in southern Michigan. The property remains largely unmowed, other than the fence lines, until after breeding season, making it a reasonable accidental preserve for grassland birds. Horned Larks, Dickcissels, Savannah Sparrows, and Eastern Meadowlarks join the Bobolinks for the prairie birding experience, provided you don't mind looking through a fence in the shadow of giant antennas.

Military bases are recognized nationwide for providing inadvertent refuge services. Camp Grayling occupies an enormous amount of land in the northern Lower Peninsula that is largely wild. Scoping an Upland Sandpiper while tanks drive past and A-10 Warthogs fire their 30mm cannons at 80 rounds-per-second in the distance is a surreal experience.

Forest habitat is also well-protected at Fort Custer in Calhoun and Kalamazoo Counties, adjacent to the Fort Custer State Recreation Area, which was originally part of the federal land. A proposed missile defense site could be installed there, pending an environmental impact study and green light for the project. Cerulean Warbler habitat will likely not take priority over national defense, but that's part of the package with the incidental conservation aspect of a military base.

In some of these situations, the conservation value of the site is debatable and it may be of much more value to birders than birds. In the case of the antenna farm, though, any spot that harbors grassland nesters has to be welcomed. Unspoiled grasslands are nearly non-existent in Michigan, forcing these birds to eke out a breeding season in a hay field before it's mowed in June. Measuring breeding production at the antenna farm would likely make it, anecdotally at least, a viable grassland refuge. Again, it is by no means a substitute for a managed grassland preserve with native prairie plants. We need as much wilderness and as many managed refuges as possible, but the public appetite for refuges is variable and the land for such is scarce. The antenna farm is there now – with Bobolinks. Birders and conservationists alike need to embrace what we have to its fullest while working to always protect more land and find more birds.



A male Bobolink perched on a teasel plume. © Daniel Behm

*[Editor's Note: The most popular accidental wildlife refuges of all, wastewater facilities, were not forgotten. Read all about them in the next issue of Jack Pine Warbler.]*



Kirby Adams ([kirby.adams@gmail.com](mailto:kirby.adams@gmail.com)) writes the birding column for the online travel blog, National Parks Traveler. Kirby lives in Eaton Rapids.

# Michigan Purple Martin Conservation: Lansing Beginnings

BY RACHELLE ROAKE, CONSERVATION SCIENCE COORDINATOR

On a clear, sunny day in early May, Michigan Audubon installed the first wave of new colonies for Purple Martins in the Lansing area. Under the guidance of experienced Purple Martin landlords Penny (the brains) and Rick (the brawn) Briscoe of the Kalamazoo area, Michigan Audubon's Rachelle Roake and Diane Huhn prepared for a day-long lesson in Purple Martin colony installation.

Packed tightly in a pickup truck among the equipment, the team headed to the first prime location: the Lake Lansing county boat launch. Rick set to work assembling the winch system, which allows the martin house to glide with ease down to the ground for monitoring and maintenance. Penny emphasized the importance of providing a mix of housing options for Purple Martins to choose from. "It's likely that these birds prefer to nest in the type of houses they themselves grew up in: if the bird hatched in an apartment-style house, they will seek out that style and the same goes for gourd-raised birds," explained Penny as she hung a gourd below an apartment-style house.



Penny Briscoe discusses different types of Purple Martin housing with Michigan Audubon's Rachelle Roake while prepping a newly installed housing at Lake Lansing.

Like a sign from Mother Nature, a sudden aerial chatter caused everyone to drop what they were doing and search the skies. Circling high above was a jet-black, iridescent, male Purple Martin. Soon joined by ten others, that first male appeared to be monitoring our progress, curious to see what new construction



was happening in his territory. Spirits were high as the group cranked up the ivory housing unit. Sleek and modern with clean lines (I think I saw stainless steel appliances!); what self-respecting Purple Martin wouldn't want to reside there?

While we humans appreciate houses that are visually appealing, there is a mantra that is more applicable to Purple Martins:

Location, location, location. When selecting sites for the Lansing Purple Martin houses, we sought out partners with properties featuring yawning swooping space, a water source within five miles, and most importantly, an active building nearby. Another important characteristic is the presence of an established Purple Martin colony, although in the Lansing area these are proving hard to find.



Rachelle Roake poses with Penny and Rick Briscoe at the newly installed Purple Martin house along the Grand River in Lansing.

The Lake Lansing county boat launch, managed by the Ingham County Parks Department, ticked all of the boxes plus a bonus feature: the high amount of public traffic means hundreds of people will see the birds and an example of properly sited and managed housing. Other Lansing partners include Woldumar Nature Center and the City of Lansing, which both provide excellent sites with native plant gardens (aka “Purple Martin grocery stores”) and public outreach opportunities.



Penny Briscoe and Rachel Roake speak with Program Director Dan Auer while Rick Briscoe works to move an existing Purple Martin house to a more conducive location at Woldumar Nature Center in Lansing.

What is crystal clear from this experience is the importance of people in the quest to save the Michigan Purple Martin population. Not only are Purple Martins entirely dependent upon dedicated individuals to provide safe, properly-sited housing to nest in, the population is dependent upon communities to welcome them back into our neighborhoods, natural areas, and public spaces. Michigan Audubon’s Purple Martin conservation effort is focused on identifying local colonies, then expanding community-wide support around those population centers. This first colony installation is just the beginning of our work to grow the network of Michigan Purple Martin landlords and with it, grow the dwindling population of Purple Martins as well.



Rachelle Roake is the Conservation Science Coordinator at Michigan Audubon. Rachelle oversees our Purple Martin conservation efforts and encourages Purple Martin landlords to contact her to register their colony.

## Thank You

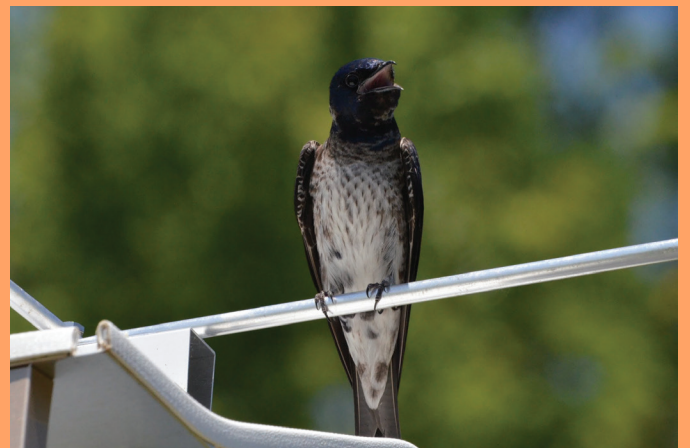
Michigan Audubon is grateful to Penny and Rick Briscoe for their guidance and assistance. Thank you also to Woldumar Nature Center, Ingham County Parks, and the City of Lansing for working with us to make Lansing a more bird-friendly community and allowing us to place these houses at strategic locations for Purple Martins and at locations where they can be enjoyed by the public. Thank you to all of our generous project donors and to the Purple Martin Conservation Association for providing us with a discount on wonderfully built houses and equipment. An additional gourd colony was installed at Michigan Audubon's Capital City Bird Sanctuary with a generous grant from the Capital Region Community Foundation.

To learn more about Michigan Audubon's Purple Martin Conservation efforts and/or to register a colony, please visit:

[www.michiganaudubon.org/our-conservation-impact/puma/](http://www.michiganaudubon.org/our-conservation-impact/puma/)



A Purple Martin expresses interest in the house erected at Lake Lansing in May, 2017.



A subadult male Purple Martin sings from the perch of the house at the Lake Lansing boat launch. There are several existing colonies in the area.

# Spring Season at WPBO

## One for the Record Books

BY SKYE HAAS, WPBO SPRING FIELD ORNITHOLOGIST



A Northern Harrier glides along the beach near the waterbird shack at Whitefish Point. © Skye Haas

Well another successful spring at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory is on the books! I've always loved spending time at the Point in the spring. When I was just a kid with an old pair of beat-up Bushnells, my grandmother brought me up on a Detroit Audubon weekend field trip (the infamous "bus stuck on Vermilion Road" incident!). I remember walking up to the Owl's Roost as a kettle of hawks spun overhead and seeing written on the "good bird board" species such as Great Gray Owl, Red-throated Loon and Harlequin Duck. How my mind reeled at the thought that I had come to such a magical paradise for birds. Already woozy from an afternoon watching a displaying Spruce Grouse in the jack pines (it took a while for the tow-truck to arrive and get our bus unstuck), I knew right then that watching migrating birds in north woods of Lake Superior was something I just absolutely loved!

Over the years, I've come and gone from Whitefish Point numerous times, some seasons as a staff counter or frequent volunteer, other years barely fitting in a quick visit. But this spring may be one of my favorites yet in my almost 30 years of being a Whitefish birder. Our crew was a group of solid professionals. Louie Dombroski, Gary Palmer, and I are all voracious birders and we joined veteran owl banders and Paradise residents Nova Mackentley and Chris Neri and proceeded to have a truly fantastic spring, and it was one for the record books!

And I'm not just spinning out superlatives either. It literally was one for the record books. Several species tallied in high-end totals, with a few species such as Canada Goose and Long-eared Owls having their highest totals ever

recorded. I'll let my WPBO comrades detail their count totals in their respective articles in this issue of the *Jack Pine Warbler*. Instead, I'd like to discuss a few of the other record makers from the spring, those delightful unexpected gold nuggets that are the treats of conducting a season-long migration count, the rarities! Simply put, this was one of the most exciting springs ever at Whitefish Point for rare birds. Normally we think of south and west winds being most advantageous for both spring migration and propelling rarities our way. But with



the extensive run of north and east winds we frequently dealt with, I was surprised that we just kept getting unusual birds this season. It started off mid-April with an unseasonably early Pacific Loon flying by and though it shocks me to type this, the annual arrival of a Eurasian Tree Sparrow to Whitefish Point. But then things started to get a bit crazier. On April 22, a Neotropic Cormorant flew past the waterbird shack! Woohoo! Both a Whitefish Point and Upper Peninsula first record! Exciting for the lucky few who saw it, tragic for the rest of us not present. But hey, that's how it goes, and you temper your bummed-out self with a little existential koan that there are more goodies on the horizon. You hope...

A few Swainson's Hawks in the days to follow along with a brief visit of the Point's second record of a Tufted Titmouse helped build the excitement, (quit chuckling southlanders! That's a good bird up here!), but on May 2, a Golden-crowned Sparrow was discovered at the feeders! Another great bird, and this time enjoyed not only by all the staff but by numerous visiting birders. And then things started to get truly nutty. The day after finding the sparrow, the same birder re-discovered the Neotropic

Above Center: Spruce Grouse © Skye Haas



This Golden-crowned Sparrow was located by Joe Kurtz on May 2 at the WPBO feeding station behind the Owl's Roost Gift Shop. The bird stayed for several days, much to the delight of numerous birders near and far. © Skye Haas

Cormorant at the mouth of the nearby Tahquamenon River! The cormorant excelled at playing hide and seek with birders for the next several days, before a handful of birders finally got some diagnostic looks and photos of the bird. As they observed the cormorant, they proceeded to get an unbelievable shock as a drake Garganey from Eurasia swam right by their location! This incredible bird is a major rarity anywhere in North America. And to have one right near Whitefish Point really had never even been conceived as a possibility! It was a handsome bird and for two days, treated many dozens of birders who trekked from far and wide to see this duck! Surely it was the bird of the season and a dang good one.

We were happy and satiated, knowing that this would be one of those legendary Whitefish Point weekends. We continued on with the season snagging a few more notable sightings like Parasitic Jaeger and another Pacific Loon. But much to our surprise, we got another big rarity on May 19 and 20 when an adult Slaty-backed Gull was discovered loafing at the tip of the Point with other gulls!

With only a handful of records for Michigan, this bird was not even on our “expected to happen one day” short lists as Whitefish Point is just not a great place to hold flocks of large gulls.

Late May is actually our traditional rarity season and we felt greedy even wondering if there were anymore surprise visitors headed our way. Franklin's Gull, Wilson's Phalarope, Le Conte's Sparrow, Marbled Godwits, and a few more Jaegers were fun, and one lucky birder got a look at a delightful Yellow-throated Warbler. As the count drew to a close, another trio of rarities came together to wrap the season up on a high note. A flock of four Eurasian Tree Sparrows were joined by a White-winged Dove at the feeders, and out on the beach a Lark Sparrow



A drake Garganey was spotted at the mouth of the Tahquamenon River while birders were viewing another very rare bird for the area, a Neotropic Cormorant. The Garganey was a second state record. © Skye Haas

foraged among the heathers and lichens. But there was still one more mind-bender hurdling our way, one they call a “mega.” (Continued on p. 8)

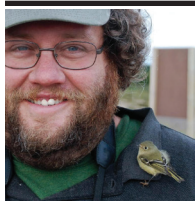


Skye Haas scans the skies near the waterbird shack at WPBO at Spring Fling with Carol Goodman and Russell Conard of Dunkadoo.



A Shiny Cowbird was spotted at WPBO shortly after the close of the spring season on June 3. This was a first state record. © Skye Haas

On the morning of June 3, as we were about to have a meeting of the Michigan Bird Records Committee, a couple of committee members were watching the feeders when a funny looking blackbird dropped in. Much to their shock it turned out to be Michigan's first state record of a Shiny Cowbird. What?!?! This bird is a rare visitor to say the least. It's range is primarily in South America and the Caribbean and only barely reaches into the US in south Florida! The bird thankfully cooperated and showed well all that day and the next, and only delayed the start of our meeting by an hour! I might add this is the second time a first state record was found by committee members about to hold a meeting, the first time being Michigan's first Cave Swallow back in the 90s. What a great bird to end the season on, especially considering it was a life-bird for the entire staff! I'll come back to Whitefish Point again in the future, but on those days when the waterbird count is slow and folks start chatting more than they scan through their scopes, I know sooner than later, a recanting of the amazing spring in 2017 will certainly be had.



Skye Haas is the Spring Ornithologist at WPBO. An avid birder and naturalist, Skye landed his first waterbird counting position at Whitefish Point over a decade ago. Since then, Skye has worked as a contract biologist for numerous organizations across the US and has his own guide service, Borealis Birding.

## Thank You to Our Event Volunteers

Michigan Audubon would like to take this opportunity to thank the many volunteers who made our spring event season a success!

### Spring Fling

Dea Armstrong  
John Baumgartner  
Mike Bishop  
Vince Cavaliere  
Mike Clemens  
Louie Dombroski  
Josh Haas  
Kara Haas  
Skye Haas

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Chris Neri  
Gary Palmer  
Bob Pettit  
Mary Wise

Additional thanks to sponsor Wayne Olivier of Wells Fargo Advisors. Additional event support provided by Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum, Whitefish Township, Chippewa Nature Center, and Wild Birds Unlimited of Grosse Pointe.

### Cerulean Warbler Weekend

John Chenault  
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Agnes Karas  
Anne Klein  
Doug Klein

Maeve Klein  
Derrick Kooistra  
Sarah Nelson  
Caleb Putnam

### Tawas Point Birding Festival

Please see the back cover for a full listing of Tawas Point Birding Festival sponsors and volunteers.

## Upcoming Events

### July

11 Digiscoping Workshop | Okemos, MI

14-17 National Audubon Convention | Park City, UT

### July 31-August 5

AOS-SCO Conference | East Lansing, MI

### August

1 No Family Left Indoors: Intro to Birding | Hastings, MI

### September

16 Michigan Audubon Gala | Jackson, MI

### October

14-15 CraneFest | Bellevue, MI

Visit [www.michiganaudubon.org/calendar](http://www.michiganaudubon.org/calendar) to stay abreast of additional birding events.

# A Record Owl Banding Season at WPBO

BY CHRIS NERI, WPBO LEAD OWL BANDER

As Nova Mackentley and I began looking forward to the upcoming banding season in the late winter, the weather turned unseasonably warm. Standing in our yard just south of the Point on a warm, calm and clear February night, we could not help but feel like owls might be moving north early this year. Unfortunately, but not unexpectedly, this weather pattern only lasted a few days and winter soon reclaimed its grip on Whitefish Point. Regular periods of snow and high winds continued through the season's start date of March 15, keeping us closed during five of the first 10 nights of the season. Although the wintery weather significantly hindered our efforts, by mid-March we began seeing signs that Northern Saw-whet Owls might be rebounding from the unexpected lows we experienced during the previous three spring seasons. Eighteen Saw-whets on the night of March 20 got us a bit excited, but things then slowed down again for about a week. The weather patterns finally began to improve on the night of March 29 and the owl migration kicked in, beginning what would prove to be a record owl banding season for Whitefish Point Bird Observatory.

Despite the rough start, we were able to open nets on 66 out of a possible 79 nights this spring. Those 66 nights produced a total of 1,429 individuals of five species! Of these, 1,375 were new birds, and 54 were owls that had been previously banded. The new birds were comprised of 942 Northern Saw-whets, three Boreals, 423 Long-eareds, five Barreds and one Great Horned. As is typical, the majority of the previously banded birds were Northern Saw-whets. Forty-nine of the recaptures were also Northern Saw-whets, while four were Long-eared Owls and one was a Barred Owl. The 942 Northern Saw-whets represent the second highest seasonal total for that species at WPBO. The 423 Long-eared Owls was not only a new record high total for WPBO, but for any North American banding station.



Chris Neri takes measurements and records data about a juvenile Northern Saw-whet Owl before banding and releasing the owl on the evening of March 28, 2017.

This is the second season in a row that we have set a new North American record for Long-eared Owls, and WPBO now holds the three highest seasonal banding total for these amazing owls.

Experiencing a record season is very exciting and rewarding. The fact that the peak period was not absolutely crazy added to our enjoyment of the season. Big nights are incredible to witness, but they are hurried and we are not able to take

the time to truly appreciate the owls on the biggest nights. Although there were some busy nights this season, it was the consistent migration from the night of March 29 through the end of season that made it such a successful one. The peak period for Northern Saw-whets occurred from March 29 – April 13. During this time we banded 348. The peak night occurred on April 7, when we banded 72, recaptured four previously



One of three Boreal Owls banded during the 2017 spring season at WPBO. © Chris Neri



Chris Neri and Nova Mackentley chat about owls at The Owl's Roost Gift Shop during Spring Fling.

banded, and banded 16 Long-eareds. As we have experienced in the past, the Northern Saw-whet migration then slowed, but remained steady from mid-April to mid-May before picking up again towards the end of the season. During the final two weeks of the season, May 18-31, we banded 272 Northern Saw-whets and caught 19 of the season's 49 recaptures for the species. This late May spike in Northern Saw-whet numbers remains a mystery to us, but it is a regular occurrence here that no longer catches us off guard. What did come as a surprise was the fact that the Long-eared migration continued through the end of the season. (Continued on p. 10)

The first seven Long-eared Owls of the season arrived on the night of April 4. Their numbers were a bit sporadic for a week, before suddenly peaking on the night of April 12 when 30 were banded. This night also marked the start of the peak period of this spring's record Long-eared migration. During the 33 night period from April 12 – May 14 we banded a remarkable 332 of the season's Long-eareds.



The 400th Long-eared Owl banded at WPBO this spring. During the 2017 spring season, banders Chris Neri and Nova Mackentley set a new North American record with 423 banded. © Chris Neri

The season's four recaptures also all occurred during this period. For whatever reason, the recapture of Long-eared Owls at migratory sites is very uncommon and there was something interesting about these recaptures. They were all originally banded here during previous spring seasons. Two were from 2015, one was from 2013 and one was from 2010. These were all low years for Long-eareds at WPBO.

We banded just 48

in 2010, 35 in 2013, and 53 in 2015. So, we recaptured four of the combined 136 Long-eareds banded during those three low spring seasons, including one from seven years ago, but none of the 336 banded just last spring. We very politely asked the owls to explain this to us, but they are not talking. We naturally hope that the 759 Long-eareds we have banded here these last two record spring seasons will generate some recaptures in the coming years.

The Long-eared Owl migration slowed after this peak period, but unexpectedly continued through the final night of the season. We expect that the Long-eared migration will begin to go through the low point in their natural cycle over the next couple springs, but we feel so incredibly fortunate for the experience we gained these last two springs. They are truly beautiful, amazing owls.



This Northern Saw-whet was the 1000th owl banded at WPBO during the 2017 spring season. © Chris Neri



Chris Neri arrived at WPBO in 1999. Chris has been fortunate to spend seasons at some of the premier raptor sites around the country, working on some great research projects, but as he reports, "nothing has captured me the way the owl migration at Whitefish Point has."

# Spring Waterbird Recap

BY LOUIE DOMBROSKI, WPBO SPRING WATERBIRD COUNTER

Having been the waterbird counter at Whitefish Point for more seasons than I can count over a thirty year period, (though not continuously — for instance, there was a two decade long break in there), I've seen a few changes. None have been as dramatic as those initiated by Michigan Audubon in 2017.

First, the count data for both the waterbird count and hawk count were tabulated on touch-screen tablets. Any qualms I had as an old fogie about taking advantage of such technology proved to be baseless. Entering data onto a tablet proved to be quicker, easier and less error-prone than the old method of spilling ink on those slabs of — what was that stuff called? — oh, yeah, paper. (Of course, I always kept my trusty Rite-in-the-Rain notebook and pen in pocket in case of a technological malfunction.)

Not only was the data collected via tablet, it was live-streamed, so desk-bound members of the work force had something in addition to cat videos to lessen their productivity. The live-streaming proved to be useful not just for the vicarious enjoyment of those far away, but also for those birding the point. (Nothing in the last hour at the tip but three Herring Gulls? I think I'll head to the hawk deck next. Wait a minute. They've only had two sharpies and a Turkey Vulture so far today. Let's stay at the feeders. Look — there's a Eurasian Tree Sparrow!)

Next, we counters were provided with comfortable new chairs for those inevitable slow periods where we didn't need to be on our feet with eyes glued to our spotting scopes. These chairs spin around like the wooden stools we had been using, but also provide a bit more elevation and back support. This may seem like a minor feature, but I have a few vertebrae that would argue that point. With the waterbird shack for shelter (which is holding up great by the way) and the new (as of 2016) boardwalk that goes most of the way to the count site, I felt quite spoiled as a field biologist.

Enough already about all the creature comforts for us counters; how were the waterbird numbers? First, the bad news: Common Loon numbers were low. The season total of 2,103 was down considerably from last year's total of 2,709, and is much lower than the seasonal average since 1,984 of 5,691. The news wasn't quite so bad for Red-throated Loons: the seasonal total of 387 was only slightly lower than 2016, but still below the average of 447.

The Red-necked Grebe seasonal total of 1,014 was well above the average of 614. Much to the delight of visiting



White-winged Scoters in flight over Whitefish Point. © Skye Haas

birders, there was often a Red-necked Grebe or two sitting on the bay to aim the scope at. After the pathetic total in 2016 of just 8 Horned Grebes, a seasonal total of 100 (well above the seasonal average of 37) was a relief.

The late season Canada Goose migration seemed to be happening at a slow pace this spring, but the geese were actually just waiting until the late morning of May 29, when they decided to come all at once. That day's total of 4,807 was higher than the seasonal total for all but a few years since the count began, contributing to a record high seasonal total for 2017 of 6,850!

Most duck species were seen in typical or slightly higher than average numbers. The White-winged Scoter total of 1,301 was below the seasonal average of 1,926, though higher than the 2016 total. The seasonal total of 118 Surf Scoters was somewhat above the average of 81. The Long-tailed Duck seasonal total of 2,530 was well above the average of 1,375.

Most shorebird species were seen in good numbers, with the pond that has formed near the tip attracting a few to linger a while, including one of the season's two Marbled

Godwits and one of the season's two American Golden-Plovers. The season's Whimbrel total of 958 is well above the average of 271, and does not include one impressive evening flight.

After the spectacular and unprecedented Sandhill Crane migration at the point in 2016, the total for 2017 of 1,350 was closer to, though still above, the seasonal average of 1,025.

Waterbird rarities included first Whitefish Point records for Neotropic Cormorant and Slaty-backed Gull, and the third record for Wilson's Phalarope. Add two Pacific Loons, eight Willets, three Parasitic Jaegers, a Franklin's Gull, five Black Scoters, and three Trumpeter Swans, and I conclude that it was a great season for seeing a diverse assortment of waterbirds at Whitefish Point.

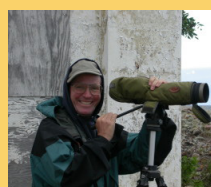
An annotated list with the seasonal totals for every waterbird species seen during the count can be found on the migration count blog on the WPBO web site at: [www.wpbo.org/blogs/](http://www.wpbo.org/blogs/).



Marbled Godwits in flight. © Marilyn Keigley



Louie Dombroski (seated center) at the waterbird shack with fellow birders during Spring Fling.



Louie Dombroski landed his first field ornithology job in 1988, when he became Waterbird Counter at Whitefish Point. Although field work has taken him to Alaska, Arizona, Mexico, and many points in between, Louie keeps returning to northern Michigan on a regular basis. Louie is currently chair of the Michigan Bird Records Committee.

# From the Hawk Deck

BY GARY PALMER, WPBO SPRING HAWK COUNTER



A Northern Goshawk in flight above the hawk deck at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. © Skye Haas

The hawk count ended some time ago, but as I'm falling asleep at night I sometimes still see them — wave after wave after wave of Sharpies, rolling off the dunes and over the treetops, surging past me in an endless stream. Sharp-shinned Hawks, the smallest of the three *Accipiter* species seen at Whitefish Point, were the most numerous for my count by a vast margin. They accounted for 55 percent of all raptors recorded across the season with an incredible total of 11,926 individuals. On a good Sharpie day, I was inundated from the start. With a flood of hundreds filling the air, and so many zipping through the trees, it was all I could do to speedily scan from side to side atop my dune, clicking in each bird I saw. Though they were dominant overall, with a peak of 2,150 in a single day, the first day of the season with more than a handful wasn't until nearly halfway through my ten-week count. The hawk count at Whitefish Point was a constant ebb and flow of migrants, and the excitement of the dynamic changes from day to day, even hour to hour, will forever be etched in my memory.

As three feet of snow still blanketed the forest around me, the early weeks were dominated by a steady trickle of Bald and Golden Eagles, Rough-legged, and Red-tailed Hawks, peppered with the delight of near-daily visits from immature Northern Goshawks. While hawks were the intended focus of my count, spectacular finch flights lasting several hours kept me quite busy throughout my first weeks on the deck. In the opening month, my counts were dominated by Common Redpolls. In fact, with the early masses of Redpolls and Pine Siskins and a pair of days with Purple Finch totals topping 1,000, finches ultimately accounted for nearly 20 percent of my grand total of 60,816 birds counted, a tally which includes over

21,500 raptors, 4,000 geese, 6,000 cranes, and almost 5,000 Blue Jays!

The differences among my most common migrants were fascinating to learn firsthand as the season unfolded. Sharpies rarely rely on thermals during migration, resorting instead to sustained powered flight, which combined with their hunger for a songbird breakfast meant they were often the first bird of prey I'd see in the air each day. The second and third most common raptors, Broad-winged and Red-tailed Hawks, respectively, employ an entirely different approach to migration, and this fact was obvious daily from my watch. While *Accipiters* were early risers, these *Buteos* always appeared in their biggest numbers later in the day. In order to save energy during their long journeys, these larger, heavier-bodied birds ride rising currents of warm air which are created when direct sunlight beats down on reflective surfaces such as the sand dunes along the Whitefish Peninsula. Their reliance on particular weather conditions made *Buteos* more predictable migrants — wait for a warm, sunny day, with light winds out of the south anytime between late April



Red-tailed Hawk during spring migration at WPBO. © Skye Haas

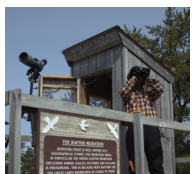
and mid-May, and an unbelievable display from these soaring birds is almost inevitable!

Imagine the scene on May 13 — a swarm centered around nearly 1,500 Broad-wings smeared across an unbroken blue sky. Everywhere you looked, up and down the peninsula, kettles breaking and reforming without warning, hundreds upon hundreds of birds whipped into frenzied tornados while thermals carried them higher and higher as they surveyed the landscape. Now imagine trying to pluck a Swainson's Hawk out of the haystack of Broad-wings, as the kettles drift in and out of view and the birds float so far away that the shapes of Sharpies, Broad-wings, Red-tails, Bald Eagles, and Turkey Vultures blend into one another in the increasing distance.



Rough-legged Hawk coming in for a landing near the hawk deck at WPBO. © Skye Haas

Nobody said it would be easy. In fact past counters warned how trying the weather could be and how frustrating the identification challenges would become on a daily basis. They cautioned about monster mosquitoes and pinprick-sized Buteos, indistinguishable from specks of dust stuck to my lenses. And they were right — some days were frigid, at season's end mosquitoes reached intolerable levels, big Buteo kettles are maddening (yet in a delightful way), and I finished each day mentally and physically spent. But I've never had so much fun or learned so much in such a short time, all while working! My season at Whitefish Point will always remain among my top birding experiences, and having the chance to contribute to science while sharing the pure joy of migration with so many incredible people as they visited the hawk deck throughout the spring makes it a true highlight of my life.



Gary Palmer attended graduate school at Northern Michigan University, where he recently finished his master's degree in post-secondary biology education. His interest in studying animal behavior steered him toward taking Dr. Alec Lindsay's field ornithology course at NMU in 2010, and his life hasn't been the same since.

## We welcome our newest Michigan Audubon Members

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We would like to thank our newest members as well as our renewing members for your support of Michigan Audubon's efforts to protect birds and their habitat through conservation, education and research.

Dated Material



## Tawas Point Birding Festival Special Thanks

We had another incredible Tawas Point Birding Festival this year. The event continues to shine due to the cooperative efforts of many people, organizations, and businesses. Michigan Audubon would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved in supporting this event. It's success would not be possible without them!

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## Tawas Point Birding Festival returns May 16 - 18, 2019!