# Jack Pine Warbler

SUMMER: Wind Energy: The Garden Wind Farm Project • Migratory Bird Treaty Act Update Whitefish Point Bird Observatory Spring Reports: Owl Banding, Hawk Count, & Waterbird Count Photography Award Winners • WPBO Waterbird Count Video Debut • Community Spotlight: Mike Bishop





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#### Cover Photo = Dickcissel Photographer: J. A. Mikulich

J. A. Mikulich is a wildlife photographer focused on capturing moments in the lives of avifauna. His images have been recognized by photography groups and nonprofit organizations and have appeared in gallery showings, most notably at Blandford Nature Center. He cares deeply about environmentalism and works for diversity and inclusion within green spaces. He and his wife Evelyn spend their time traveling between Michigan and Puerto Rico. He is also an award-winning creative professional and multicultural marketing strategist.

Thank you to J. A. Mikulich for submitting this image to the 2021 Michigan Audubon Photography Awards for which he was awarded an honorable mention. If you have photographs you would like considered for inclusion in future issues of the *Jack Pine Warbler*, please contact Communications & Marketing Coordinator Molly Keenan at mkeenan@michiganaudubon.org or (517) 580-7364.

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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 4,000 acres of land within 18 sanctuaries as habitat for birds and other wildlife. More than 30 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 for more updates, and follow Michigan Audubon on social media.



### From the Executive Director

Dear Michigan Audubon members and community,

In this issue of the *Jack Pine Warbler*, we share with you some hard-earned good news for birds at the federal level with the protection of the **Migratory Bird Treaty Act**, a bedrock environmental law that has been weakened and threatened in terms of its efficacy and integrity.

For our third feature article on **wind energy development** in Michigan this year, volunteer Jared Hocking interviewed Joe Kaplan, a wildlife biologist and volunteer for Michigan Audubon and Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. Joe's perspective is based on knowledge as an involved and concerned resident of the Upper Peninsula during every phase of the Garden Wind Farm project. The final piece on wind energy perspectives in Michigan will be published in the fall issue of the JPW, wherein we'll share with our members our understanding of how the wind energy industry may be changing in Michigan and beyond and what implications there are for birds.

In other updates from the organization, we held our **Birdathon** fundraiser this May, an annual historical event to help fund the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory program site. On May 30, our field staff counters at WPBO observed 152 species and raised \$3,448.59 from donors like you, which directly funds WPBO. While this year wasn't as successful in fundraising as it has been in the past, we'd like to share that the Birdathon donation window remains open through the end of 2021 if you would like to give to Michigan Audubon in support of Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. You can donate online at michiganaudubon.org/donate or reach out to us via email at birds@michiganaudubon.org or phone at (517) 580-7364. Thank you to everyone who donated in support of not only the Birdathon event and our skilled volunteer counters, but ultimately, to Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. We appreciate your generosity!

Earlier this year, we promoted **Black Birders Week**, a weeklong series of online events and content to help highlight and create more of a space and a voice for Black nature enthusiasts. Black Birders Week is about increasing the visibility of Black birders, an exercise in empathy and ethics for each of us. People of color face unique challenges and dangers when engaging in outdoor activities, including in birding spheres, and visibility is about so much more than safety. Visibility is also about being seen and celebrated and included in our spheres, in the field, and in the research and work on a broader scale that translates to bird protection and enjoyment for everybody.

If you are interested in learning more or becoming involved in our growing **diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts** on the statewide level, in support of our chapter network throughout the state, please email birds@michiganaudubon. org. We are currently forming an ad hoc council to help support and advise our chapters on how to be a safe, inclusive place for members, field trip guests, and neighbors of all kinds.

Shining in our **community spotlight** this issue is Mike Bishop, a longtime board member of Michigan Audubon, an experienced and enthusiastic bird bander, and a leader of Michigan Audubon's Michigan Young Birders Camp. Mike's dedication to being a voice and a supporter for Whitefish Point, in particular, is one way he shines as a member of our community. Karinne Tennenbaum, a "young birder" herself, authors the spotlight piece on Mike Bishop. Karinne has incredible energy and an engaging curiosity for birds; she's been greatly involved in the **Michigan Young Birders Network** and her local community and school.

Speaking of our young birders, we generated enough interest and support to hold another virtual **Michigan Young Birders Camp** in 2021. We're eager to adapt content for adolescents who want to engage more with birds or simply make a connection to the world of birds and birding with their peers.

As our programs, projects, and plans continue to take shape for the year ahead, we invite you to stay connected to us and to birds in ways that reconnect you with what watching birds means to and for you. If you haven't already, we invite you to join our electronic mailing list — which you can do at michiganaudubon.org — as a lot of great content is shared each month. We will continue to keep you dialed in to the news of birds as it relates to our state and our mission to connect birds and people for the benefit of both.

Thank you for your ongoing support and for giving back to birds when and how you can.

With gratitude,

Heather Good Executive Director

A Black-capped Chickadee rests on the waterbird counter's scope at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. Photo by Matthew Winkler



# The Garden Wind Farm: A Conversation With Joe Kaplan

f you've been a *Jack Pine Warbler* reader since at least the start of the year, you'll recall seeing content focused heavily on what's involved and what's at stake when it comes to wind energy developments in Michigan.

To take a different angle in telling a feature story for our member magazine, we invited two volunteers to share their conversation in narrative form about the Garden Wind Farm project in the Upper Peninsula. This project was given the green light in 2018 and involved developing a turbine farm for generating energy.

Jared Hocking, a new volunteer and recent graduate from the University of Michigan's School of Environment and Sustainability, spoke with Joe Kaplan, a long-term volunteer, U.P. resident, birder, and wildlife biologist with historical knowledge and involvement with the project that has been named Garden Wind Farm.



Jared Hocking is a graduate of the University of Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability, where he graduated with an M.S. in Environmental Policy and Ecosystem Science in 2020. During his program, he conducted two independent studies to determine the effect of noise in urban environments on bird populations. Currently, he is a community engagement assistant at River Network, and has also interned at Defenders of Wildlife, working on endangered species policy resources. In his free time he likes to hang out with his two rescue pups.

#### Jared (Q): Today, we're talking about the Garden Wind Farm project on the Upper Peninsula's Garden Peninsula. So how did this wind farm project come together? And why is this a special area for birds?

Joe (A): There is no question that the Garden Peninsula is one of the more special places for birdwatching in Michigan's U.P., and it is a prominent migratory flyway on Lake Michigan. Garden Peninsula borders Fayette Historic State Park on the east side, where during the spring migration, you have a flood of migrants with hundreds of warblers and sparrows streaming up or down the peninsula. During the winter migration, you have a great chance of seeing many different majestic birds, perhaps due to the more expansive and diverse open country. You will see Sharp-tailed Grouse, Roughlegged Hawks, and Snow Buntings – even a few Great Gray Owls. Of course, if you drop down to the beach on Lake Michigan, you will see many waterbirds and gulls from American White Pelicans to Sandhill Cranes. You also have numerous offshore islands like Poverty, Summer, and St. Martin that together create an important bridge for migrants to Wisconsin's Door Peninsula.

Back in 2011, founder and chief executive of Heritage Sustainable Energy, Marty Lagina (who is actually a longtime oil and gas guy who founded a company called Terra Energy Partners), first started thinking about developing a wind farm on the peninsula. Marty had a powerful attorney who knew that given the project's location, he would likely never be able to satisfy the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service over the risk to migratory



Joe Kaplan is a director of Common Coast Research & Conservation, a nonprofit that specializes in migratory bird conservation. Joe is a former director of the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory and was instrumental in securing an extension of Seney National Wildlife Refuge at the Point. He is also responsible for establishing and stabilizing the 93-acre Manitou Island Light Station Preserve (Whitefish Point's sister light) through the Keweenaw Land Trust. Joe lives in Delta County with his wife Chris and coordinates the Escanaba Migratory Bird Enhancement Initiative to create stopover habitat and provide nest boxes for neotropical migrants in the city's waterfront parks.

birds — it would go against all the volunteer siting requirements that the USFWS puts out.

But Marty was already committed to that site, and it was a great site for wind energy. So instead of looking for an alternative site, Marty just denied everything. He denied there would be any effects on birds. They had already bought up a bunch of leases in the area, and they proposed they were going to build the project.

Bert Fisher of the USFWS sent a letter (which was also signed by Scott Hicks, the field office supervisor for the Michigan Ecological Services Field Office at the time) to Heritage saying if they did not comply with the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, they would likely be prosecuted for harming migratory birds.

That got Marty's attention. After some litigation, which was brought by the National Wildlife Federation, Marty promised to do all these studies and mitigation measures and this and that. He built one turbine, and then said to USFWS and NWF, "Let me build 14." So he built 14 turbines, about 500 feet tall. But with the Garden Wind Farm project and others, Heritage was ignoring the effects to warblers and Piping Plovers, so the USFWS did not authorize the permit. They said in that letter to Heritage that they are liable; they don't recommend building in those places.

Heritage basically just ignored them and kept saying, "We're not having any impact [on birds]." Basically, what they're claiming is plausible deniability. And those 14 turbines are still operating there today. Q: On the Heritage company website, they have a list of "myths" associated with the project that at one time were thought to be true but have since been proven false. For example, they claim that it's been proven that a common barnyard cat will have more impact than the entire wind farm. What do you make of that claim? And the others they make?

A: Let's say it's unsubstantiated. I mean, it's interesting because that seems to be the default of the energy companies — they always compare their mortality to something that kills, but I don't know if this analogy works. That would be like saying that alcoholism kills far more people than heroin, which is an absolutely true statement.

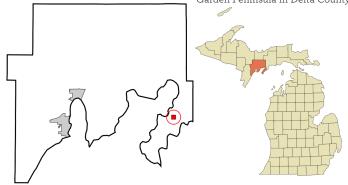
We have to think about what we have the most control over. We can control how many wind turbines we install and how we operate them. We have -I think -less control over the behavior of a barnyard cat.

#### Q: Another claim that Heritage makes on the site is that they have drawn this conclusion from "independent avian studies," which have found very little mortality. Have you seen these studies?

A: The first thing I will tell you is that they're "business confidential." The wind energy industry, like many other industries, hides behind this label. I tried to get access to them but faced resistance, so I have since backed off.

#### Q: Let's talk about the regulatory framework that approves projects like the Garden Wind Farm. How are projects like this authorized?

A: So, one relevant treaty here that dictates permits like this is the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The MBTA prohibits "taking" a migratory bird, whether



intentionally or unintentionally. So how could wind operators operate a farm that has a high likelihood of "taking" — meaning harming, harassing, threatening, or killing — a migratory bird, right?

With the MBTA, the law is written and understood that it doesn't matter if the "take" is intentional or not intentional (however, that's what the Trump administration just tried to change). The USFWS cannot authorize a company to take a certain number of migratory birds unless they get a special permit. In most cases they say, "Wink, wink, we are not going to pursue an enforcement action if you follow all the voluntary guidelines."

In the last few years, there have been changes to the Golden and Bald Eagle Protection Act, which has provisions for take. A company like Heritage could apply for a permit under the act to take eagles. Then, USFWS could do a risk analysis that says, "Over the lifetime of this project, you're allowed 20 Bald Eagles or 20 Golden Eagles." They could authorize a permit for that or even for the take of endangered species. But in general, you better have a really good justification for why you're killing endangered species.

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In California right now, there is a [wind] company working on mitigation efforts for condors. Instead of saying that they will protect the ones living free in the wild, the company says, "We'll spend half a million dollars to [breed more condors to replace] those we kill and make up the difference by charging more in electricity."

### Q: What is wrong with the current framework? Where would you improve?

A: Right now, the question that federal agencies are looking at is what the relative impact of this project is. If the storyline is that cats kill more birds, this pretty much negates the impact [of wind energy] as long as the USFWS buys that ridiculous storyline. There's no empirical data to support how many birds are killed by a typical barnyard cat.

Secondly, the guidelines developed by USFWS don't have the force of law. Carrying out studies or doing proper siting is not mandatory, nor is even consulting with the USFWS for a certain-scale energy project. We need to make all that mandatory and by the force of law.

Thirdly, I would change these studies, once they are made mandatory, to be public information and require them to be shared with USFWS on an annual basis, rather than being "business confidential," as Heritage claims.

Fourthly, who is carrying out these studies? I am a successful biologist because I get results. But with these wind farms, it's the opposite — they don't want to find any results. So when the companies can hire their own firm and call it "independent," that obviously presents a conflict of interest. They're not going to hire a biologist who will find a bunch of dead migratory birds.

Another thing we have to look at with regulation is making the use of technology mandatory. For example, the Garden Wind Farm project could use the detection system produced by the FAA where the lights [on turbines] are off completely until a plane or bird comes nearby, which would trigger them to come on.

With this technology, places like the Garden Peninsula would probably be dark at night 95% of the time, addressing a huge aesthetic impact and potential environmental concern with birds. Still, it would have cost Heritage about \$600,000 to do it, and of course they didn't want to do that because they didn't have to. Heritage would rather spend the money to lobby someone to prevent that from becoming a rule. But what if we had to use such technology? This could be a big part of the answer.

#### Q: How is the fight for responsible wind energy siting different from previous fights to protect birds from the effects of communication towers and other technologies?

A: To me, in terms of protecting wind turbines, I view them the same as communication towers. I was involved in the original petition to the FCC to get them to recognize the effects of communication towers on birds.

Since that time, there have been all sorts of changes, including requiring lights on towers, but companies are not going back and turning off the lights at the appropriate times.

The companies that operate these types of industrial technologies have savvy legal departments. The departments are likely advising them to position as, "Whoa, our towers don't kill birds. You can't tell us that our towers kill birds," even though every tower kills birds.



Carrying out studies is not mandatory, given that these regulations are voluntary.

In the 1970s, when these 1,000-foot towers started going up, they decimated North American bird populations. One country doctor in Clare, Wisc., from the late 1950s, recorded 120,000 dead birds over a few nights at one tower. He had nights where there would be 30,000 dead birds from a single tower. Show me a feral cat that can do that. So what we are doing now is exacerbating

Wildlife biologists examine a dead bird found at a wind farm in Altamount County, Calif. Photo by Elizabeth Pepin | Flickr modern-day impacts on a resource — endangered, beautiful birds — that we nearly squandered 50 years ago. It's tragic.

And today, if you were to go to that same tower, you can't find anywhere close to that level of mortality. It doesn't exist. Why? Because there are barely any birds anymore. So, unless we want zero birds in the sky, we have to start thinking about how to site these types of industrial technologies better.

Q: Given that we know climate change presents not only an existential threat to humans but also birds and almost every species on the planet, how should we think about the risks posed by wind energy development compared to climate change? Is it possible for us to get to 100% clean energy without wind power? Are large-scale wind farms that might kill birds a necessary evil?

A: Well, one of the first things I would look at is how we can make the economics make sense for every homeowner or property owner in the country to have rooftop solar. If I hadn't installed my solar panels on my small lakeside cabin, I would be paying almost 2 ½ times the amount that I am paying in Escanaba for kilowatts of electricity. But that's because I am part of a certain 1%. I am one of the first 1% of customers in the state that qualified for net metering — meaning I am selling the electricity produced back to the grid. Why is that only 1%, though? If, as customers, we are generating electricity and sending it back to the grid, why shouldn't we get credit? Making those economics make sense could do a lot to mobilize the rooftop solar market.

And, of course, we have to look at responsible siting... and enforce the existing laws. If USFWS isn't making sure that these huge wind energy projects are not harming migratory birds, then they're not enforcing the law.

Please visit michiganaudubon.org/learn/the-jack-pine-warbler for the online version of this article with links to information regarding wind energy in Michigan and more.

An Update on the Migratory Bird Treaty Act

I n the fall of 2020, we featured a story about the federal government halting the Trump administration's proposed rule changes to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), the primary federal law that protects non-game bird species in the United States.

A nationwide backlash followed during the public comment period, as people wrote to the USFWS and urged them to stand up for and resolutely reinforce this important law. At a time when birds and other wildlife are facing tremendous stressors related to climate change, habitat loss, and human disturbance, advocating for birds has become a part of many birdwatcher's worlds. Judge Caproni said it best in her ruling on August 11, 2020, quoting the Pulitzer Prize-winning Harper Lee and referencing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, "It is not only a sin to kill a mockingbird, it is also a crime."

"That has been the letter of the law for the past century," added Judge Caproni. "But if the Department of the Interior has its way, many mockingbirds and other migratory birds that delight people and support ecosystems throughout the country will be killed without legal consequence." However, the department's proposed rule didn't succeed in large part thanks to Judge Caproni's ruling and the wave of public support of protecting this law that followed.

On March 8, 2021, the Biden administration rescinded a Trump-era rule that would have prevented businesses from being held responsible for the inadvertent death of migratory birds. In their announcement, the department stated, "Significant concerns about the interpretation of the MBTA have been raised by the public, legal challenges in court, and from the international treaty partners." Secretary Deb Haaland added emphatic support validating the scientific need for bird conservation in the United States, stating, "Today's actions will serve to better align [the] Interior with its mission and ensure that our decisions are guided by the best available science."

In response to the ruling, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Principal Deputy Director Martha Williams spoke to the public backlash that signaled just how much our citizens want our government to demonstrate better environmental policy and protection for habitat, birds, and wildlife. Director Williams said, "We have heard from our partners, the public, tribes, states, and numerous other stakeholders from across the country that it is imperative the previous administration's rollback of the MBTA be reviewed to ensure continued progress toward commonsense standards that protect migratory birds."

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Heather was a member of Michigan Audubon's Board of Directors, studied at the University of Michigan's School of Natural Resources and Environment, and volunteered with birds of prey at the Leslie Science and Nature Center as an independent rehabilitator of raptors before beginning her tenure as executive director in 2016. Sherman W. Garnett and John Fortener Top Their Categories in 2021 Michigan Audubon Photography Awards

W Phichigan Audubon Photography Awards Winners are Sherman W. Garnett in the Jack Pine Warbler Cover Photo category and John Fortener in the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory category!

The three submissions from each photographer were impressive, with Garnett's Northern Shovelers photograph standing out above all for the cover of a future issue of our member magazine, the *Jack Pine Warbler*. Fortener's winning capture of a Snow Bunting at WPBO will appear in a future issue, as well.

2021 Honorable Mentions in the *Jack Pine Warbler* Cover Photo Category (in alphabetical order):

- Steve Jessmore
- Janet Lewis
- J. A. Mikulich



A Blue-winged Warbler at Ronald H. Warner Sanctuary. Photo by Sherman W. Garnett

2021 Honorable Mentions in the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory category (in alphabetical order):

- Christine Andrews
- Greg Bodker
- Victor Chen

Each photographer will be taking over the Michigan Audubon or Whitefish Point Bird Observatory Instagram account for a week to feature their work and share their stories as nature lovers and advocates for birds. (If you're not an Instagram user, don't worry. We will follow the event with highlights in a blog post.)

You can stay up to date on our future photo contests by becoming a member, receiving our monthly eNews, and following us on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.

Thank you to all who submitted their photos to the 2021 Michigan Audubon Photography Awards! It is always breathtaking to see the incredible images captured by nature photographers, whether amateur or professional.



### Spring Season Breaks Record for Long-eared Owls Banded

BY CHRIS NERI AND NOVA MACKENTLEY, WPBO SPRING OWL BANDERS

I was an excellent year for the spring owl banding at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory (WPBO) in 2021. We were able to band on 69 out of 79 nights from March 15 through May 31. Including previously banded birds, we caught 1,442 individual owls, which represents a record total for a season at WPBO. Of the 1,442 owls, 1,366 were new owls that we banded this spring and 76 were previously banded owls. Unfortunately, this season lacked the diversity of owl species that we often experience in spring at the Point, but Northern Saw-whet Owls (NSWO) occurred in good numbers and it was a record season for Longeared Owls (LEOW).

We banded 882 Northern Saw-whet Owls, seven Boreal Owls, 465 Long-eared Owls, and 12 Barred Owls this season. The 76 previously banded owls are also a new record for WPBO and included 70 NSWO, five LEOW, and one Barred Owl. These include 32 owls banded in previous years here at WPBO and 44 banded at other sites. The 32 recaptures of WPBO owls include one NSWO banded in spring 2015 and 13 NSWO originally banded at WPBO as juveniles during the summer owl research. The saw-whet from spring 2015 is now eight years old and is the oldest of this spring's recaptures. We have received data back on 40 of the 44 foreign encounters. These owls were originally banded at 15 different banding stations — two in Michigan, four in Wisconsin, four in Minnesota, four in Ontario, and one in Kentucky.

The 465 Long-eared Owls banded this spring represent not only a new record season for

WPBO but also a new North American banding record. The previous record of 423 LEOW banded in a season was also set at WPBO in spring 2017. The record LEOW migration this spring included an amazing three-night stretch when we banded 107 LEOW. The second night of this stretch produced a record nightly total of 59 long-eareds banded on the night of April 22. That night started with relatively high winds that resulted in a slow start to the night. With two hours left in the night, we had banded 14 long-eareds. The wind then died, and our banding skills were put to the test as 45 LEOW were caught during the final two hours of the night. When people ask us about big nights and we tell them totals like this, a common response is, "That must have been so much fun!" There are many ways to describe an experience like that night, but "fun" is not one of them. It is incredible to witness a big owl migration, but as the banders, it comes with a lot of responsibility. Recognizing that things were suddenly becoming more hectic, we quickly closed some of the nets to help ensure that we could stay in control of the banding. That said, it is an experience we will never forget.



One of the Long-eared Owls banded that made it a record-breaking season.

The spring owl banding regularly presents us with challenges, both recurring and new, from which we continue to learn. We feel fortunate to have our lives filled with memories of amazing experiences with owls. It is also gratifying when we see that the efforts we have made over the years produce results like those we experienced this spring. We constantly remind ourselves that the owls migrate through WPBO whether or not we, or anyone else, is here to witness it. The unique opportunity of experiencing the owl migration so intimately, year after year as WPBO's spring owl banders, is never lost on us. As always, we thank all of you for the support you provide to WPBO's long-term owl research. It indeed would not be possible without your generosity.



Nova Mackentley and Chris Neri are a legendary pair of raptor banders living at Whitefish Point. In addition to regularly leading the owl banding program every spring at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, they are accomplished nature photographers.

### The View From the Hawk Deck

BY RICHARD COUSE, WPBO SPRING HAWK COUNTER

ast December, after enjoying a wonderful Christmas Bird Count with friends in Keene, ■ New Hampshire, I found myself thinking about wintering raptors. I had spent the fall visiting hawk count sites on the East Coast, Cadillac Mountain in Maine, Mt. Watatic in Massachusetts, and Lighthouse Point in Connecticut. Being on the Atlantic flyway, odds were greatly against any of the birds I saw being one of the birds I counted heading north last spring here at Whitefish Point, but not completely out of the realm of possibility. Was it even possible that the winter territories of some of these birds actually intersect each other? Which way would they go in the spring? Would one perhaps follow the other on a northward path over Whitefish Point? These were all entertaining thoughts for a cold winter's evening sitting by the woodstove after a great day of birding, and as I lay down to sleep, it wasn't visions of sugarplum fairies dancing in my head — it was kettles of migrating raptors leading me to wonder where I would go in the spring.

Much like migratory birds, we all have certain paths we choose to follow in life. The only question I had

to ask myself was, "What makes me feel like I am on the right path?" The answer was simple — return to Whitefish Point and spend another season counting hawks for Michigan Audubon (lucky for me that they were happy to have me back). I wanted to meet more raptor enthusiasts and count more raptors! I wanted that elusive 1,000-plus Sharp-shinned Hawk day, and this season we did have a day with over 2,000 Sharp-shinned Hawks! Ironically, it happened on my day off. Argh! I am getting a bit ahead of myself though; let's take a step back.

On March 15, 2021, I found myself once again standing behind the spotting scope on the hawk deck at Whitefish Point. Over the winter, I had researched long-range weather patterns that predicted a warmerthan-average spring, and I was surrounded by supporting evidence. The snowpack was shallow and patchy, not at all typical for this part of the Upper Peninsula at this time of the year. Locals would later inform me that snowfall accumulation over the past winter was the lowest it had been in decades. My first day was pleasant, sunny, and unseasonably warm, and I counted one Bald Eagle and four Golden Eagles. My second day brought me another Bald Eagle and five more Golden Eagles. Day three, one bald and three goldens! The count was off to a great start, and I ended my first week with 38 Bald Eagles, 18 Golden Eagles, and eight Northern Goshawks. The following week, temperatures sky-rocketed into the 40s (Fahrenheit) and all signs were pointing to a super early spring. I started to dream about a mega-migration, thinking to myself, "This is why I came back to Whitefish Point; an epic season is blossoming right before my eyes!"

Well folks, mother nature is a fickle mistress, and she decided to give me the cold shoulder. That early spring heatwave was nothing but a tease. What followed was plummeting temperatures and north winds blowing with a renewed and unchecked ferocity. I had two days with barely a single bird in the sky as I watched the spring going into a full retreat while slowly wearing away my hopes for an epic season. However, while April brought me many long, gray, cold days, it also brought me spectacular flights of Rough-legged Hawks, Sharp-shinned Hawks, and American Kestrels. I counted as many kestrels (145) in a single day as I had counted the entire 2020 season! Two days with 100 Rough-legged Hawks nearly doubled the total number from last year, and the 2,000-plus Sharp-shinned Hawk day accounted for more than two-thirds of last season's total. So let me be clear, while 2021 was not going to be an epic season, it still had the potential to be a great season. If only May had held true...

Right in the heart of Broad-winged Hawk migration, May made and broke a promise to me. A migration • counter's life is tied to the weather app as we • continuously look ahead to see what days will have the best migration conditions, and a window had opened. After a weeklong spell of unfavorable north and east winds, a string of five days with south winds • **Г** had me looking to the skies each day with eager • anticipation for a big broad-winged day — one that • field staff and dedicated volunteers worked together had giant kettles trading thermals on their way over to identify species such as the Parasitic Jaeger, Redthe hawk deck and would delight onlookers to no end.

Inexplicably, it just never happened. Broad-winged Hawks did arrive but their numbers just weren't what I expected, and that would be the tale of the rest of the season. There were a couple of decent • days with their numbers in the hundreds, and with • that being said, the season total of 4,441 was still a better season than last year. While I cannot be sure if it was more so that last year was a very bad year or this year was a good year, I can state for a fact that • with a grand total of 14,192 individual raptors, the • 2021 season totals are the highest they have been since 2017.

What this indicates is hard to say; raptor migration • is incredibly weather dependent, and the success • of a season is primarily up to mother nature. This is why our long-range study (42 years) is essential; over time, the randomness of weather patterns start to mitigate themselves and an accurate picture of • To learn more about Birdathon and how you can donate, population dynamics becomes clear.

Overall, for me, the spring of 2021 was a great Point in the past, and for playing a part in preserving this special place for birds and people for generations than not, and in my opinion, any day with a bird in • to come. the sky is a good day. Combined with having the • opportunity to meet some wonderful hawk watchers, birders, and non-birders alike, I got to experience my hawk deck becoming a community of likeminded individuals spending time talking about • wildlife, conservation, traveling to far-off places, • and everything in between. I couldn't have asked for more and couldn't be happier about the path I chose to take this spring.

Next spring, make it a point to visit the hawk deck at • Whitefish Point. Feel the wind and watch the skies, listen to the ceaseless roar of the waves lapping the shore of the great Lake Superior, and welcome the signs of spring borne on the wings of raptors.



Rich is a conservation biologist from Massachusetts. He is a firm believer in the • fact that everything is connected through the ecological web of life, and his path reflects his fascination with all creatures • great and small. His field research has taken him to Massachusetts, Michigan, Maine, and beyond.

# 2021 Birdathon Tallies 152 Species

■he 2021 Birdathon at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory on May 30 was a successful and throated Loon, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Yellowbellied Flycatcher, and Piping Plover throughout the • day!

"This was my first time coming to Whitefish Point as a birder, as well as my first time participating in Birdathon. I've heard this is a spectacular place for birds, but I didn't expect the flock of 500 Blue Jays above my head when I exited my car. I also didn't expect to make so many friends and meet so many amazing birders and human beings. Everyone was educated and passionate about birds; I felt as though I had found my flock. People aside, the birding was excellent. Numerous warblers, shorebirds, raptors, and wayward vagrants found their way into my sights and onto my eBird checklist. Birdathon was such a fun and incredible experience. I will participate in Birdathon every year I can."

~ Birdathon Volunteer Joyanne Mittig

visit wpbo.org/birdathon.

• Thank you for being a friend and supporter to Whitefish this special place for birds and people for generations

> A Red-tailed Hawk observed during the 2021 Birdathon. Photo by Richard Couse



## Spring Waterbird Count Brings Surprises

BY MATTHEW WINKLER, WPBO SPRING WATERBIRD COUNTER

Here at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory (WPBO), the spring waterbird count begins April 15 and goes for six weeks, ending May 31. During this time, I was tasked with counting all the waterbirds I could see that passed the Point on their way north for the summer breeding season. My inaugural season as the waterbird counter here at WPBO was a fun and interesting season. I enjoyed chatting with visitors about birds and migration, with many non-birders often asking what I was doing out there, standing on the beach. It provided an excellent opportunity to talk birds with them, opening their world just a little and enlightening them about these animals.

This season was an interesting one, seemingly defined by steady north or northwest winds for most of the count. Winds were typically in the 20- to 30-mph range (or so), with a "calm" day being 15 mph or less. This combination of strong, sustained winds undoubtedly had its effects on the count. Birds of any sort much prefer to migrate with a tailwind rather than a headwind; tailwinds save the bird energy and make the migration journey much easier. Day after day, I watched and waited, hoping the wind would die down or change direction to south or southeast. This season I never detected any real big push of waterbirds migrating at any given time. It was mostly a smattering of waterbirds here and there. I found this odd as I usually associate a big push of waterbirds with spring migration, at least at some point.

Early in the season is usually when most of the dabblers move through — Mallard, American Wigeon, Northern

Shoveler, Black Duck, Northern Pintail, and teal. While we were treated to all these ducks (and we saw a couple of nice mixed-species groups fly by), these were very brief encounters, being more of an exception and not the rule this season.

The loons dictated mid-season. Here at WPBO, it's the Common Loon migration that's most impressive. We also see Red-throated Loons migrate by, but the Common Loon flight is really the frosting on the cake. It is always remarkable and something of a treat to watch Common Loons buzz right over the waterbird shack. These are special moments too. Most often, though, the loons choose very distant flight lines, either way out over Lake Superior toward Canada or way to the south of Whitefish Bay, when they decide to cut overland across the point. This requires your head to be on a swivel, constantly scanning the sky, and it paid off with around 3,500 Common Loons being counted this season.

With bulk loon migration fading into the rearview mirror, it was time to welcome the scoters and Longtailed Ducks. Here at WPBO, the White-winged Scoter is the show's main act, although we do get a fair showing of Surf Scoters and a sprinkling of Black Scoters. On a good scoter or Long-tailed Duck day, it's quite possible to count hundreds or even thousands of birds migrating by. Unfortunately, a good scoter or Long-tailed Duck day never materialized, which left me somewhat miffed. Where did they all go? Was it the poor wind conditions that ruled most of the season? Did



the bulk of migration happen at night? We do know ducks prefer to migrate nocturnally. It left me feeling that it would be tough to overcount scoters or Long-tailed Ducks when conducting a diurnal count here at WPBO.

Late season, things slowed way down; many an hour went by with not a single waterbird sighting to report. To spice it up, though, we did enjoy an excellent movement of shorebirds - nothing in the way of huge numbers that would blow you out of the water, but a nice variety. These included Dunlin. Ruddy Turnstone. Sanderling, Pectoral Sandpiper, Red Knot, Black-bellied Plover, American Golden-Plover, Whiterumped Sandpiper, yellowlegs,

A first record of a Ruff at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory took place on May 21, 2021 . Photo by Alec Olivier

Stilt Sandpiper, and Short-billed Dowitcher. The season also welcomed a rarity and first record at the Point of a Ruff, found by Alec Olivier. Congratulations to Alec on this fantastic find! Whimbrel, which ordinarily makes a good showing here at WPBO, didn't show up in the numbers we typically expect and only had a light scattered appearance. Later in May, we did have three adult Parasitic Jaegers fly by the Point; these are a very nice treat to see during the spring waterbird count. They are more typical during the fall count here at WPBO.

#### Daily High Counts and Season Totals for Highlighted Species

Sandhill Crane DHC: 4,148 on April 18 | Season total: 6,402

Red-necked Grebe DHC: 104 on May 2 | Season total: 566

Common Loon DHC: 347 on May 7 | Season total: 3,486

White-winged Scoter DHC: 606 on May 20 | Season total: 1,981

Long-tailed Duck DHC: 857 on May 23 | Season total: 1,289

Red-breasted Merganser 163 on May 24 | Season total: 2,179

To pin the tail on a duck and summarize this season, it was an interesting one for sure. One day, there were birds; the next, there were none, seemingly with no rhyme or reason (though I think the weather patterns were a factor). I don't know if this is something to be concerned about as a long-term trend, as a sign of bigger environmental issues, or just a blip on the seasonal radar screen. To be sure, I had a fun season here at WPBO counting birds, discussing them with visitors, bringing them to you through my blogs and social posts, and connecting you to the wonders of the natural world. It was my pleasure to share this season with all of you. I learned a lot in the six weeks I spent at WPBO.

A special thank you must go to volunteers Rhoda Johnson and Darrell Lawson, who took the time to come up to Whitefish Point and give me the occasional and much-needed day off. Thank you to both of you.

Lastly, I'd like to thank all of you for tuning into the season with me. Happy birding to you all!



Matthew Winkler is a lifelong bird nerd. His first adventure to Whitefish Point was in 1995 at around age 7, and he's been visiting the Point most years since. He strongly advocates for citizen science, good mentorship, and connecting more people to the world of birds.



### Video Accentuates the Importance of the WPBO Waterbird Count

In celebration of World Migratory Bird Day, Michigan Audubon premiered a video about the waterbird count at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, and, boy, does it deliver!

"This video artistically offers the audience the specifics that make Whitefish Point such a unique and admired place," said Heather Good, executive director of Michigan Audubon. "It's been a bit of an organizational dream, seeing a video produced that could capture and share the meaning and magnitude of this place, and what it means for and has done for migratory birds over the past 40 years."

Volunteers Scott and Steph Castelein, inspired by their love for the Point, began producing the video in the fall of 2020.

"Fleeting wings, endlessly passing by the Point in all of her raw beauty, is truly something to behold. In her instructions for living a life, Mary Oliver wrote, 'Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.' Since first visiting the Point with wide eyes one year ago, that is exactly what we've done, felt, and now aim to do with Whitefish Point, Michigan Audubon, and the conservation of the birds of Michigan. Thank you, everyone, for your help and collaboration," shared Scott and Steph.

The Casteleins will be working with Michigan Audubon and WPBO staff to create videos highlighting other research topics including the hawk count and owl banding programs, so stay tuned for more inspiring content. Until then...

Take a look into the world of the waterbird count on the Michigan Audubon YouTube channel (youtube. com/c/MichiganAudubon) and get ready to plan a trip to the Point!

# Community Spotlight: Mike Bishop

BY KARINNE TENNENBAUM, MICHIGAN YOUNG BIRDERS NETWORK

Mike Bishop was a faculty member in the Department of Biology at Alma College for roughly 20 years. He taught biology, ornithology, and scientific methods, all while being an advocate for Whitefish Point Bird Observatory and an active board member for Michigan Audubon. He retired in the summer of 2020 and since then has been volunteering at Forest Hill Nature Area and running rampant in the woods chasing birds.

Recently I was able to catch up with him to talk about his experiences with birds, conservation, and education.

### Karinne (KT): Can you describe your journey as a birder?

Mike (MB): I was an animal nerd when I was little. My first big love was dinosaurs, but I quickly realized that I was never going to be able to hold one, so I shifted to insects. After I caught my first snake, I fell in love with reptiles and amphibians — snakes, box turtles, salamanders, and frogs. Sometime in late junior high, I got interested in bats before finally discovering birds. In tenth grade, I first got interested in hawks but very quickly became nuts about all birds.



Mike Bishop processes a Tufted Titmouse at the Chippewa Nature Center's Dragonfly Marsh banding site.

So, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade were all about birds for me, and that never really changed. When I started attending the University of Cincinnati for my undergraduate studies, I immediately found out which faculty members were conducting ornithology-related research. They put me in contact with Jim Davis, who was at the time a graduate student studying Belted Kingfishers. I spent the next several years of my undergraduate at UC working with him, looking at nest building, territoriality, creekside foraging habits, and the efficiency of the birds in finding resources along the creeks in southern Ohio. It was a blast!

Then, I moved to Texas and obtained a teaching certificate from the University of Texas at Austin in the hopes of working in environmental education. During that time, I also worked as a naturalist for several years at environmental summer camps for kids. After teaching eighth-grade earth science at Austin Public Schools for four years, I went to Texas State University to obtain my graduate degree in ornithology.

After getting my banding permit, I started working at Alma College and banding at their ecological station. During my years at Alma, I had many undergraduate students — both birders and non-birders — that worked with me. Looking back, it wasn't a straight path that led me to Alma, but I certainly learned a lot along the way.

#### KT: Why is bird banding important to you?

MB: In high school, I met Worth Randall, a hawk bander, and thought that banding was the coolest thing in the world! Banding allows us to study population dynamics and life history. By marking birds, you can distinguish individuals in the population to learn about physiological changes, maturation rates, and longevity. Much of what we know about migration routes and timing has come from banding studies. It's a really useful and effective, albeit tedious, tool. Even though it's changing dramatically with the advent of transmitters, there will always be reasons to band individuals.

Honestly, my big draw to it was being that little kid that wanted to hold an animal. Once I fell in love with birds, I really wanted to be able to hold them and examine them. Banding allowed me to fulfill that desire.

### KT: What happens to the morphological data that you collect?

MB: Currently, I'm studying molt sequences in the birds living in the Alma area. This information can help us better determine the age of birds by looking at which feathers are retained over time. I also have



Mike Bishop processes a Gray Catbird for banding.

an 18-year-long American Kestrel project looking at winter site fidelity. Alma, Mich., is about the northern limit of the kestrel wintering range. We've discovered that their behavior in the wintertime is dramatically different from their behavior down south, where most of the research on wintering kestrels has been done. They are highly territorial further south, while up here, they are mostly nomadic. Finally, I've got 20 years of banding data that I want to mine in hopes of finding hidden gems.

### KT: What role can avid birders play in bird and environmental conservation?

MB: One of the most valuable things birders can do is talk to other people about birding. While it's great if those you speak to become birders, the primary goal should be to make people aware of some of the issues facing birds and why bird conservation is so important. Talk about why you like birds, why birds are exciting, why some birds are in peril, and why you should keep your cat indoors. The recent paper, "Decline of the North American avifauna," revealed the loss of three billion birds since 1970. It has made a major impact on many people, even those that may not consider themselves nature lovers.

Also, the advent of eBird has been revolutionary. Additionally, the North American Breeding Bird Survey, Christmas Bird Count, and Project Feederwatch are all great ways that amateur birders can contribute to the field.

### KT: What can organizations like Michigan Audubon do more of in the future?

MB: Educate, educate, educate. It comes back to just making people aware. Anything an organization can do to educate people about the environment does two things: It brings a lot of these issues to the forefront, and it sparks interest. When people spark an interest in something, they develop an appreciation and take ownership of it, and then they are much more willing to fight to preserve it. We also need to work to make birding a more inclusive activity and welcome birders of all backgrounds.

### KT: What advice can you give young birders?

MB: I've noticed that many organizations are seeing attrition of membership, and most of the members are on the older side. Even professional organizations aren't recruiting younger members like they used to. I firmly believe that young birders are the

future ambassadors of bird conservation, and I am extraordinarily interested in reaching those kids because I know they're out there.

In terms of specific advice, meet and talk to as many people as you can. When I was young, I was constantly finding the people who were doing the kind of work I was interested in and writing them letters — almost all of them wrote back! It's true; sometimes, you're going to get nothing. However, as an academic myself, the few times I had high school students or younger contact me, I was absolutely going to respond. Lastly, birding is a skill. To improve, you have to go out and bird. The one area of birding that I see a lot of people neglect is learning calls and songs. In a breeding bird survey, you're doing everything by song, and there's a lot of fieldwork like that.

My involvement with the Michigan Young Birders Camp and the Michigan Young Birders Network (MYBN) has been reinvigorating for me. I had gotten to the point where I really just didn't feel like birds were something young people cared about. Fewer and fewer younger kids were coming through the program at Alma that had a previous interest in birds or even an interest in nature. The MYBN has really gotten me excited that there are kids out there that are really into birding. I'm constantly lurking on the MYBN Discord and love hearing their discussions about artwork, local organizations, or bird walks. I needed to hear about the schools or programs that they are interested in applying to or what they want to do when they graduate. For me, that's been a lot of fun. It has allowed me to step back and think about how I can assist them. We need more of them, and I want to help with that as much as I can.



Karinne Tennenbaum is a senior in Ann Arbor, Mich. Although she has many hobbies and interests, birding tops the list. She has her own birding podcast and enjoys birding at Skyline High School in Ann Arbor. *Michigan Audubon* 2310 Science Parkway, Suite 200 Okemos, MI 48864



Dated Material

Connecting birds and people for the benefit of both through conservation, education, and research efforts in the state of Michigan.

#### We Welcome Our Newest Michigan Audubon Members

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.

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