

Jack Pine *Warbler*

WINTER: Five-Mile Radius Birding: Keeping it close to home ■ Make a Difference: Pledge to keep cats indoors
The Season of the Long-tailed Duck ■ Boreal Owls Abound During Fall Season ■ Legacy Giving
Reaching Young Birders with Online Resources ■ Registration Open for Michigan Young Birders Camp 2020



Jack Pine Warbler

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Photographer: D. Eric Johnson

Eric Johnson has been a professional photographer since 1983; over the years he has won numerous awards and recognitions, including two "top-ten-in-the-state" awards with the Michigan Professional Photographers Association. Eric has quietly pursued his passion for wildlife photography for his personal enjoyment and after years of encouragement to do "something" with his images, he has decided to share his images through Visions of Wildlife. Visit www.visionsofwildlife.com to enjoy more of his work.

Thank you to Eric Johnson for submitting this wonderful image for the 2019 *Jack Pine Warbler* cover photo contest. 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 mkeen@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.

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From the Executive Director

Happy New Year, Michigan Audubon members and friends!

I recently saw a photoshopped image of an escalator covered with ivy with the words “Nature Will Win” written over the image. My first thought was, *English Ivy, though?* The plant species taking over the escalator in this meme is that well-known, aggressive invasive species that threatens native ecosystems, growing along the ground as well as into the forest canopy, onto buildings, etc. The intention of this message, I think, was not to say that invasive species would win out, but that the natural world would adapt and prove more powerful than the collective threats to it. While this nod to the power of nature is something we can all get behind, it does not mean our work is or ever will be done — the daily work of our choices, our activism, our investment in the natural world and the things we know are worth preserving. The recent delisting of the Kirtland’s Warbler is one such example of an against-all-odds conservation success story. It is through the cross-pollination of group, individual, and government efforts that make changes happen.

There is an ever-expanding awareness (for better or worse) of the state of the environment and what that means to and for us all, especially as scientists around the world are amplifying a call to global action over the climate crisis. We are in the Anthropocene epoch, wherein species are becoming extinct 100 times faster than they would without human impacts. I think about this often, not only as a director of a conservation organization dedicated to conservation, education, and research of birds and their native habitats but also as an individual who has been paying attention and who cares about the preservation of wild places and wildlife. Awareness-raising is wonderful, but what we are more aware of often pains us to come to terms with.

How can we turn things around — as a nation, a world, a species, an interconnected part of the whole — is a daunting question for many of us. The avian realm is constantly giving us clear feedback about ecological balance (or imbalance) around us, in the habitats it is adapted to and specialized within, and never before have we relied so greatly on the compelling feedback of birds to push farther and harder in terms of advocacy and legislation, education, and research. In September of 2019, the New York Times featured a story titled *Birds Are Vanishing From North America*, detailing the reality of how the number of birds in the United States and Canada has declined by 3 billion, or 29 percent, over the past half-century.

How do we turn it around? We carry on. We question our habits, our thinking, our lifestyle. We learn and do more.

For Michigan Audubon, speaking both as director and as someone who historically supported the organization as a volunteer and member, I am proud to say that this organization is contributing to the greater, cumulative, and collective efforts of conservation, education, and research.

I’ve witnessed the patient, informed, and dedicated follow-through of conservationists — people who aren’t solely birders for the sake of enjoyment, but who give back to the world of birds through their advocacy, volunteerism, choices, and involvement with efforts and groups that are representing the importance of ecological balance, respect for the insights of science, and reverence for the natural world.

I am reminded of Jane Goodall’s book, *Reason for Hope*, one I read nearly 20 years ago that remains with me in a vague yet encouraging way. I urge you to resolve in this new year to self-reflect on the ways you give and can give more to the greater work of conservation in our state. To do more for birds than spot them. To see the connectedness and the ways in which we can improve and work together in carrying on. Ecology teaches us that everything is, after all, connected. I think that applies to the habitats of human thinking as much as it does to our beloved native ecosystems in this beautiful, Great Lakes state. For example, as you’ll read in our conservation feature on page 4, Michigan Audubon invites you to join us in pledging to keep cats indoors.

Thank you for being a member and for continuing to trust our organization to do the work of our mission with your support and the reverberation of *your* individual impact.



Heather L. Good, Executive Director

PS: If you have a feline friend, consider making a conservation pledge to keep your cat indoors.



Five-Mile Radius Birding: Keeping it close to home

BY KIRBY ADAMS



Rusty Blackbird © Linette Mansberger

How many species of birds can be found throughout the year within 5 miles of your front door? Folks in Michigan who aren't regularly immersed in nature might guess only a couple dozen. Even those with naturalist tendencies might presume 50 or 60 would be a good number. I live in an area of lots of bean fields and low bird diversity in Eaton County, but over the past 5 years I've tallied 164 bird species within a 5-mile radius centered on my house. I know that number because I've become a dedicated 5MR (5-mile radius) birder.

As with most new trends, 5MR birding seems to have either originated or first gained popularity in California. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the excuse for one more list, birders started looking at how many birds could be found not just in the yard, but within 5 miles of home. Competition led to people seeking out unknown birdy spots near their homes, and now we have a new aspect of the hobby that's fun, easy, inexpensive, and can be a great asset to conservation.

Birding in Peru or Florida is expensive. Even birding on Michigan's Lake Erie shore can be time-consuming and costly when you live in Ironwood. But 5MR birding lets you work on a list all year without much cost. It can also be done by many people without consuming any fossil fuels, always a bonus for the environmentally-conscious birder. The exercise of biking or walking to cover those 78 square miles in your 5MR might make you a healthier birder too!

The 5MR birding style forces you to not just go to a popular hotspot like Pointe Mouillee or Whitefish Point, but to find good fragments of habitat that would otherwise be overlooked by birders. In farm country, hedgerows and drainages are worth checking out regularly in spring and summer. You'll learn the location of every berry-bearing tree anywhere near your home in short order if you're trying to boost your 5MR list in winter. You'll find previously unknown patches of oak in spring and black walnut in the fall, looking for those last few warblers you need. You'll discover that a remarkably small pond can host diving ducks when you're desperate for a Canvasback in your 5MR before freeze-out next December. When you look at these otherwise unmonitored habitats day after day, you begin to see trends. If you share your data to eBird, those trends can inform population studies and conservation efforts.

Habitat conservation isn't just about fighting climate change and protecting huge swaths of pristine habitat. Exploring your 5MR will show you that a hedgerow between two farm plots can be a conservation success story when it's filled with native plants and not subjected to irresponsible use of pesticides. That little strip of land half a mile long and 20 feet wide is an oasis of refuge for pollinators and other insects, which in turn bring the birds. This can be particularly critical during migration. When the sun rises and a small flock of warblers is exhausted and near expiration, a vast expanse of lifeless farm field with no food or cover is a death sentence. The thin strip

of multi-hued greens marking the ditch between two fields is a literal life-saver. If you're spending every day in May at a migrant trap on the lakeshores, you might never notice it, but most of the migrants on my 5MR list have come from walking or biking country roads and lingering at every hedgerow.

Making an effort to monitor spots closer to home can also be a part of a more specific conservation effort. Since 2005, the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (IRBWG) has been working to identify and hopefully mitigate the causes of a greater than 90 percent reduction in the Rusty Blackbird population. Identification of migration stopover habitat is a large part of that research and included several years of a "Rusty Blackbird Blitz" utilizing eBird. I happened to stumble onto a spot less than a mile from my home that has proven to be a regular location for Rusty Blackbirds in each of the last four Aprils and three of the corresponding falls. I discovered this by walking a road to see if I could boost my 5MR numbers. I drive past the spot on the way to work every day, but the blackbirds are typically deep in a tangled expanse of dogwoods in a seasonally flooded section of a small woodlot. I'd never notice them without walking past and first hearing their distinctive call. 5MR birding

led directly to the identification of a spot that hosts hundreds of Rusty Blackbirds every year. Now the IRBWG has those data via eBird, and even if that spot can't get dedicated habitat preservation from a large NGO, you can bet I'll be making a few calls if that corner lot ever comes up for sale.

Competitive birding and list-building are often maligned by birders who are dedicated to conservation, but I'd encourage folks to give 5MR birding a try, even if you never mention the number to anyone. If the 5-mile radius just misses the best park in the county, you can always cheat a little, or be true to the 5MR spirit and find somewhere that's just as good as that park but has never had binoculars pointed at it. You make the rules and you have the fun, but either way, the birds win. And if you want to be competitive, I'm betting almost everyone in Michigan could beat my 164 5MR with a little work.



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



Make a Difference: Pledge to keep cats indoors

BY LINNEA ROWSE, CONSERVATION PROGRAM COORDINATOR

We love birds. We love cats. How can the two coexist? As birdwatchers, conservationists, and nature enthusiasts, we want to do all that we can to protect the integrity of ecosystems and habitats, and the birds and wildlife therein. As bird populations continue to plummet (nearly one-third of all birds have been lost since 1970¹), it becomes ever more critical to do everything we can to protect our beloved birds. How do cats tie into this? Consider this: cat predation of birds is the most impactful, human-caused, direct threat to birds in North America².

Free-ranging domestic cats kill an estimated 2.4 billion birds and 12.3 billion mammals each year in North America². Other major causes of bird population declines in North America include habitat loss, bird collisions with glass, pesticides (direct and indirect impacts), and bird collisions with communications towers and other structures including wind turbines, but none to the scale of the direct mortality caused by cats.

Domestic cats are not native to North America. Introduced by people moving around the world and settling in new locales with cats as intended or unintended traveling companions, cats have spread globally and have

directly contributed to the extinction of 33 species¹. Like non-native invasive plants or insects, cats cause serious degradation to native habitats and species within. Cats are included on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's global worst invasive species list³.

Birds and other wildlife aside, allowing cats outdoors or maintaining outdoor cat populations is bad for cats, from a health and welfare perspective, and is also bad for human health, according to the National Association of State Public Health Veterinarians as well as other public health scientists and public health agencies.

The number one carrier of rabies among domestic animals is the domestic cat, and people are more likely to be exposed to rabies by cats than by wildlife such as raccoons⁴. Rabies exposure is treatable, but the disease is dangerous and treatment costly.

Cats are the only known reproductive host for the *Toxoplasma gondii* parasite, which causes toxoplasmosis. The eggs of this parasite are excreted in cat feces, and humans can be exposed to this through accidental inhalation or ingestion (think about children playing in public parks or in your backyard, where cats may





Feral cat with her three kittens. Photo by Chriss Haight Pagani

have defecated in gardens, sandboxes, or other areas!). Toxoplasmosis has serious impacts for humans, including possible miscarriage, blindness, birth defects or developmental problems, memory loss, or death⁵. *Toxoplasma gondii* is also transmitted to wildlife and causes serious harm and death, as has been documented in sea otters and marine mammals such as the endangered Hawaiian monk seal⁶.

Trap, Neuter, Release: Ineffective and unsafe

Though still widely employed as a method to control feral cat populations, TNR programs continue to fail to reduce feral cat populations. The premise of TNR is to capture unowned cats (e.g., feral cats), neuter or spay, and re-release into the environment, with the long-term goal of reducing cat populations in a given area. Unfortunately, this has been shown time and again to be an unsuccessful system, with long-term TNR programs demonstrating that feral cat populations are not reduced in size over time⁷. In fact, established cat colonies may actually increase in size, especially where TNR programs are used⁸.

Cats, though they may be vaccinated as part of a TNR program, continue to be exposed to and spread disease after a vaccine has run out — think of the annual or bi-annual frequency of your pet cat's vaccine needs. Cats subjected to these programs are still at risk of injury and infection and may lack proper shelter or food. Unfortunately, TNR programs are still widely used, despite the public health risks and wildlife impacts.

Beyond the health and welfare concerns for cats who have been through a TNR program, these cats continue to have

both direct and indirect impacts on birds, mammals, and other wildlife such as amphibians and reptiles. Even when well-fed by people, feral cats and free-roaming indoor/outdoor cats continue to predate wildlife and birds. Cats are predators and follow their instincts even with a full belly. The mere presence of a cat in the vicinity of nesting birds can diminish nesting success by causing adult birds to reduce feeding of their nestlings⁹. As mentioned above, cats are carriers of diseases (rabies, toxoplasmosis, and other diseases), and can transmit these diseases to wildlife — an indirect effect on wildlife populations (i.e., not direct mortality), but impactful nonetheless.

Alternatives to Letting Cats Roam Freely Outdoors

Are cats able to happily exist indoors? What if my cat needs to go outdoors and explore? Many cat owners have concerns about their cat's need to be outdoors, as a “wild” animal. Luckily, there are solutions! Domestic cats can be well-adapted to living an indoor lifestyle, and with plenty of enrichment opportunities indoors, your cat can live a full, satisfying life, with no need to go outdoors.

Provide plenty of options for your cat to explore, play, and even solve puzzles — cat structures such as cat condo trees, puzzles to get treats, and a variety of toys keep your cat entertained and enrich their life indoors. Cats love to climb and explore, and you may consider installing or building wall shelves at various heights — it can even be like an art installation in your home!

If you feel your cat wants to go outdoors, but you want to limit their impacts to birds and wildlife, remember that leashes aren't just for dogs. Cats can learn and adapt ...

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well to wearing a harness and going outdoors on a leash, and this may be a good option for you and your cat if Kitty must get out the front door.



If your home space allows it, you can build a “catio.” These enclosed patios or porch areas for your cats feature mesh screens so cats can still enjoy the sights, smells, and sounds of the outdoors, and lounge in the sun without causing harm to the environment.

In the end, keeping cats indoors is a positive solution for all — for cats (their welfare and safety), for birds (safety and avoidance of indirect impacts), and for you and me (public health, and our peace of mind that our cats are safe and healthy). Will you make a change at home, or encourage your friends and community to protect not only birds but also cats?

Your decision to keep cats indoors is a small change that will make a massive difference for the environment. Make a difference — pledge to keep cats indoors.

References

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- ⁸ Castillo and Clarke (2003). Trap/Neuter/Release methods ineffective in controlling domestic cat “colonies” on public lands. *Natural Areas Journal* 23:247–253.
- ⁹ American Bird Conservancy (2019). Press releases: study documents dramatic new impacts to birds from outdoor cats. <https://abcbirds.org/article/study-documents-dramatic-new-impacts-to-birds-from-outdoor-cats/>

Read more about solutions for keeping cats and birds healthy and safe: <https://abcbirds.org/program/cats-indoors/>

For more information on the loss of birds: <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/vanishing-1-in-4-birds-gone/>



Linnea Rowse is Michigan Audubon's conservation program coordinator. An avid birder who grew up in Minnesota, Linnea enjoys being a part of the conservation community in Michigan. You can contact her at lrowse@michiganaudubon.org.

Keep Cats Indoors — for Their Sake!

By Heather Good, Executive Director

2.4 billion birds are killed by outdoor cats annually in the U.S. alone. If this statistic doesn't move you, let's consider your cat's health, well-being, and longevity. Having previously worked in veterinary medicine, the number of feline diseases, injuries, and deaths I encountered as a result of wonderful, well-intentioned owners permitting their cats outdoors astounded me.

“Basically, no matter where you are in the world, keeping your cat indoors is a great way to keep them healthy from infectious diseases,” said Kayleigh Chalkowski, a researcher at the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences at Auburn University in Alabama. This is especially good advice she noted, “considering that many of the pathogens cats carry can actually be spread to humans.”

Given the number of studies confirming the risks to your cat — even if she only occasionally goes outside — it is worth making a change for the health of your cat and the native ecosystems outside. Create a plan for proactive change — one that, I assure you, your cat will become accustomed to as long as you are patient, consistent, and offer him stimulation and play at home (i.e., scratching posts, toys, and perches).

Other risks for felines outside include:

- Poisonous chemicals, such as insecticides, rodenticides, and fertilizers.
- Exposure to viral infections like feline leukemia virus (FeLV), feline immunodeficiency virus (FIV), and rabies from close contact to other outside cats alone. Some of the diseases these pathogens cause have neither a vaccine nor a cure.
- Internal parasites, like roundworms, hookworms, whipworms, heartworms, and *Toxoplasma gondii*.
- Car injuries.
- Wounds from cat fights, which can lead to infections, abscesses, surgical drainage, medication, etc.
- Predators: in Michigan alone, cats can fall prey to coyotes, foxes, and large birds of prey.

Of course, we all want the best for our pets. Thankfully, it turns out that what's best for cats is what's best for birds and other wildlife. So before you let your cat outside, think about the dangers an outdoor cat faces in a single day and how your cat can live a longer and healthier life indoors!

Reaching Young Birders with Online Resources

BY LINDSAY CAIN, EDUCATION COORDINATOR

In 2019, I was lucky enough to be able to reach more young birders with the development of more K-12 programming. By participating as a guest speaker at Woldumar Nature Center, I was able to lead activities with roughly 160 children between the ages of four and 12. Additionally, I spent time in several classrooms acting as a facilitator of our Bird by Bird school program. I was able to reach over 200 fifth-grade students during the 2018-2019 school year. This school year, I've added two fourth-grade classrooms and three first-grade classrooms to the program.

Preparing for my time with these students both at camp and in the classroom was spent Googling, comparing notes, and using resources available from institutions like Cornell. Some items are ready to use in their current form. Others took some tweaks and reimagining. My experiences helped with preparations for future visits with K-12 students.

Because of all I've learned and continue to learn, we now have a list of educational resources available on our website (www.michiganaudubon.org). These include links to organizations that have their own resources available as well as downloadable activities.

This page of educational resources will be continually evolving as new resources are discovered and developed for teaching Michigan children about birds and conservation.

Online Educational Resources

BirdSleuth: birds.cornell.edu/k12

Environment for the Americas:
environmentamericas.org

NestWatch: nestwatch.org

FeederWatch: feederwatch.org

eBird: ebird.org

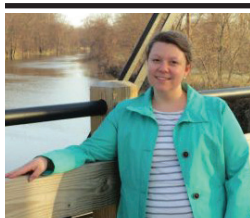
All About Birds: allaboutbirds.org

Bird Song Hero:
academy.allaboutbirds.org/bird-song-hero

Where the Birds Are: wherethebirdsare.com

Flying Wild: fishwildlife.org/projectwild/flying-wild

We hope you find these resources fun and inspiring!



Lindsay Cain is Michigan Audubon's education coordinator. If you are interested in learning more about our events, workshops, presentations, or event sponsorship opportunities, please contact Lindsay at 517.580.7364 or lcain@michiganaudubon.org.



Learn about cavity-dwelling birds such as Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows, House Wrens, and Black-capped Chickadees in this hands-on workshop! Gene Wasserman will present the basics of being a responsible bird "landlord" and how to provide a safe nesting situation, through activities such as regular nest checks, maintenance, and predator guards. Learn how to record monitoring data and participate as a citizen scientist! Registered participants will each build one nest box, sized for Eastern Bluebirds, and will take this home.

Registration is \$30 for Michigan Audubon members and \$35 for non-members. You can register for the event at michiganaudubon.org.

Mark Your Calendars!

Great Backyard Bird Count | Feb. 15 – 17
Nest Box Workshop | Feb. 22

Quiet Water Symposium | Feb. 29

WPBO Spring Hawk Count | March 15 – May 31

WPBO Spring Owl Banding | March 15 – May 31

WPBO Spring Waterbird Count | April 15 – May 31

Spring Bluebird Festival | March 21

Mackinaw Raptor Fest | April 3 – 5

Spring Fling | April 24 – 26

Biggest Week in American Birding | May 8 – 17

World Migratory Bird Day | May 9

Barry County Birding Tour | May 9 – 10

Tawas Point Migration 2020 | May 14 – 16

Tawas Beginning Birder Tour | May 16 – 17

Backyard Bird Habitat Workshop (Boyne City) | May 21

Backyard Bird Habitat Workshop (Hastings) | May 31

WPBO Birdathon | May TBD

Cerulean Warbler Weekend | May 29 – 31

MA Kirtland's Warbler Tours | June 1 – 30

Michigan Young Birders Camp | June 21 – 26

WPBO Summer Owl Banding | July 1 – Aug. 25

WPBO Fall Waterbird Count | Aug. 15 – Nov. 15

MA Swift Night Out Surveys | Sept. 11 – 13

WPBO Fall Owl Banding | Sept. 15 – Oct. 31

Advanced Birding at WPBO | Sept. 26 – 27

CraneFest | Oct. 10 – 11

Please check the Michigan Audubon website for additional events and more details as they become available.

The Season of the Long-tailed Duck

BY ALISON VILAG, WPBO FALL WATERBIRD COUNTER

To spend a second consecutive migration huddled on whatever the lee side of the counter's shack worked out to be was an honor. I think all who have spent time out here on the Upper Peninsula's northeastern reaches would agree that Whitefish Point is a treasure — yes, undeniably harsh at times — but uniquely beautiful and flush with moments that, for me anyway, will resonate for the rest of my life. These are the rewards that come from riding out migration's arc on the shores of Superior.

In my mind, this season naturally divides into three parts. First came a period of comfortable weather but few birds. Then was an all-too-brief period of abundant, diverse birds. They were, in fact, so plentiful that the weather during this time isn't particularly memorable. However, it was during this period that my shack blew over — on a day we logged nearly 2,000 waterbirds — and it was also around this time when Superior produced a waterspout between snow squalls (which coincided with the day of our peak Tundra Swan flight). I suppose these are likely signs that at least some of the weather during this time was bad.

Finally, there came a period of uncomfortable weather and few birds. This last bit, in fact, was laudably bad. On Nov. 5, I had a marvelous (1,307!) flight of Bufflehead. This was the great clearing-out: birds fleeing winter's usurpation earlier than usual this year. For most of the rest of the count, which ended Nov. 15, I was dealt hip-high drifts with visibility, windchill, and migration all around zero. The discomfort was alleviated by kind souls who provided warmth in its many forms: stones heated on a wood stove, hot soup, companionship. But there were mornings where walking out to the shack felt like a scene from a documentary of arctic exploration — tongues of snow snaked around the dune heather, and great mounds of water, green and taupe, heaved sand onto the beach.

We'll focus, then, on that period where birds distracted the focus from the weather. It began in late September when the dabbling flocks began to push past the Point. This is one of the best parts of fall migration at WPBO — the limited window one has to work birds before they are forever gone into the ether triggers some ancient hunter instinct. There comes a wild, primal joy in the scramble to



Winter sets in at the Point. © Alison Vilag



The trek to the waterbird shack grows snowier as the season carries on.
© Alison Vilag

pin a high-traveling flock in the scope, to count them and sift them, trying to find, for example, the Gadwall slipping by with the ball of American Wigeons. The advent of the mixed dabbler flocks was a welcome change from what had felt an eternity of occasional, heat-distorted Red-necked Grebes on loop.

Ranking high in this season's favorite days was the flight of Oct. 19. Weather conditions — southerly winds so strong that tripod shake was a perpetual annoyance — did not seem indicative of migration. In fact, upon arriving at the shack at sunrise, I definitely made a few disparaging remarks about the day's outlook. Within the first hour, I was proven so wrong that it led me to swear off these sorts of predictions. This unlikely day produced the season's only Snow Geese (a flock of 6), our peak Gadwall (186) and Mallard (206) movement, a flock of 14(!) uncommon Canvasback, and, best of all, a Sabine's Gull, our season's second. It was a juvenile arcing high over the lake, the dramatic dorsal pattern of black, sand, and white blocks striking despite the distance. I ended Oct. 19 with 2,495 waterbirds — nearly 3% of the entire fall count's total.

Even as the weather turned dour, the count continued to supply highlights right up till the end. This year's big Long-tailed Duck flight produced about 9,000 birds seen over three days around Halloween. By then, the air was considerably colder than Superior, and the immense groups of long-tails shimmered like an apparition in this distortion. As the Long-tailed Duck flies is a completely different concept from as the crow flies: the long-tails crest and fall, bunch and pull apart, they serpentine, twist up into double helixes, scatter into the ether...and the symmetry of it all is something beautiful.

Overall numbers from the 2019 WPBO fall waterbird count generally trended above the cumulative averages,

but somewhat lower than averages from the waterbird count's most recent decade. A total of 88,294 individuals of 77 waterbird species were counted; the most numerous were Long-tailed Duck (18,089), Red-necked Grebe (10,647), Red-breasted Merganser (7,727), Canada Goose (7,297), Greater Scaup (5,339), Common Loon (2,960), American Wigeon (2,680), Bufflehead (1,989), White-winged Scoter (1,903), and Redhead (1,878). Species well below their overall averages included Blue-winged Teal (361; avg. = 1,174), White-winged Scoter (1,671; avg. = 2,960), Common Goldeneye (1608; avg. = 2,282), Red-breasted Merganser (7,726; avg. = 9,437), and Red-necked Grebe (10,643; avg. = 12,474). Species considerably above their averages this count included Canada Goose (7297; avg. = 4,578), American Wigeon (2,680; avg. = 1,623), and Mallard (1,472; avg. = 1,110).

New fall high counts were established for Tundra Swan (46; n = 23 in 2014), Wood Duck (20; n = 15 in 2014), Hooded Merganser (63; n = 52 in 2017), Least Sandpiper (106; n = 58 in 2004 and 2016), and American Woodcock (2).

Less-common waterbird species observed during the 2019 fall count include Pacific Loon (flybys on Aug. 31, Sept. 25, and Oct. 18, as well as one observed on the water on Oct. 20); American White Pelican (two observed on Sept. 22 and 23, representing just the second time this species has been recorded on the fall count), a Willet on Aug. 28, the fall count's third-ever Long-billed Dowitcher (Sept. 13), Red-necked Phalaropes on Sept. 3 and 6, Sabine's Gulls on Sept. 14 and Oct. 19, and an Arctic Tern on Sept. 22.



A waterspout forming above Lake Superior.
© Alison Vilag

While not the primary focus of the waterbird count, we do record every species observed, and this season netted 7,847 individuals of 111 non-waterbird species. This is a very low count, and most passerines seemed alarmingly absent throughout the count's duration. The most numerous of the non-waterbirds were American Robin (1,310), ...

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Horned Lark (770), Snow Bunting (613), and Pine Siskin and Purple Finch (each 491). Non-waterbird highlights included a Lark Sparrow on Aug. 17 and a Northern Hawk-Owl that cast delightful glares in my direction for a few hours on Nov. 9.

One of the most impactful moments to me during the fall waterbird count was the period of peak loon flight. On the morning of Sept. 21, I tallied 163 Common Loons in the first hour of the count. It seemed that every scan revealed droves of yet uncounted birds, and I stood there documenting their passage. Digging it, too: just me, the sunrise, and them — dozens flapping south, quiet and almost somber, yet comical with ungainly feet dangling behind and bills gaping slightly. I wondered if, by count's end, I'd have a 500-loon day.

And then the fog came in. We were so soaked that I couldn't even see the couple hundred meters to Superior. For nearly three hours my count was effectively shut down, and my brain most definitely did not. My mind wandered to a recent Cornell release regarding the state of North America's birds — a piece that, with careful words and data, paints a dire picture of something I think most birders knew already, though we may not have known how to say it best.

I thought of data I have compiled for sundry projects, much of it united in a common theme of less now than there once was. I wondered about the whereabouts of the chickadee flock, absent the whole season, that usually loiters around the last row of jack pines. I thought about how in birds, I find a sense of place that, to me, is often elusive — my life is not settled, but watching the same birds in different places feels like home. Mostly, I stood there in the fog, seeing nothing. It was easy to imagine a birdless world. Is that our future? That morning, I felt about as capable of healing the planet as I did of lifting the fog.

Two days later, unhindered by fog and assisted by north winds, I counted 420 loons. For a glorious 15 minutes or so, I was surrounded in all directions and heights of the sky by groups of birds riding the north wind south. In a world where we're increasingly separate from instinct, I find it impossible not to be moved by watching another species following those ancient urges. It was a surprisingly emotional moment — I was both caught up in the beauty and magnitude of the migration, and grieving the uncertainty of its perpetuity.

I experienced many flashes of intense feeling out at the waterbird shack this autumn: a Snowy Owl reaching first land after laboring across Superior; the calls of Tundra Swans ringing out as flocks came into view. The wind was not the only thing that brought tears to my eyes this season. Charles Bowden writes, "The environment is not on the agenda, never is, since we both know people are killing the planet and there is nothing to do but fight this trend and if we lose, well, a good fight is better than being a spectator." How are you contributing to this good fight?



The pursuit of birds has taken Alison to exotic places and gigs closer afield her Great Lakes upbringing including Michigan Audubon's Kirtland's Warbler tours. She has a strong affinity for Michigan's Upper Peninsula and, in particular, Whitefish Point.

A Snowy Owl lingers at the Point. © Alison Vilag

Boreal Owls Abound During Fall Season

BY TORI STEELY AND ZACH WILKINSON, WPBO FALL OWL BANDERS

Fall of 2019 marked the 27th season of owl banding at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. Research started on the night of Sept. 14 and continued into the morning of Oct. 31. The mist nets were able to be open 35 out of 47 nights. Northern Saw-whet, Boreal, and Long-eared Owls were the target species, and four separate audio lures were stationed at standardized mist net locations. During this fall season, a total of 127 birds were banded: 110 Northern Saw-whet Owl, 6 Boreal Owl, 7 Long-eared Owl, and 4 Barred Owl.

In all, this was a good fall season in terms of owl banding. We were able to double the number of birds we caught last year. This was in part because the weather was much more cooperative this season than last.



The first Boreal Owl of the season.

The biggest surprise of the season was the Boreal Owls. These birds tend to go through a four-year cycle, and an irruption year was not expected until 2020. However, they decided to come early and surprise us all. Our first Boreal Owl was captured on Oct. 4. This also happened to be

our best night of the season, with 24 birds captured across four different species (21 Northern Saw-whet Owl, 1 Barred Owl, 1 Long-eared Owl, and 1 Boreal Owl). We were hoping to catch a few more Boreal Owls during the last week of October, as this is when this species is expected to show up. However, this was not the case for us this season, and we did not catch any Boreal Owls after the night of Oct. 22. It will be fascinating to see what next year brings in terms of this species.

This season also brought four different encounters with birds that were previously banded. Two of these birds were banded right here at WPBO. One was the last bird banded as a hatch-year during the summer 2019 season. It was a real treat to see this bird flourishing and not yet in full adult plumage. Another was banded initially during the 2017 spring banding, making the bird at least 4 years old. Finally, the last two encounters were foreign recaptures — one bird originally banded in Sheboygan County, Wisconsin, and the other in Picton, Canada. Whenever we encounter one of these birds in our nets, it always makes us stop and ponder where they have been and what

they have been up to since they were originally banded. Hopefully, some of the birds we banded this season will show up at banding stations in the future so we can get an update on how they are doing.



One of the Long-eared Owls of the season.

A special thanks to Michigan Audubon for their continued support of the banding research at WPBO. Also, a huge thank you to Chris Neri and Nova Mackentley for answering our many questions, bringing us groceries, and helping to keep our spirits up when the weather wasn't cooperating. Finally, we couldn't do this research without everyone who supports it in the Michigan Audubon community. It is through your generous support that this research can continue. It was a pleasure to meet many of you who stopped by to say hello over the weekends. Thank you for your continued support of the research at WPBO.



Tori Steely grew up in Battle Creek, Mich., but currently resides in Salt Lake City. She fell in love with birds, especially owls, in college during an ornithology class. The fall 2019 season marked her fourth year at the Point.



Zach Wilkinson grew up in Eagle County, Colorado, where from a young age he was immersed in outdoor recreation and exploration. Zach is interested in juvenile dispersal in owls as well as raptor migration in general and is a passionate skier in the winter months.

Legacy Giving

BY SARAH POOLER, DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

The message in Heather's opening letter reminds us all that the adaptive power of nature and the human interventions that determine its future are not mutually exclusive. Many of us were taught that it is always best to let nature take its course, a phrase that was likely coined long after humans began to alter the earth, and one that is losing relevance as we address what it means to preserve biodiversity and habitat in the modern world.

In carrying on, it is up to us to play our roles responsibly. Our choices, our habits, our thinking, and our investments in our state's beloved natural spaces will define how nature can win, and will leave a lasting legacy for future generations. It is in that spirit that we invite you to explore legacy giving in support of Michigan Audubon. Leaving a gift in your will or trust, or through an IRA or other financial account, is a remarkable expression of your values that upholds your commitment to Michigan birds and leaves a legacy that will help protect them in perpetuity.

We believe that your legacy gift should support what you cherish, and we welcome designations to any Michigan Audubon program, activity, or bird sanctuary that is especially meaningful to you and

your family. You may also choose to leave your gift unrestricted, which is an extraordinary gesture in entrusting us to address the most urgent needs facing birds in Michigan at the time your contribution is received. All legacy gifts will help to provide lasting financial stability for our dedicated efforts in conservation, education, and research.

The power of nature is inspiring. Recognizing our interconnectedness to nature should inspire us even more. Your experiences with the natural world and your love of Michigan birds can be an enduring part of your life story. We encourage you to share it — with friends and family, and with the birds and open spaces that have brought you joy and wonder throughout your lifetime.

For more information, please contact Development Manager Sarah Pooler at (517) 580-7364 or spooler@michiganaudubon.org.



Sarah can trace her love of wildlife and conservation to her first week of day camp at Kalamazoo Nature Center where she met a Great Horned Owl. She is excited to support and expand the scope of Michigan Audubon's efforts and to grow its ranks of supporters and bird enthusiasts.



Registration is Open for the 2020 MYBC!

MICHIGAN YOUNG BIRDERS CAMP | JUNE 21–26, 2020 | ALMA, MI



Do you know a young birder or naturalist? Have them join us this summer for an adventurous week assisting with bird banding and point counts, touring critical habitats for Michigan birds, learning about wildlife rehabilitation, studying bird biology, and birding, of course! Each year campers have seen nearly 100 bird species during the week, and all have checked at least one lifer off their list.



Experiences at MYBC help campers to:

- Develop expertise in avian natural history;
- Foster connections with their birding peers;
- Discover careers in bird conservation and ornithology;
- Grow their passion for the natural world.

We encourage young birders and naturalists of all skill levels to participate — curiosity and enthusiasm will make it a fun week for anyone who enjoys the outdoors.

Camp is open to those who will be 13 to 18 years old. Camp cost is \$500 per student and includes lodging, travel during camp, food, and supplies. Full and partial scholarships are available. The MYBC camper application deadline is March 31, 2020. The online application can be found at michiganaudubon.org.

Contact Education Coordinator Lindsay Cain at lcain@michiganaudubon.org or (517) 580-7364 with any questions.

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.

Mary Abbott	Robin & William Dickson	Jeff Koval	Christy Penka	Sherry Stiles
Joshua & Julia Abbott	Gary Dodd	Doug & June Kuiper	Patricia Perkins &	Patricia Tarini
Julie Alton	Robert L. Dow	Teri Kukla	Wayne Say	David Taylor
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Please check the expiration date above your address to ensure that you continue to enjoy the benefits of your Michigan Audubon membership. If you have any questions about your membership status, please contact Communications & Marketing Coordinator Molly Keenan at mkeenam@michiganaudubon.org or (517) 580-7364. Thank you!



Dated Material

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



Sandhill Cranes © Jocelyn Anderson

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