

THE WARBLER

DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY

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MARCH 2014

EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



SATURDAY, MARCH 8TH FIELD TRIP

Meet in the parking lot of the Visitors' Center at Saylorville Lake at 8 a.m. on Saturday, March 8th. We'll observe birds around the Visitor's Center and feeders and then we'll venture out in search of species that might be found at various sites around the lake. Dress for conditions and bring a beverage and snack for break. Contact Denny Thompson at 515-254-0837 for information about field trips. All levels of birdwatchers welcomed.

Loon Magic

A slide presentation and lecture

Tuesday, March 18th

By Ty Smedes

As an icon of the north-country, the Common Loon has created magic for all who have enjoyed his antics and that magical "*call of the wild*". Join local writer/photographer Ty Smedes on Tuesday, March 18th as he lectures about the life history of the Common Loon, and shares many stunning images. Ty has made many trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of northern Minnesota, where he has captured the iconic images of a mother loon on the nest, with youngsters riding on her back, and the male feeding the young, as they rest there. Join us for an exciting and educational presentation!

Ty's photos have been published by many major magazines and book publishers. Specializing in landscapes, wildlife, and prairie wildflowers, he also loves to photograph and market photos of Iowa people and cultural events. Ty has taught nature photography classes and is an experienced Photo-Tour leader, having led nature photography tours to Yellowstone and Teton National Parks, as well as the Eastern Sierras. He was co-leader of a nature photography tour to Brazil in 1996 and has led several nature photography tours since then to East Africa and Botswana. Information regarding Ty's two books "Capturing Iowa's Seasons" and "The Return of Iowa's Bald Eagles – 2nd Edition" can be found on his website at www.smedesphoto.com.

Meetings of Des Moines Audubon Society begin at 7 p.m. and are held in the lower level of Westminster Presbyterian Church which is located at the corner of Beaver and Franklin Avenues in Des Moines. Parking is available on the north and west sides of the church and an elevator can be accessed at the west door. For information about this program, please contact Jane Clark at jclark@radiks.net or 515-223-5047.

American Woodcock Watches

Friday Night, March 28th at Neal Smith NWR, 7:15 PM

Friday Night, April 4th at Saylorville Visitor's Center, 7 PM

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Join us for Woodcock Watches on Friday March 28th at Neal Smith NWR, 7:15 p.m. and Friday, April 4th at the Saylorville Visitor Center at 7 p.m. Karen Viste-Sparkman will be our leader at Neal Smith NWR and Denny Thompson will be our field trip leader at Saylorville. If you have questions about these events, please contact Jane at jrclark@radiks.net or 515-223-5047.

Although it is still windy and cold, American Woodcocks will soon be heading north along their spring migration routes. In the 'early bird gets the worm' mentality, woodcocks migrate earlier than most other species leaving their southern wintering grounds sometimes before February to arrive on northern breeding grounds often when there is still snow on the ground. Despite the specie's allure, there is still very little known about the ecology of American woodcock along the spring migration routes.

It will be twilight when we meet. We'll be walking in an open area or forest opening when we'll hear a buzzing call or "peent" sound. A small creature up ahead will be bobbing its head strutting around. Suddenly, it will spiral upward to a height of more than 200 feet. Quickly, it will spiral back down to earth, zig-zagging and swooping while making a musical, chirping sound. Once back on the ground, it starts "peenting" again.

Join us to say hello to spring and the return of the American Woodcock, while witnessing the male woodcock performing a mating ritual. The woodcock, also known as "timberdoodle" breed in March and April throughout most of the eastern United States and Canada.

Birding Basics at Gray's Lake in Des Moines

John Bissell will again be holding weekly birding walks at Gray's Lake every Wednesday from 11 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. through May. Meet in the beach parking lot of the north side of the lake. Sponsored by Des Moines Parks and Recreation.

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**REAP Day/Environmental Lobby Day**  
**March 18, 2014**  
**9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.**  
**Iowa State Capitol Rotunda**

Join like-minded Iowans at the statehouse to support clean water, wildlife habitat and conservation progress in Iowa.

More than 100 Iowans and 30 organizations turned out during last year's REAP/Environmental Lobby Day at the statehouse. Now, with an historic opportunity to fund Iowa's Resource Enhancement and Protection Program (REAP) at a \$25 million level for its 25th anniversary year, members of the Iowa REAP Alliance and Iowa Environmental Council are working together for an even bigger turnout in 2014. Together, we can help "close the deal" for conservation this legislative session!

Plan to wear blue to show your support for clean water! Training for citizen advocates will be held at 8:30 a.m. and a news conference on the importance of conservation funding will be held during the event, about 10 a.m.

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What's black and white and like a torpedo?
Common Loon

Common Loons are avian torpedoes, perfectly designed for underwater pursuit of their fish prey. Strong webbed feet propel them through the water to depths of up to 150 feet. Although the Common Loon population appears to be increasing, threats still exist. Among these is lead poisoning: the birds ingest discarded lead fishing tackle as they scoop up pebbles from the lake bottom to store in their gizzards. In the Adirondacks, acidification and contamination of lakes caused by burning of fossil fuels also pose a problem. Common Loons are accidentally caught by commercial fishing nets, both on the Great Lakes and in the ocean.

**Excerpted From American Bird Conservancy's Bird of the week, January 24, 2014*

An Attached Garage

By Kim Gerety

Have you ever had a project that ended up being a lot bigger than originally planned? We had one such project last fall.

After reading Althea Sherman's book, *Birds of an Iowa Dooryard*, we wanted to see Chimney Swifts for ourselves. If you have not read this book, Althea hired carpenters in 1915 to build a Chimney Swift tower for the purpose of observation. A staircase was built around the artificial chimney with windows and peep-holes for viewing. This made her the first person to witness the nesting activities of these birds.

For a time, Chimney Swifts thrived as man settled the continent, but now our home heating methods and designs have changed, causing a loss in habitat for these birds. Some, who continue to use the ideal chimneys, view these birds as pests when they hear the cries of the young as they beg for food. They may not realize what growing life is within this strange place, nor the help these birds are to us by all the flying bugs they consume. Unlike human newborns, the little nestlings sleep at night. Our homes are filled with so much noise without the birds-- phones, televisions, stereos, even our conversations. If any reading this have suitable chimneys, I would beg you to leave them open for the birds. You would be doing the Swifts so much good.

We did finally see Chimney Swifts, but only for brief moments as they flew high around the Washington Township School. Later, we saw them in the downtown area of Panora, as well as other locations. Oh! Wouldn't it be something to have these birds around our yard?

We read Paul D. and Georgean Z. Kyle's books; *Chimney Swifts: North America's Mysterious Birds Above the Fireplace* and *Chimney Swift Towers*. We knew they were interesting birds, but now even more so and really would like to witness their antics. One being, the newly fledged young will "tag" unsuspecting birds as they develop hunting skills. We talked about it, but were not sure we had just the right spot to place a tower. We'd forget about it, only to start thinking again. Last summer, we became more serious about this and figured out the cost of building it ourselves.

We had an old garage. Well, not really a garage, but an old carriage shed. The foundation was crumbling and the walls leaned. As long as we have lived here, the big doors have never closed completely. The building was a place to store stuff. Barn Swallows and Robins found it to be a fine place for nesting. Then the door blew off and we became concerned for the children's safety, if they were in there at the wrong time.

This was when our project grew. Instead of building one tower ourselves in the south yard, we'd hire someone to build a garage with two Chimney Swift towers on the south side of it. Unlike some nesting boxes that need so much space between each box, Chimney Swift towers can be placed as close as ten feet apart. No matter how tall a tower is made, only one pair will use it for nesting. Our towers are about 20 feet apart.

The towers are not just simple boxes with holes at the top. There are features built in for the comfort and safety of the Chimney Swifts. Each tower has three layers. The inside layer is textured siding to allow for the birds to cling. The next layer is foam board insulation and the outside layer is white, vinyl siding. The vinyl siding is said to prevent snakes and other critters from crawling up the tower. I recently saw a picture of a snake going up vinyl siding to get to a nest, so we plan to put up some metal flashing before the Swifts begin arriving.

Because we are not using metal stilts, we had to be a little creative to make sure rain water drains and cool air goes up. Down at the base of each tower is a vent to allow cooler air to go in, which pushes the hotter air out the top. The vents have mesh on the inside to keep anything from getting in that way. Prior to the concrete being poured, large metal cans of gravel were placed in the ground.

At the top is a cap that shrinks the size of the opening. Homeowners did this to prevent as much snow and rain as possible from going down their chimneys. The Swifts have adapted to this and the cap keeps much of the sun from shining into the tower.

When we started the project, we had no idea if the Swifts would even come our way. All we knew was we had seen some several miles east and nine miles west. We were taking a risk that any would just happen by and find these in the spring. Well... wouldn't you know it? After the first day of the dirt work, guess who just happened to fly above our yard? Yes, a Chimney Swift! Another was seen several days later.

Kevin and I have different priorities, though he does enjoy birds. He calls our new building "a garage with two Chimney Swift towers". I call this "two Chimney Swift towers with an attached garage."

We have high hopes we will see Chimney Swifts here in the spring. Maybe then we'll have another story to share.

*Kim and Kevin Gerety live in rural Dallas County with their four sons.

Bluebird Trail Time

The Eastern Bluebird is a joy to behold. Many people have never seen one. We find them today in our county parks and other rural neighborhoods, largely due to the efforts of volunteers who monitor bluebird trails.

In the 1930's Eastern Bluebird numbers had been severely diminished in this country due to habitat destruction and the illegal introduction of the European Starling and the House Sparrow, which competed for cavity nests with the Eastern Bluebird and other desirable bird species, such as Wrens, Tree Swallows, Black-capped Chickadee, and others. Their numbers have since steadily increased due to the placement of nest boxes designed for Eastern Bluebirds, and to the efforts of trail monitors.

Approximately fifteen bluebird trails, and 270 nest boxes, are known to be currently maintained in Polk County by public and private organizations. Polk County Conservation currently has ten trails and is considering the establishment of two more trails, and will need volunteers to monitor them. Monitors would need to commit to a weekly trail visit of less than four hours, on a day of their convenience, during the nesting season which runs from the first of March until around Labor Day.

New volunteers will be provided an instructional publication, and will accompany experienced trail monitors until they are assigned their own trail. The work is not difficult, and monitors routinely drive their own vehicles between nest boxes.

If you are interested in this satisfying, responsible, outdoor endeavor, see the contact information below.

Rogers Shell, Polk County Coordinator (515-284-5269, deeshell@live.com)

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