

**THE WARBLER**  
**DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
**VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 5**  
**MAY 2016**  
**EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK**



**Des Moines Audubon Field Trip—Saturday, May 14**  
**Walnut Woods State Park**

For the Saturday, May 14 field trip, Des Moines Audubon will meet at 7:30 a.m. at the circle drive by the bird blind at Walnut Woods State Park. We'll also check out nearby Brown's Woods County Park. The main species we'll be searching for will be warblers, but there could be a great variety of breeding and migrating birds. Bring a beverage and snack for break and dress for conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! For information about this field trip, contact Jane Clark at jrclark@radiks.net or 515-223-5047. Please note the early meeting time of 7:30 a.m.

Saturday, May 14 is International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD)—a time to celebrate and support migratory bird conservation throughout the Americas. IMBD focuses attention on the nearly 350 species of migratory birds that travel between non-breeding grounds in South and Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean and nesting habitats in North America.



**Spring Bird Hike**  
**Saturday, May 14, 8:00-11:00 AM, Voas Nature Area**

The beauty of spring certainly includes the songs and colors of the birds that return to their summer nesting grounds. Mid-May is the peak of songbird migration with the potential to see over 50 different species. Birders will be exploring the forest, prairies and wetland habitats that Voas offers. Hiking will be on mowed trails but may be wet. Some binoculars and bird books will be available. Program will be rain or shine. Pre-registration is required for this free program. To register, contact: Dallas County Conservation Board, 465-3577 or email at conservation@dallascountyiowa.gov .

**MAY 17<sup>th</sup> POTLUCK PICNIC**  
**GREENWOOD PARK, DES MOINES**

Our traditional spring potluck will be held on Tuesday, May 17<sup>th</sup> in the Greenwood Park open shelter. The shelter can be reached by entering the park at 45<sup>th</sup> Street and Grand Avenue in Des Moines. Follow the park road until you reach Greenwood Pond, then immediately turn left up the hill. After reaching the parking lot, turn left to the open shelter.

Joel Van Roekel, Supervisor of Environmental Education for Des Moines Parks and Recreation will also be joining us for a discussion on bluebirds and other species of interest. Members Rogers Shell and John Gersib monitor bluebird boxes in this park and other city, county and state parks (see related article elsewhere in this newsletter.)

We'll begin the picnic at 6:30 p.m. Bring a main dish, salad, and/or dessert to share and your own table service. Come before the picnic at 5:30 p.m. or earlier to view migrating and breeding species in the oak woodland, so bring your binoculars. Join us for a peaceful and relaxing evening! Please note there will be no regular meeting in June, July or August. Contact Jane Clark for details about the picnic at jrclark@radiks.net or 515-223-5047.

## **Birder's Brunch at Ledges State Park Saturday, May 21, 8:00 AM**

Meet at 8:00 AM at the Oak Grove parking lot at Ledges State Park, south of Boone, on Saturday, May 21, for the Ames Big Bluestem Audubon Society's traditional last field trip of the BBAS season. Plan on birding the trails around Ledges State Park, and then enjoy a potluck brunch. Please bring a food item to share and your table service. All Big Bluestem Audubon's field trips are free and open to the public.

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### **Audubon Bluebird Program By Rogers Shell**

Bluebird programs are funded by both public and private organizations. In Polk County, three bluebird trails were provided by the City of Des Moines Parks and Recreation, nine trails by Polk County Conservation, one trail by the City of West Des Moines, two trails in State Parks, one trail by a private organization, and one by a private individual. Several of those trails benefitted from private donations. Legal ownership of these trails lies with the landowners where nest boxes are placed. In 2014 over 300 nest boxes were serviced in Polk County where over 600 bluebirds were fledged.

Still the volunteers who made the nest boxes, installed them on those trails, and then monitored them weekly throughout the nesting season, have their own interest in these trails, simply due to their contribution of time and resources. You should know that nearly all of those volunteers are current or past members in the Des Moines Chapter of the Audubon Society. It then follows that these Polk County bluebird programs are actually the "Audubon Bluebird Program", and Audubon members can be proud of this. They are bringing bluebirds back into the county!

Bluebird trail monitors enjoy this outdoor endeavor, knowing that there is a potential surprise waiting for them every time they open a nest box, like opening a Christmas present. The cavity nesters using these boxes are mostly bluebirds, tree swallows, chickadees, wrens, and house sparrows, but they can always hope to see a prothonotary warbler or other rare cavity nester in their boxes. These monitors share their experiences with a lively email communication, which can be both educational and entertaining, and sometimes saddening when they experience losses to the very many bluebird predators.

The primary bluebird predator is the House Sparrow. It was unfortunately introduced into this country in 1851 in Brooklyn, New York, and is the primary reason for monitoring bluebird nest boxes. We will not allow them to imprint on our nest boxes, because if we allow them, they would eventually take over all the boxes on a trail, resulting in the death of many bluebirds. This is especially true in the cities where the House Sparrow abounds.

In the past two years, we have installed eight new trails, and plan to continue the increase, primarily in City parks and cemeteries. We recruited five new monitors, and will need more in the future. Polk County Conservation and the City of Des Moines have been providing all monitors with an illustrated guide. They also get personal training and instructions on established trails with experienced monitors.

We visit each nest box weekly throughout the nesting season, on dates and times of our own choosing, from around May 1st to Sept 1st. A standby monitor can be requested for any reason. Monitors provide their own transportation to their trail and between boxes. They can be any age as long as they have a valid driver's license. There are two active monitors in their 80's.

If you want to become a part of the Audubon Bluebird Program, express your interest by email to Rogers Shell, Bluebird Trail Monitor Coordinator, at [deeshell@live.com](mailto:deeshell@live.com).

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### **Audubon Chapters Complete Bluebird Survey Pilot Project By Doug Harr, President, Iowa Audubon**

Four Audubon chapters in Iowa participated in a pilot project for the National Audubon Society during a 4-day weekend in mid-January. The purpose of the project was to begin a long-term survey of bluebirds wintering in the northern U.S., to determine if bluebirds might be wintering farther north each year, as a possible indicator of climate change. Because this was a pilot year, changes will likely be made before the survey is expanded to include more states. Few bluebirds were encountered during this test year, as the selected weekend was one of the coldest and windiest of Iowa's winter. While bluebirds were present, most were impossible to count due to severe weather conditions. It is hoped that in coming years the count period will be expanded from 4 days to perhaps 2 weeks, allowing volunteers to select days best suited for the surveys.

*\*From the Iowa Audubon Newsletter. Volume 12, Number 1, April 2016*

## **HOUSE FINCH--A HANDSOME ALIEN SPECIES**

**By Ray Harden**

One of the prettiest little birds at the feeder this time of year is the male house finch. His red head and streaked red breast makes him stand out more distinctively than the sparrows, goldfinches, and juncos. The female is the same size--six inches long with a brown back with brown stripes on her buff-colored breast. She does not have the reddish coloration.

The house finch is not a native Iowa bird. This species arrived in Iowa during the summer of 1982. Mrs. Marcia Steck of Perry is credited for spotting the first one in Dallas County and she recorded the second sighting in the state. Mrs. Steck had read reports of these birds moving into Iowa and was watching her back yard birdfeeder when she saw one.

House finches are originally from the west coast of the United States. According to Gladys Black, an Iowa ornithologist in her book Iowa Birdlife, "In 1940, some enterprising cage-bird dealers on Long Island, New York, received an illegal shipment of house finches. As U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agents were about to make their arrest, the dealers released the finches." The birds have now spread across the United States and even to Hawaii.

Many people do not like house finches because they compete with native purple finches and tend to drive them away. The house finch also competes with the common house sparrow and studies have shown that in areas where the house finch becomes established the house sparrow population decreases.

House finches were increasing in numbers until the mid-1990's when a bacterial eye disease, conjunctivitis, caused the death of one third of the population. The bird's eyes became swollen and covered with crusty mucus that blinded them and they starved because they could not find food. House finches are social birds that live in large flocks so the disease spread quickly. Many scientists were concerned that the entire population could be wiped out. However, the finches are making a comeback and their numbers are increasing. This disease was also found in goldfinches and it is sometimes a problem for domestic poultry. This form of conjunctivitis is not spread to humans. Studies have shown that the disease is more prevalent in winter when the birds are in flocks and are visiting back yard feeders. If you put out food for birds, you can help in controlling this problem by having several feeders spread out across your yard this will reduce the numbers of birds at a feeder.

The house finch is a seed eater and even when they are feeding their young, they eat very few insects. They play an important role in the environment by eating the seeds of noxious weeds. They also eat a variety of fruits and berries and in fact the males red coloration is due to the "carotenoid pigment" found in fruits. In the southwest desert the male house finches have a yellowish-orange coloration because the foods the birds eat in that area do not have the red pigment.

House finches will nest in a variety of places like tree branches, eaves, and bird houses. They also seem to be fond of building a nest in hanging planters on porches and patios. They make cup shaped nests from plant fibers, twigs, hair, various kinds of debris, and then line it with fine leaves of grass. The parents, unlike other birds, do not keep the nest clean. The nest is usually surrounded with the young's fecal material. The finches have four to five bluish white eggs speckled with brown and have two to three clutches per season. Both parents care for the young and the young leave the nest two and one half weeks after hatching.

They are found in a variety of habitats- parks, gardens, brushy hill sides, and fencerows and they live in Iowa all year. House finches are an alien species but the handsome males are always pleasant to watch at bird feeders and in springtime they have a delightful song.

### **No Red Dye! by Carol Berrier**

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology warns not to use red dye in hummingbird feeders. Many commercial nectar solutions contain red dye. A hummingbird consumes 10 grams of nectar solution per day. This means it ingests 17 times more red dye for its body weight than the maximum daily limit recommended for humans. Red caps, bases, or decorations on feeders are adequate to attract the birds. Hummingbirds that have been fed red dye have higher mortality rates and tumors of the bill and liver.

Instead mix a more natural nectar with a ratio of 4 parts water to 1 part white sugar. I use a two-cup Pyrex measuring cup, fill with 1 cup water, add 1/4 cup sugar and put in the microwave. Heat until sugar has dissolved and nectar begins to boil. Cool before filling feeder. Extra sugar may appeal to the birds, but it is NOT healthy and is harder for them to digest. Clean feeders every few days.

For orioles, use a ratio of 6 parts water to 1 part sugar. Orange halves, suet, grapes, peanut butter mixtures and watermelon are recommended. We all know they like jelly! Insects are an essential part of both species' diets.

**Des Moines Audubon Society membership is for one year, from July to June.  
Dues should be mailed to our Treasurer,  
Jim Clark, 9871 Lincoln Avenue, Clive, IA 50325**

**Please make checks payable to “Des Moines Audubon Society”**  
**Membership Levels and Dues:**

Student (under 18).....\$1.00  
Individual Adult..... \$10.00  
Family.....\$15.00  
Life.....\$125.00  
(May be paid in five annual payments of \$25.00)

\*Additional Contribution for Conservation Projects \_\_\_\_\_  
\*Additional Contribution for Bird Feeding Projects \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City/State/Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

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**RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED**