

***THE WARBLER***  
**DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
**VOLUME XXIII, NUMBER 6**  
**JUNE 2016**  
**EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK**



**FIELD TRIP TO CHICHAQUA—SATURDAY, JUNE 11<sup>th</sup>**

The Des Moines Audubon Society field trip will be held on Saturday, June 11 and the destination will be Chichaqua Bottoms Greenbelt in northeast Polk County. Chichaqua Bottoms includes over 8,000 acres along the Skunk River, with prairie, wetlands and riparian woodlands supporting about 200 species of birds. Meet at 7:30 a.m. in the parking lot on the west side of the Best Western Motel located in the SW corner of the Ankeny 1st Street Interchange on I-35. Dress for conditions. Contact Denny Thompson for more information at [cdnthomps@gmail.com](mailto:cdnthomps@gmail.com) or 515-254-0837.

**REMINDER: NO PROGRAM MEETINGS IN JUNE, JULY OR AUGUST**

**BIRDING SURVEY: WHITEROCK CONSERVANCY**  
**COON RAPIDS, IOWA--MAY 7, 2016**

I was awakened by the loud call of a barred owl. The ruckus was coming from the large cottonwood tree next to my tent. The owls questioning cry, "Who, who cooks for you?" was answered by several more barred owls in the area. The chorus owls abruptly stopped—something in the woods must have frightened them. I checked my watch, it was ten minutes after midnight and I had started my bird list for the day.

When the owls stopped calling I quickly went back to sleep. However, I was awakened again about 4 a.m. by another bird calling west of my tent, this time it was a whippoorwill. I had two birds on my bird list and I was still in my sleeping bag.

The Whiterock Conservancy, near Coon Rapids, had invited birders of the Raccoon River Watershed Association (RRWA) to do a birding survey in the area. A dozen birders from the group met at the shelter house at 6:30 a.m. for coffee and snacks before we took to the trails. We counted several species around the shelter while we were having coffee, such as barn swallows, phoebes, goldfinches, and orioles.

We broke into small groups and went in different directions that offered a variety of habitats. I walked along the edge of the Middle Raccoon River for a half mile. I made several stops to observe and take photos of the birds I saw. Near the bridge a flock of cliff swallows were feeding on insects as they flew above the water. Further downstream a small group of bank swallows were also hunting for insects. A few of them had perched on a brush pile and were posing for my camera.

I saw six Harris's sparrows feeding along the edge of the trail. I had never seen so many in one group and I was also surprised to see them feeding on dandelion seeds. They were just passing through Iowa and fattening up to continue their long flight to Canada.

At a small pond, near the river, I jumped up a pair of wood ducks. They skimmed across the water giving their squealing flight call "oo-eek, oo-eek" as they headed downstream. A pair of Canada geese looked like they wanted to land on the pond but they veered off when they saw me. However, a pair of common yellowthroats was not disturbed by my presence. They kept flying around the pond and occasionally the male would land on a shrub to sing.

My best bird of the day was an orchard oriole; I had not seen one for many years. It was eating at a feeder near the shelter. My best photo was of a Swainson's thrush that was heading to its breeding area in Canada.

Some of the group went to nearby Dunbar Slough in the afternoon to look for wading birds. Their best sighting was a Hudsonian godwit; it is heading to the Arctic Ocean area.

It was a good day for birding; RRWA birders recorded one hundred and three species. This is about one fourth of the total number of all the species that have been seen in Iowa. This list gave the Whiterock Conservancy a good baseline for the birds that are found in the area and information for future studies.

Ray Harden, May 10, 2016

## **American Bittern (*Boterus lentiginosus*, Iowa Important Bird Area Spotlight Species** **By Doug Harr, President of Iowa Audubon**

“Thunder Pumper”, “Stake Driver”, “Water Belcher”, and “Bog Bumper” are just a few of the colorful colloquial names, based upon the sound of its call, awarded to the American Bittern. This wading marsh bird is a fairly large and secretive species, with another very descriptive name given by noted avian author Pete Dunn: “Patience Cast in Feathers Imitating Reed Bed”. Anyone familiar with this species will recognize its call instantly, but finding it hiding in marsh vegetation can be a much more difficult task.

Large (about 28” long), somewhat stocky, golden-brown members of the heron family, American Bitterns commonly hide in tall, emergent, wetland plant life. Extending head and neck skyward, and exhibiting vertical stripes on the neck and chest, makes them blend in with surrounding reeds or cattails. Sometime they will even sway to imitate surrounding plants blowing in the wind. Adults and juveniles all are similar, except adults have a blackish malar (jawline) stripe.

Widespread breeders across the northern two-thirds of our continent, the species is most common where wetlands are abundant, especially on larger vegetated marshes. But with the loss of wetlands nationwide, bitterns have realized a decline in numbers, particularly in a state like Iowa, where most wetlands have been drained and remaining marshes suffer in water quality from farmland runoff and pollution. In wetlands of the eastern tallgrass prairie area, which includes all of Iowa, the federal Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) indicates an annual decline of about 3%, but there are so few left in Iowa that American Bittern is almost never detected on the state’s annual BBS routes.

For this reason, Iowa Audubon has declared this bittern a “criteria species” for establishing Important Bird Areas. Iowa DNR lists the American Bittern as a “Species of Greatest Conservation Need”.

Upon arriving in Iowa on spring migration, pair formation usually occurs during April and May. Solitary adult males proclaim territories with a classic “oonk-a-choonk” call (like the sound of a pump, or of a stake being driven into the ground—hence the nicknames). When startled into flight, adults emit a “wok” call.

Females construct a nest of cattails, reeds or other emergents, generally about 15”-18” in diameter and built over water, but sometimes on shore-lines. As vegetation grows, the nest becomes more well-concealed. Because of the birds’ secretive nature, not much is known about nesting, other than they typically lay 4-5 eggs which are incubated only by the female for 28-29 days. Separate, well-hidden, nest entrance and exit paths are used by the adults. Young leave the nest at 2 weeks, with the parents feeding them small fish, frogs and invertebrates—even mice—from the time of hatching until about 4 weeks of age, when young begin their own foraging.

Conserving wetlands is essential to the survival of American Bitterns in Iowa and elsewhere. Fortunately, cooperative efforts between DNR, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, Audubon, and other organizations, have resulted in many wetlands being restored since the late 1980s, so bitterns are hanging on. However, we must also work to reduce farm runoff and all water pollution in our wetlands, in order to permanently secure the American Bittern in Iowa’s landscape.

*From: Iowa Audubon’s Newsletter, Volume 12, Number 1, April 2016*

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### **Jewels of the Wetlands by Ann Johnson (Older Wiser Livelier Seniors Program)** **Tuesday, June 14 @ 11:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.** **Jester Park Lodge**

Looking for an excuse to get out of the house, make some new friends, enjoy a good meal and learn about the exciting world of nature? These programs are held the first Tuesday of each month. The nature program will start at 11:00 a.m. at the Jester Park Lodge. An optional luncheon follows the program at noon in which pre-registration is required. Call 515-323-5300 to register. The cost of the catered lunch by The Radish is \$10. Lunch registration is due June 10th.

Ann Johnson is a life-long Iowan and birder. In the summer of 1999 she expanded her natural history interests to learning identification of dragonflies and damselflies. That process of learning led to the publication of "Dragonflies and Damselflies in Your Pocket: A Guide to the Odonates of the Upper Midwest" and the creation of the informal Iowa Odonata Survey. Ann's presentation will focus on gaining an awareness and appreciation of the beauty and diversity of these fabulous insects. See more at: <http://www.mycountyparks.com/County/Polk/Park/Jester-Lewis-A-Park/Events/7871/OWLS-Older-Wiser-Livelier-Seniors-Jewels-of-th.aspx>

## Southern Iowa Northern Saw-whet Owl Survey October 16-November 8, 2015

Very little is known about the migratory movements of northern saw-whets (NSWO) in the state of Iowa. At Hitchcock Nature Area, located in the central Loess Hills of western Iowa, a long-term fall migration monitoring project was initiated in 2007 to begin to advance the knowledge of this elusive but common wintering species of owl. However, distribution of this species throughout the state continued to rely on incidental sightings during overwintering. This project's intent was to systematically detect the presence of NSWO at state-owned sites at as many as possible of the 10 southern tier counties across the width of the state from river to river to further understand the extent of their winter range. Since they migrate in a generally southern direction, detecting them in fall migration when they are most common and in the most southern counties of Iowa would suggest that they also occupy the region north of the detection points during winter.

It was determined that seven years of monitoring NSWO fall migration at Hitchcock Nature Center has demonstrated that there is a three-week period in which the majority of migration occurs. Thus, if surveying occurs for a three evening period at each location then, allowing for variables in weather and logistics, six sites would be optimal. State lands seemed the simplest for access. Those available were identified within the study area. Using Google Earth software, we looked at forested public lands with associated possible forested migratory corridors, particularly but not singularly on or near river systems.

Eight locations were chosen to be visited for closer scrutiny from which seven were chosen: Waubonsie State Park (Fremont County), Lake of Three Fires State Park (Taylor County), Mount Ayr Wildlife Management Area (Ringgold County), Stephens State Forest-Whitebreast Unit (Lucas County), Wapello State Park (Davis County), Lacey-Keosauqua State Park (Van Buren County west), Shimek State Forest-Farmington Unit (Van Buren County east).

Veronica Mecko and her assistant Emily Wilmoth set up nets on October 16 at a site in Harrison County, Missouri, about 6 miles south of Lamoni, Iowa. This was part of the training for Emily and also a test of all the equipment for the project.

Prior to the mid-1990s, NSWO were usually considered uncommon if not rare throughout their range. A group of researchers, primarily in the Appalachian Mountains and around the Great Lakes developed the technique of playing a recording of the male courtship call to attract them to mist nets for capture and banding. This proved to be a highly successful technique to detect the presence of this strictly nocturnal and secretive species. Protocols were developed and we used this technique for this project.

Of 32 new captures of NSWOs, two owls were male (6%), 4 were of unknown sex (12%) and 26 (82%) were female. Compare this ratio to what was captured at Hitchcock NA during the same time period: of 40 owls, 8 were male (20%), 6 were unknown (15%) and 26 were female (65%).

### Ages of NSWO banded in Southern Iowa and Hitchcock NA (control) in 2015

<u>Age</u>	<u>Southern tier counties</u>	<u>Hitchcock</u>
Hatch year (HY)	46.5%	70%
Second year	21.5%	17.5%
After second year	16%	5%
After Hatch year	16%	7.5%
Ratio of Hatch year to adults*	15:17	22:10

\*A higher ratio of HY to adults suggests a more successful breeding season. NSWO begin breeding in their second year. This was the first year we were able to compare age groups from two separate samplings in Iowa. The obvious discrepancy points out the fallacy of using small sampling size to make inferences.

The largest weight of an owl was 111 grams at Mount Ayr. This is a relatively large mass for NSWOs captured in southern Iowa during migration. In 2012 of 41 owls captured at Mount Ayr only one was more than 100 grams weighing in at 102 g. and in 2013 of 12 owls banded the largest weighed 103 grams. Five other owls this year weighed 100 grams or more and they were scattered among the locations.

Our experience at Hitchcock NA shows that migrating NSWO prefer windless or near windless nights for migration. They are more likely to migrate with northerly winds (tail wind), tolerate light west wind, and are least likely to migrate into strong southerly winds. The variable effects of weather systems, annual changes in nesting success, untested banding sites, with the exception of Mount Ayr WMA, played a role in detection of NSWO. It was anticipated that more NSWO would be captured but by using the comparable banding efforts of Hitchcock NA, which ran concurrently, as a control to compare numbers, the effects of variables were kept in perspective. As a technique, the use of actively luring and capturing an elusive species, such as the northern saw whet owl, can arguably be an effective method to better understand population distribution and density with minimum impact on individuals. An added bonus is that by banding the owls and possibly receiving recapture information on them, the knowledge base can expand beyond the borders of Iowa.

Veronica and I wish to thank the people and organizations that are essential to the success of any endeavor. Emily Wilmoth ably assisted Veronica Mecko with the field work with good humor, flexibility and newly acquired skill in banding. We are thankful to the Board of Directors of the Audubon Society of Omaha for sponsoring this project, Des Moines Audubon Society for financial support and the Projects Committee of the Iowa Ornithologists Union and Iowa Audubon for their continuing financial support of our work with raptors.

Jerry Toll and Veronica Mecko

**Des Moines Audubon Society membership is for one year, from July to June**  
**If you would like to check on the status of your membership, please email jrclark@radiks.net or call 515-223-5047**

**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 \_\_\_\_\_

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