

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
VOLUME XXIV, NUMBER 5
MAY 2017
EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



Saturday, May 13th Field Trip
Saylorville Visitor's Center at 7:30 a.m.

Join Des Moines Audubon members on Saturday, May 13th as we celebrate the return of migrating songbirds. Meet in the parking lot of the Visitors' Center at Saylorville Lake at 7:30 A.M. The main species we'll be searching for will be warblers, but there could be a great variety of nesting and migrating birds. Bring a beverage and snack for break and dress for conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Contact Dennis Thompson at cdnthomps@gmail.com or 515-254-0837 for information about field trips.

Bird Sounds, Decoded
By Nathan Pieplow
Jester Park Lodge
Tuesday, May 16, 7 p.m.

Des Moines Audubon Society and Polk County Conservation invite you to attend a program on Bird Sounds, Decoded, by author Nathan Pieplow. The program will be held at Jester Park Lodge on Tuesday, May 16 at 7 p.m.

Identifying birds by sound is a crucial skill that can be difficult to learn. Author Nathan Pieplow has devised a system that lets you identify bird sounds without having to memorize them. The *Peterson Field Guide to Bird Sounds* lets you look up sounds, the way you look up words in the dictionary. The key is learning to visualize sounds. Nathan's clear, practical instructions for visualizing sounds will make you a better listener. You will hear details in sound that you hadn't noticed before, and you will have the vocabulary to describe those details. Nathan will help you identify birds by their sounds, but he will also help you understand birds by their sounds. For the sounds of birds are a language, carrying messages from one bird to another. To understand the language, and decode the messages, all you need is the right dictionary.

Nathan Pieplow is the author of the *Peterson Field Guide to Bird Sounds*. He blogs about bird sounds at the website Earbirding.com. He is one of the authors of the Colorado Birding Trail and a former editor of the journal *Colorado Birds*. He teaches writing and rhetoric at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Des Moines Audubon meetings begin at 7:00 p.m. Please note, this program will be held in Jester Park Lodge. If you have questions about the meeting place or the program, please contact Jane Clark at 515-223-5047 or jrclark@radiks.net.

The White-breasted Nuthatch, By Carol Berrier

I am often greeted by a soft, nasal “enk,” “enk” while filling my bird feeders. Looking up the tree, I see black beady eyes in a white face peering down at me. A friendly White-breasted Nuthatch is checking up on my activities, hoping that I replenish peanuts, seeds and suet. My little friend usually can’t wait, but grabs a seed or nut while I am still working. Like a woodpecker, the nuthatch carries its prize to a tree, wedges it in the bark and hacks it open with a chisel-like bill. The name nuthatch is a corruption of a European relative’s name- - “nuthack”.

Although not used to grasp food, the nuthatch’s feet are very specialized. The hind toes are equipped with long powerful claws that enable the bird to walk headfirst down a tree trunk. Its upturned bill helps extract from an upside-down position the bark insects that a right-side-up feeder misses. Food caching under tree bark or roof shingle is common among nuthatches.

The nuthatch is a five-inch-long bird with a black-capped head (dark gray in the female), and blue-gray back, wings and tail. The face, breast and belly are white. The bird’s short stubby tail flares out in flight, showing white and black outer feathers and chestnut color under the tail.

Nuthatches are cavity nesters, preferring knotholes, old woodpecker holes, or even bird houses. The pair also use separate cavities for overnight shelters. These fastidious little birds always clean the holes of feces after use. And, to make their cavities less interesting to predators, they often “bill-sweep” thoroughly outside the entrances, using an insect like a blister beetle that emits a foul-smelling substance.

White-breasted Nuthatches are monogamous, foraging together as a pair in the fall and winter, courting in the spring, and nesting in April and May, when they become very quiet. They usually raise eight nestlings, and remain together as a family until fall, when the young disperse. The parents stay as a pair on their twenty-five-acre—or more—territory. They will at times share and flock with other species such as chickadees or woodpeckers.

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## Iowa IBA Spotlight Species: Bell’s Vireo (*Vireo bellii*), By Doug Harr

Rather plain little birds, often hidden in thick or thorny brush, Bell’s Vireos (BEVI) can most often be located and easily identified by their very distinctive song. The species is a summer resident of scattered thickets in grasslands, often near water.

Breeding range is from America’s southwest, through the central Great Plains and southern Iowa, east to Indiana, with winter range in Mexico. Interestingly, BEVIs were seldom seen in north central Iowa until recent years but now appear to be expanding their range into the Des Moines lobe, if suitable brushy habitat might be found. Eastern and northern range expansion may be due to climate change, loss of favored habitat in its historic range or other yet unknown reasons.

Four subspecies vary in color from rather grayish in the southwest, becoming increasingly green above and yellow below in the east. One reason birders tend to rely on the song for positive ID is because many of this vireo’s markings are fairly indistinct. Besides its drab colors, white wing bars and broken white spectacles around the eyes can appear faded and ill-defined. Not much larger than a warbler, it does have a characteristically long tail, which can help with identification.

Bell’s Vireos habitually hide out in dense, low to medium height brush, skulking from one part of the tangled shrubs to another, but still often traceable by song. That song has been described by some as “an angry wren on steroids”, and by well-known birder and author Pete Dunne as the vireo that says “\$%#@\*!!!”. Although it is not advisable to overplay a recorded song in order to view the bird, the species usually responds by immediately popping out of its thicket and cussing almost in the observer’s face.

Seldom seen during migration, BEVIs reach Iowa in May and begin heading back south in August. Courtship and breeding begin within about two weeks of arrival. Nests typically are constructed in a bush at a height of about one meter above ground. An average of four white eggs are laid in a basket shaped nest constructed of grasses, straw-like stems, small pieces of bark and other materials, often fastened with spider silk and lined with fine, yellowed grasses.

Incubation takes about 14-15 days, and nestlings will fledge in a similar time period. Young are fed crushed and often regurgitated insects.

Like many avian species, Bell’s Vireos are suffering losses of habitat, but perhaps the biggest threat to this species is nest-parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds. The California subspecies (Least Bell’s Vireo) is listed as both State and Federally Endangered, with nest parasitism and brush fires being the primary suspects for its decline.

**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 \_\_\_\_\_  
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### **CHANDLER ROBBINS: REST IN PEACE**

Sadly, the renowned ornithologist, author, educator, and public servant, Chandler S. Robbins, passed away on 20 March. Chan, as he was known to everyone, was 98 years old.

He graduated from Harvard with a degree in physics and began teaching math and science in Vermont. Robbins joined the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1945 as a junior biologist at Patuxent Research Refuge in Maryland, where he engaged in early research on the effects of DDT and had his papers edited by his USFWS colleague, Rachel Carson.

Also, Chan was the bander who first banded the Laysan Albatross named Wisdom in 1956. He re-banded her, the world's oldest known banded bird, in 2002. [See last month's Warbler for an update on Wisdom.]

For many birders in the 1960s, their introduction to birding and to Robbins was through his role as lead author of *A Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America*. In 1966, this book - simply called "the Golden Guide" by many - was a breakthrough field guide with profound features. It covered all of the continental U.S. and Canada; all illustrations were in color; birds were presented in a variety of postures and often in some habitat; text and images were on facing pages; continental range maps accompanied the text; measurements were of live birds, and those puzzling sonograms were first introduced to an eager popular audience.

In the same year that the Golden Guide appeared, Chan launched one of the most important citizen science tools that we have today, the North American Breeding Bird Survey. The creation of the BBS was not universally and instantly appreciated, however. He actually received a disciplinary letter in his work file for its premature launch!

In 1981, he co-authored the memorable paper familiar to an entire generation of ecologists: "Effects of forest fragmentation on avifauna of the eastern deciduous forest." This article led to a national effort to identify and prioritize large, still-unbroken tracts of forest while there was still time. In 2012, Chan declared that this was the work of which he was most proud.

After his 60 years of full-time work as an avian biologist at the USGS Patuxent Wildlife Research Center (he didn't retire until 2005), Chan became "Scientist Emeritus" at Patuxent where he actually continued to work. One could often find him at his office at the far end of the library, at the Gabrielson building, working on the next paper, the next study, always keeping connected, and always making a difference. Chan Robbins was at the same time a giant in the field of bird study and also a gracious, quietly creative, and unassuming colleague. The world has lost another of The Great Ones.

From: The Birding Community E-bulletin, April 2017

## **Wren Song** **By Carol Berrier**

I am delighted that a male House Wren discovered my wren box this spring. The bubbling incessant song that emanates from this tiny bird awakens me in the morning as it did when, as a girl, I heard the same song out my window. How can such a feathered mite produce so much noise - - - I mean music?

Birds' respiratory systems are the most efficient known among vertebrates. Their long, sometimes coiled, tracheas add volume to their songs. The voice box of a bird is not like our larynx with its vocal cords. Instead the syrinx is a modified structure unique to birds, located at the end of the trachea where the two bronchi join. Vibrating tympanic membranes enable song birds to sing two different pitches simultaneously! The beautiful song of the Wood Thrush is a good example.

Back to the wren. Why does he sing? He sings to proclaim to other males his sovereignty over his nesting territory, and to attract a female to his site.

After filling the nest box with small sticks, the House Wren advertises his virility, hoping that a female will line his nest with soft grasses, lay eggs and raise a brood. In fact, that hopeful little bigamist may claim other promising sites in his efforts to allure yet another female to his territory.

The females of some species, including the Northern Cardinal, answer their mates with song. Expert birders know that the most accurate bird identifications are made from songs.

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