

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
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EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



FIELD TRIP TO CHICHAQUA—SATURDAY, JUNE 10th

The Des Moines Audubon Society field trip will be held on Saturday, June 10 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 Ramada Inn (used to be 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 or 515-254-0837.

REMINDER: NO PROGRAM MEETINGS IN JUNE, JULY OR AUGUST

OUTDOOR RECREATION TRENDS

A recent report, "Federal Outdoor Recreation Trends: Effects on Economic Opportunities," looked at participation in 50 nature-based activities in the U.S. The report was prepared for the Federal Interagency Council on Outdoor Recreation, which consists of seven government agencies, including the Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Forest Service. Its findings were based on the results of the Forest-Service sponsored *National Survey on Recreation and the Environment*, a telephone survey of people 16 years of age or older. It's the Forest Service's General Technical Report PNW-GTR-945.

Results in the recent report show that nature-viewing activities are among the fastest-growing pursuits, but some traditional activities like hunting and fishing have seen per capita declines. Nature viewing and photography activities had nearly 10 times more participation days than any other activity. Hiking was the most popular backcountry activity. Skiing and snowboarding were among the fastest-growing pursuits.

Looking into the future, birding, skiing, hiking, and horseback riding are among the activities likely to increase the most by 2030.

While the participation rate for nature viewing is projected to increase by slightly more than 1 percent through 2030, *the participation rate for birding could increase by 4 percent*. The viewing days per participant, however, are anticipated to decline by over 3 percent.

There are related problems. The expected decline in overall days is influenced by projected increases in population density, as well as projected decreases in the extent of both forest and rangeland and national park acres per capita.

To read the full 46-page report, packed with charts and tables, see: https://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/pnw_gtr945.pdf .

Excerpted from: The Birding Community E-bulletin, April 2017

BOOK NOTES: SOUNDS DIFFERENT

Des Moines Audubon Society and Polk County Conservation cosponsored a very well-attended presentation by Nathan Pieplow at Jester Park Lodge on Tuesday, May 16. For those who attended the program and also for those who missed it, the following book review of his book, *Field Guide to Bird Sounds of Eastern North America*, should be of interest. The review is from The Birding Community E-bulletin, April 2017.

Learning bird sounds can usually be categorized into three teaching formats: by words, similes, and/or symbols. Words can be logical or nonsensical (e.g., *chick-a-dee-dee-dee* or *fire-fire-where-where-here-here-hurry-hurry-quick-quick*). Similes help remember individual birds (e.g., Yellow Rail sounds like tapping two stones five times in sequence) or sets of birds (Scarlet Tanagers sound like American Robins with hoarse throat). While words and similes can be subjective and stylistic, even depending on your experiences and attitudes, symbols tend to be more precise, concrete, and more objective.

There are books from over a century ago with actual sheet-music notations to represent bird song. Diagrammatic shorthand has also been tried. These have not been very successful. It's the use of spectrograms (or "sonograms") of bird sounds that makes bird-sound symbols so meaningful. Basically, it's because they are solid, scientific, "translations" of actual sounds.

The popular use of spectrograms was introduced to the birding world in mid-1966, in *A Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America* (Golden Press) by Chandler S Robbins, Bertel Bruun, and Herbert S Zim, and illustrated by Arthur Singer. The book was as breakthrough insofar as it covered virtually every bird in North America, with tightly collected illustrations, descriptive texts, and maps. Many species accounts also had visually accompanying sonograms. Unfortunately, most birders had no idea how to use them! So, following this otherwise popular publication, sonograms virtually disappeared from regular field guides.

This is a long introduction to emphasize the unique contribution that Nathan Pieplow has made in his new *Field Guide to Bird Sounds of Eastern North America* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), the latest in the "Peterson Field Guide Series." In this new guide, Pieplow presents the spectrograms of 520 species of birds found in Eastern U.S. and Canada, typically with one page per species, replete with thumbnail illustration of the bird and an accompanying range map.

The spectrograms are the meat of the pages, and once you get used to "reading" these computer-generated graphs of sound frequencies across time, you'll be well positioned to use this useful volume. Most of the book - 454 pages - is devoted to these "real spectrograms." Another vital 83 pages are devoted to a visual index, with species sounds clustered in different categories (e.g., single-note sounds, complex series, and medium to long phrases and combinations) and accompanied by "spectrogram symbols," which are artistic approximations of actual spectrogram patterns. This "index" approaches the "simile" and even the "word" methodologies that have often dominated learning bird sounds - where the sound is described as a wheeze, a churr, a laugh, or whatever.

This is not a book of mnemonics. It's on the other end of the learning-scale, and it should be appreciated as such. If you can get a grip on spectrograms, this is a book for you.

Best of all, and as a real learning experience, there are more than 5,500 audio files that accompany the book. They are available for free, streaming online with sounds and sonograms powered and delivered by the Cornell Lab's Macaulay Library: <https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/peterson-field-guide-to-bird-sounds/>.

Birders would be well advised to check out some of their favorite bird sounds from that site before buying the book. It may inspire some folks to snap up Pieplow's book immediately; but it might dissuade others.

Thanks to all who attended the program and a special note of thanks to members who came early to set up the chairs and provided refreshments. We also recognize Polk County Conservation for the use of their facility and sound system, and especially Joe Boyles for his assistance and cooperation.

Ghost Visits from the Past

By Mike Havlik, Dallas County Naturalist

On October 25, 2016, just a few days before Halloween, a Dallas County ghost was seen. A Swallow-tailed Kite made a brief appearance seen by two birders between Dallas Center and Waukee. [Denny Thompson reported that Eugene and Eloise Armstrong had a Swallow-tailed Kite north of Waukee on October 25. It was spotted at the intersection of R22 and highway 44. They had a brief but diagnostic look as it flew over the car and disappeared to the south.]

A Swallow-tailed Kite was also seen on the Hitchcock Hawk Watch in Pottawattamie County about the same time, possibly the same bird. From middle to late August, two were observed at Hawkeye Wildlife Management Area near Iowa City and two years ago a Swallow-tail was seen for about a week at Otter Creek Marsh in Tama County.

Why is this gloriously beautiful raptor of the Southeastern United States visiting Iowa? Iowa was once their home.

Kites are a group of raptors with slim bodies, long wings and bouncy flight. Swallow-tailed Kites are graceful, black and white birds with a deeply notched, forked tail that gives them their name. Their stunning pattern, size and shape make them recognizable by even a beginning birder. They are buoyant and acrobatic fliers that can quickly twist to capture their prey including dragonflies, wasps and fire ants. They can also snatch terrestrial prey from high limbs such as snakes and frogs and eat them while flying.

Swallow-tailed Kites historically nested throughout Iowa and as far north as Minnesota. They disappeared in the late 1800's with the last nesting in Minnesota in 1907. They prefer wetlands with large trees nearby. In Iowa these would have been cottonwood trees. The areas that these birds have been visiting match this habitat. In Dallas County our bird was seen less than five miles from Brenton and Ingersoll Sloughs [south of Granger].

Now their range is restricted to seven states in the southeast with the highest concentration in Florida. Loss of habitat, shooting and logging have all been factors in the disappearance of this magnificent bird. Maybe we have protected enough habitat; maybe our landscape has healed; maybe this ghost will haunt us no more and return to its once historic home.

From Avian Research and Conservation Institute: Swallow-tailed Kites (*Elanoides forficatus*) nested in at least 21 states prior to the early 1900s, but a sharp population decline from 1880 through 1940 resulted in the present limited distribution in just seven states and a breeding population of no more than about 2,500 pairs.

From: American Bird Conservancy, Friday, September 6, 2013

ABC's Bird of the Week: Swallow-tailed Kite

The graceful, strikingly marked Swallow-tailed Kite rarely flaps its wings while flying, but almost continuously moves its tail—sometimes to nearly 90 degrees—to maintain a flight path, make a sharp turn, or circle. The species' northern populations are migratory and come together with the non-migratory, southern populations in the wintertime.

In North America, this species once occurred up the Mississippi Alluvial Valley, along the Missouri River, and north along the Mississippi River into Kansas and Missouri. These northern populations were extirpated when the bottomland and riparian forests along these rivers were cut in the 1800s and early 1900s.

The Swallow-tailed Kite's main prey items are flying insects such as dragonflies and cicadas, which are captured and eaten on the wing; these aerial acrobats also snag insects and lizards as they skim across the treetops. These are unusually gregarious raptors, and several pairs may nest in close proximity. Successful nesting requires tall, living trees and nearby open areas to hunt prey. The birds may roost communally at night, and some pre-migratory roosts may attract hundreds.

The main threat to this kite is habitat loss and degradation, especially the loss of tall trees due to logging, clearing for agriculture, or other development. Although the species' U.S. population seems to be increasing due to re-growth of trees in many riparian areas, the trend may not be long-lasting, as these trees are now threatened by development. Recommended conservation measures include avoiding cutting of trees around active nests and protection of large pre-migration communal roosts, which are used year after year.

**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 _____

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