

***THE WARBLER***  
**DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
**VOLUME XXXI, NUMBER 10**  
**NOVEMBER 2025**  
**EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK**



**Des Moines Audubon Field Trip**  
**Saylorville Lake**  
**November 8, 2025, 8:00 a.m.**

The Des Moines Audubon Society field trip will be held on Saturday, November 8 and the destination will be Saylorville Lake and surrounding areas. Meet in the parking lot of the Visitors' Center at 8:00 AM. From there we will travel to various habitats and locations around the lake and in the surrounding area. We will be looking for migrating species such as waterfowl, loons, grebes, gulls, and lingering migrant sparrows. Bring binoculars or scopes if you have them and dress for the conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Contact Diane Dentlinger at [dianed\\_200@hotmail.com](mailto:dianed_200@hotmail.com) or 515-505-0064 with questions.

**Des Moines Audubon Program**  
**\*Please note this is on Monday, November 17, 7:00 p.m.\***  
**Protecting Biological Diversity in Iowa Through Connectivity**  
**By Thomas Rosburg, PhD**

Thomas Rosburg, PhD, Professor, Department of Biology at Drake University, will present a program on the importance of connectivity in preserving biodiversity on Monday, November 17. This program is based on Central Iowa Sierra Group's report on Protecting Biological Diversity in Iowa.

Dr. Rosburg has been at Drake since 1996. He has a Ph.D. in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from Iowa State University. A Master of Science in Plant Ecology and a Bachelor of Science in Fish and Wildlife Biology were also earned at Iowa State. Dr. Rosburg grew up on a farm in western Iowa. From 1983 to 1986 he farmed on the family farm established by his great-grandfather while implementing and investigating methods of sustainable agriculture.

He teaches numerous courses, primarily those in ecology, botany, biological research and statistics, natural history and nature photography and regularly incorporates field trips in his classes to enhance learning opportunities. Dr. Rosburg's research includes an array of topics within plant ecology, most notably studies aimed towards understanding the factors that affect the species composition and structure of plant communities in prairie, forest, and wetland ecosystems.

Des Moines Audubon meetings begin at 7:00 p.m. and are held in the lunchroom of the Northwest Community Center, which is located at 5110 Franklin Avenue in Des Moines. The Center is just west of Franklin Library. If you have questions about the meeting place or the program, please contact Jane Clark at [jrclark@radiks.net](mailto:jrclark@radiks.net) or call 515-223-5047.

## **November Birding, From the Des Moines Audubon Website**

November can be an exciting time for rarities, especially. This is that time of year when one is most likely to find unusual gulls such as a Black-legged Kittiwake and perhaps a Red-throated or Pacific Loon. More common migrants include flocks of Bonaparte's Gulls heading from the taiga of the north to the beaches of the south. Common Loons, already in their drab winter coloration, peak at this time of year and it is not unusual to count numbers in double-digits on large bodies of water. Common Mergansers and Common Goldeneye, diving ducks that enjoy swimming in icy water, begin to make their presence known and will stay as long as there is some open water.

A few lingering migrant sparrows may be found in brush piles and weedy edges, but they have by and large been replaced by our winter visitors from the north - American Tree Sparrow and Dark-eyed Junco. Activity at feeding stations picks up. Be sure to check on the feeders at the Saylorville Visitor Center and the bird blinds at both Jester Park and Walnut Woods State Park.

### **Iowa Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Diversity Program October 24, 2025**

October 24 through the 31st was bat week - a week set aside to celebrate our furry flying friends – but at the DNR every week is bat week. Yes, we are admitting to being a little batty but we are not ashamed because bats are fascinating, valuable and need our help! The way we express our fandom for bats is by 1) spying on them relentlessly (aka surveying) to learn more about them and 2) working on managing healthy woodlands which is where most of Iowa's bats like to hang out.

#### **Acoustic Bat Monitoring**

In the past, if we wanted to study bats, we had to go out after dark and set up very thin nets called mist nets in batty looking habitat. We would then sit and watch the net and if a bat did manage to blunder into it, we would go and quickly remove it, collect some data, and then release.

However, the issues with this type of survey are many. It is stressful for the bats to be handled, without a lot of care it is possible to pass disease between individual bats or between the bat and the human handler, it must be done by trained professionals and it is quite labor intensive.

This is where technology has been a great help in our study of bats. Sound recording units have been developed that can pick up the echolocation calls bats make when navigating and hunting. Like birds these calls are unique to species but unlike birds our human ears aren't really equipped to distinguish those differences. These recorders, coupled with a powerful microphone and an artificial intelligence powered program to analyze the sound files, can do a pretty good job collecting data on bats as they go about their nightly business.

The data we gather from acoustic surveys may not be as detailed and it does have some uncertainty but it doesn't impact the bats and data on the presence or absence of bats can be collected over a larger area. In partnership with Iowa State University, Iowa Natural Heritage, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), we've been collecting these types of data for 13 years and we've learned quite a bit.

The data collected has helped us develop a better understanding of how bats are distributed in the state and what their relative abundance to one another is. Big Brown and Red Bats dominate but species in the *Myotis* genus, our most imperiled species, are still present in all parts of the state. It has also provided some evidence that the entry of the deadly White Nose Syndrome into Iowa has caused declines in certain vulnerable bat species (*Myotis* sp. and Tri-colored) in Eastern Iowa but that decline may not be as prevalent in other parts of the state.

The other great thing about the acoustic technology is that it makes it possible for anyone to help as long as they have a car, the ability to do a little hiking and a fondness for bats. Volunteers also shouldn't be afraid to look silly to have a microphone suction-cupped to the top of their car while they drive around very slowly. There are roughly 30 survey blocks around the state and we do occasionally ask for help with blocks that need it. If you are interested in getting involved, keep an eye out for announcements about volunteers being needed in a grid cell near you.

Believe it or not, bats make our world a better place! So, this year we hope you will join us in sending a little love and gratitude their way. Or if love is perhaps a little too far, at least some respect.

## **Blue-gray Gnatcatcher** **by Carl Nollen**

Late this summer I became reacquainted with the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher when I observed one interested in the insects on my goldenrod flowers. Normally found in the treetops, this bird had come down to eye level on its migration. Like all insectivorous species, gnatcatchers must fly south to escape the frozen north. The Texas coasts are a good place to find gnatcatchers in the winter, or they may fly further south into Central America. Gnatcatchers are among those migrants who come early and leave early. Here in April, they leave in August. Another of “our” birds that actually live here just a short time. But they have been noticed staying later.

*Poliophtila caerulea* aptly describes this species. The genus name is from the Greek for “gray feathered” and Latin for “blue” or “sky-blue.” The plumage is blue gray with white underparts and a noticeable white eye ring. This fluffball is in constant motion which makes it hard to pin down with your binoculars. It is not shy, but very active. I like to find Audubon’s paintings of any bird, to see how he pictured them. True to form, his painting captures the nervous energy of a pair. A different view from a field guide painting of a quiet bird on a stick. Another moniker is “mini-mockingbird” due to its similar coloration and varied vocals; rambling warbles with nasal calls, chips, whistles, and squeaks. That is, if you can hear it from high among the leaves.

The gnatcatcher is one of our smallest songbirds, weighing only a quarter of an ounce. It takes two gnatcatchers to equal the weight of a chickadee! Length is 4 to 5 inches, and much of that is its tail. Its long, white-edged tail makes it a good field mark, because it constantly flicks it side to side to scare up insects and then chase after them. Males have a black V on their forehead. The sexes are quite similar in appearance, although females have more brown on their wing coverts.

Nests are beautiful and recognizable, resembling hummingbird nests in the use of spider webs with lichens for outside decoration. Gnatcatchers will commonly re-nest if cowbirds or predation are a problem. They will reuse nest materials from an abandoned nest to build a second nest. Eggs are bluish white with reddish brown speckles, somewhat resembling house wren eggs.

Gnatcatchers are increasing in numbers and expanding their range, more commonly seen further north such as in the Iowa Great Lakes region, and up alongside the Missouri River. All they need are deciduous woodlands, especially along streamsides. Despite its name, they don’t commonly eat gnats. It seems to be unknown who picked this common name, but we normally call any bothersome small insects, “gnats.” And so, the name stuck because gnatcatchers go after small insects. If this bird interests you, go west or south to find 18 to 22 other species, 3 which are found in the North American west, and the others in Mexico and Central America.

## **BOOK NOTES: A REMARKABLE FEATHER FOCUS**

The story of Roxie Laybourne, the diminutive and dedicated master of feathers, a woman with a thick Carolina accent, a dedicated work ethic, and the creator of forensic ornithology, is masterfully told by Chris Sweeney in *The Feather Detective* (Avid Reader Press – Simon and Schuster, 2025).

Roxie Laybourne never expected to be working at the intersection of ornithology and homicide or plane crashes. But her investigatory super-skills were her uniquely-developed ability to take a tiny feather fragment, view it under a microscope, and determine the species of bird from which it came. This became very important, and it was a long process whereby she pioneered the method, feather by feather, species by species. Had she not moved from her position as staff taxidermist at the North Carolina State Museum to the Smithsonian in Washington D.C. in the spring of 1944, none of what she truly accomplished would have transpired.

Sweeney recounts Laybourne’s evolution, at times assisting the FBI and police departments, sometimes testifying in court on feathered crime-scene evidence, and sometimes connecting with the FAA and the Pentagon over plane crashes and related incidents. Her pioneer work – slow and labor-intensive - intersected the realms of workplace sexism, bureaucratic barriers, and trailblazing science. All the while, the reader follows her endeavors, including grooming budding feather-experts in varied branches of government and getting the kind of respect her work deserved.

By the time she passed in the summer of 2003, just shy of her ninety-third birthday, she had accomplished a great deal and left a remarkable legacy. In the long hallway that serves as the Hall of Fame for the Smithsonian Institution’s Division of Birds, there are 34 black-and-white photographs of luminaries of the institution’s honored work (e.g., Spenser Baird, Elliott Coues, Edgar Mearns, C. Hart Merriam, Robert Ridgway, and Alexander Wetmore). The only photo of a woman on the wall is that of Roxie Laybourne. Indeed, she truly deserved this well-done biography.

\*From the Birding Community E-bulletin, October 2025

**Des Moines Audubon Society membership is for one year, from July to June.  
Dues should be mailed to: Jane Clark, 9871 Lincoln Avenue, Clive, IA 50325.  
If you are unsure of the status of your membership, please call 515-223-5047.  
Please make checks payable to "Des Moines Audubon Society"**

**Membership Levels and Dues:**

Student (under 18).....\$1.00

Individual Adult..... \$15.00

Family..... \$20.00

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

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

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Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

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

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