

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
VOLUME XXXII, NUMBER 1
JANUARY 2026
EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



Field Trip
Saturday, January 10, 8:00 a.m.

Meet in the circle drive at the bird blind in Walnut Woods State Park at 8 AM on Saturday, January 10. We will check out the birds at the blind and in the woods at the park and might check for more birds at Maffitt Reservoir if there is open water. At least 192 species of birds have been reported at some time of the year by birders visiting Walnut Woods State Park. Bring binoculars and dress for cold conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Contact field trip leader, Dennis Thompson at cdnthomps@gmail.com or 515-229-9615 for more information.

Des Moines Audubon Program Meeting
Tuesday, January 20, 2026, 7:00 p.m.
Loon Magic, by Ty Smedes

Ty Smedes, will present his program on the Common Loon at our regular meeting night, Tuesday, January 20th at the Northwest Community Center.

As an icon of the north-country, the Common Loon has created magic for all who have enjoyed their antics and that iconic “call of the wild.” Join Polk City writer/photographer Ty Smedes as he lectures about the life history of the Common Loon, and learn how a photographer methodically plans and executes a photography project. Ty has made many trips to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area of northern Minnesota, where he has captured images of loons building nests, incubating eggs, and with newly-hatched youngsters riding on a parent's back while being fed by the other parent. Many interesting life-cycle secrets will be shared, along with photos to illustrate.

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 or 515-707-7468.

TIP OF THE MONTH #1: SNOWY OWL ALERT

It began in late October and early November. Migrating Snowy Owls began to be reported in meaningful numbers and locations from the western prairies to the Canadian Maritimes, particularly around the western Great Lakes in southern Ontario, and in northern US states.

By late November, more of these owls were reported in normal hotspots, such as the Ottawa and St. Lawrence River valleys, southern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta, and even some in British Columbia and Washington state, where they have been scarce to absent in most recent years. Next, there were reports as far south as Long Island, New York, Iowa, and northwestern Ohio.

Almost all the Snowy Owls that have been observed are young of the year, which is what researchers usually expect during a year when many Snowy Owls arrive in southern Canada and adjacent northern states. This suggests good reproduction this last summer according to the folks at the research group at Project SNOWstorm.

You may want to check out Scott Weidensaul's latest report on the details of the recent flight, the movement of individual Snowy Owls, the *inappropriate* use of rodent bait to attract owls (including photo tour operators who use bait to provide "action shots" for clients), and more:

<https://www.projectsnowstorm.org/posts/in-with-a-bang/>

For details on ethical owl photography, see:

<https://www.projectsnowstorm.org/posts/the-dos-and-definite-donts-of-snowy-owl-photography/>

Our tip to readers is to keep looking for Snowy Owls this winter. Enjoy them, but take care not to put them at risk.

Finally, here is an Associated Press report from late November on the attention created by two Snowy Owls at the beach and pier near the Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary on Chicago's North Side.

<https://apnews.com/article/owls-chicago-lake-michigan-birding-beach-988c21c34a44f617f4d6b0abc39a7676>

From THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN
December 2025

YES, SHE'S BACK!

If you have been wondering about the status of "Wisdom," a Laysan Albatross and the world's oldest known wild bird, she made her return last month to Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in time for the 2026 nesting season.

Wisdom is at least 75 years old, and she has successfully fledged as many as 30 chicks in her lifetime.

This year's return marks a somewhat early arrival for Wisdom compared to previous years. Her mate - banded as "EX25" - arrived later in the month, on 26 November.

Read more about this remarkable seabird here:

<https://friendsofmidway.org/wisdom-returns-the-worlds-oldest-known-wild-bird-touches-down-at-kuaihelani-midway-atoll/>

From THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN
December 2025

"Night before last the mercury dropped to twelve below; last night to fifteen below. The ground is again covered by snow, not thawing though the sunlight is brilliant, and still the only birds about town are the jays, screaming as if in defiance."
(Selden Lincoln Whitcomb describing Cedar Falls, Iowa, in 1891)

White-throated Sparrow

by Carl Nollen

Along with the Dark-eyed Junco, the White-throated Sparrow is probably the most observed of our winter migrants. Although Johnson's Iowa Birds says this sparrow is an abundant migrant from mid-September into November but rare in winter, and Dinsmore's The Birds of Polk County says it is a common migrant but uncommon in winter, I see it every day throughout the winter. The Christmas Bird Count for 2024 found a record number of 1,892 counted in Iowa, including 239 at the Saylorville Reservoir on December 15. The field reports for last winter counted 40 at Saylorville one time on December 16. The Christmas count covers a 15-mile diameter circle with several observers throughout a day, while the field report mentioned above is a count for one observation.

White-throated Sparrows are one of our most easily identified birds. Its black and white striped head and yellow spot above and in front of its eyes are its best field marks. This supraloral patch is distinctive and is not found on the more uncommon White-crowned Sparrow. Another distinction is the easily recognizable song, commonly written as "Old-Sam-Peabody-Peabody, or, since it breeds in Canada, "Sweet-Sweet-Canada-Canada." A little-known fact is that it commonly sings at night, especially when the moon is full. There are no subspecies but there is a tan morph with head stripes more buff or tan, and the breast more "sullied" with brown as Rising calls it in his well-illustrated 1996 guide to the Sparrows of the United States.

One habit you may notice is the "double-scratch" method of foraging on the ground, where the White-throat, along with other sparrow species, hops forward and then quickly hops backward with both feet to rake the ground or leaf litter. After a snowfall I notice they, along with juncos, are waiting nearby for me to scoop the driveway so they can grab some grit for their gizzards.

Zonotrichia albicollis is the Latin name for the White-throated Sparrow, which means "hairlike" and "white neck, ", though the latter is not quite accurate as it is the throat that is white. Audubon painted a pair in a flowering dogwood. They favor woodland edges to find seeds and berries, and urban backyards with some fenceline shrubbery suit them just fine. In the summer, their habitat in Canada and northern Minnesota and Wisconsin includes mixed deciduous and evergreen woods.

A Red-shouldered Hawk Nest at Brenton Slough?

By Ty Smedes

In 2024 I was surprised to find a Red-shouldered Hawk at Beaver Bottoms Wetland, just south of Granger. This was a surprise, since it was my first sighting of this raptor species in more than 40 years of ownership - knowing they are not common in central Iowa.

This year, on the morning of October 2nd, I saw a distant raptor at Brenton Slough, that just didn't look like a Redtail. A slow and careful approach allowed me to collect photographs of the Buteo, which confirmed identification as a juvenile Red-shouldered Hawk. Things then became vastly more interesting when on October 11th I located a pair of juveniles, at the entrance to Brenton Slough, sitting on adjacent fence posts, and no more than 10 feet apart. Unfortunately, I only got quick looks at both as they took flight; but no photos. My interest was now peaking, and the sighting of the adult in 2024, along with the multiple sightings of juveniles this fall, suggested a successful Red-shouldered nesting somewhere in the Brenton Slough area. Consequently, I returned to Brenton Slough on October 13th and again relocated one of the juveniles, which I photographed in flight several times. In summary, the Brenton Slough sightings (and a potential nesting) add to the increased Red-shouldered Hawk sightings being noted across the state

**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 515-707-7648.
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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