

***THE WARBLER***  
**DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
**VOLUME XXVII, NUMBER 4**  
**OCTOBER 2020**  
**EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK**



## **Saturday, October 10 Field Trip**

Meet at **8:30 a.m.** in the parking lot of Saylorville Lake Visitor's Center on Saturday, October 10th. From there we'll venture to various habitats around the lake and in the surrounding area, looking for waterfowl and gulls and other migrating species. Sparrows and late warblers in migration will be busy flitting among the trees and falling leaves. Bring binoculars, your own snack and beverage and dress for the conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Please wear a mask and we will be practicing social distancing. Contact field trip leader Dennis Thompson at [cnthomps@gmail.com](mailto:cnthomps@gmail.com) or 515-254-0837 for more information.

### **Yellow-rumped Warbler by Carol Berrier**

Wow, what a way to start the day! A tiny bird sat in my viburnum bush on a chilly morning. Fumbling for my glasses, I assumed it was a favorite little chickadee. With clearer vision, the bright yellow patches on rump, crown, and on either side of his breast gave me all that I needed to know. The little bird was a male Yellow-rumped Warbler, and what a beautiful little fellow he was. His upper parts were blue-gray streaked with black and his lower parts were white. A black patch on his breast, shaped like an upside-down U, separated the yellow breast patches. The female is browner on top, but has similar markings.

Yellow-rumps belong to the Wood Warbler family of about 110 bird species found only in the western hemisphere. Fifty of those warbler species are seen in North America, most of them in migration from wintering in Central or South America to nesting in northern forests where they enjoy a diet of insects and spiders. Unlike their warbler cousins, yellow-rumps have an unusual ability to digest the wax coating found on berries such as bayberry, wax myrtle, juniper, and poison-ivy. This enables them to migrate earlier in the spring and stay later in the fall than many of their warbler relatives which need insects to survive. Most warblers leave for tropical wintering grounds soon after their fledglings are grown, but yellow-rumps usually stay and raise a second brood before their short migrations begin. Often, they winter in the southern United States.

Warblers are favorites among birdwatchers, and fall migrating warblers present real challenges for identification. When nesting is over, the fall molt leaves warblers with muted colors, and often an entirely different appearance.

But spring migrants are a joy to watch. Energetically inspecting emerging tree leaves for caterpillars, and singing all the while, they display their beautiful spring attire. On a lovely day in early May, a Midwest birder may see over twenty warbler species. I know from experience!

## North Carolina Birding Trip

In November of 2019 Ray and Margaret Harden took a Road Scholar birding trip to North Carolina's Outer Banks. They spent a week on Emerald Island at the Trinity Conference Center, about three hours southeast of Raleigh. They birded on the beaches of the Atlantic Ocean, the woodland trails of the island, salt water marshes, estuaries, and at Fort Macon State Park. They took a ferry boat ride to the Rachel Carson Preserve where they saw a large flock of shorebirds. Part of the trip included a visit to an aquarium and nature center with a boardwalk that overlooked the island's Bogue Sound.

Their group of birders recorded ninety-nine species of birds during the weeklong trip. The highlight was adding three new species to their life list and getting some good photographs of the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker in the Croatan National Forest.

### RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER

By Ray Harden

"I hear one." Margaret said as soon as she lowered the car window. We had just stopped our car in the Croatan National Forest near Morehead City, North Carolina. I lowered the driver's window and listened intently. The only sound I heard was the traffic on the highway a mile away. I shook my head letting her know that I could not hear the bird.

"There it is again, it's on your side." Then I finally heard the soft squeaky "shrit, shrit" call.

Margaret quietly got out of the car, listening and looking for the endangered and elusive Red-cockaded Woodpecker. She whispered to me that she spotted it two trees to the left of the car and she started clicking the shutter of her camera. Finally, "I see it." I said and I started taking photos too.

The little woodpecker was about thirty feet away, half way up a medium size long-leaf pine tree, working its way up the trunk searching for insects. It seemed as if the bird spent more time on the backside of the tree than on the front and most often branches were in the way for a good shot. But both of our cameras were snapping photos.

The day before we were in this same long-leaf pine forest with a Road Scholar Birding group of twenty-five other people and there was also a person target shooting with a shotgun about a fourth of a mile away. We did not see any kind of a bird. Today we fared much better. We saw several Brown-headed Nuthatches and three Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. We were thrilled.

We have looked in several national forests in the southeastern United States for this woodpecker. We saw it once three years ago in the Apalachicola National Forest in the Florida Panhandle, but were not able to get any good photos of it.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker is eight inches long and looks very similar to Downy Woodpecker, but slightly larger. It is called "red-cockaded" because of the small red tufts on the side of its head, however these are seldom seen. It has a black cap, distinctive white cheeks, a white belly with black spots, and its back has black and white barring.

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker was originally found in the southeastern quarter of the United States. However, the specie's survival is jeopardized by agriculture, logging, forest policies that suppress fires, human development, and other factors of habitat destruction. It is only found in thirty areas across the southeast. It was placed on the endangered species list in 1970. A major weather disaster has made conditions even worse for this little woodpecker. In September of 1989 Hurricane Hugo destroyed about 100,000 acres of the bird's habitat in Francis Marion National Forest in South Carolina.

This woodpecker requires the long-leaf pine ecosystem for its survival. (The same habitat as the endangered Bachman's Sparrow). The Red-cockaded Woodpecker nests only in living long-leaf pine trees. Because of this, it may take a year or more for the bird to excavate a nest hole in the tree. Tree sap flows out the newly made hole and gives the tree's bark a shiny amber color. The shiny colored bark allows ornithologist to mark the tree as an active nest site for study and protection. (continued next page)

## **RED-COCKADED WOODPECKER**

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The sticky tree sap also serves as a means to keep rat snakes out of the nest that prey on the eggs and baby birds. The woodpecker's eggs are also preyed upon by flying squirrels and other birds.

The male woodpecker feeds on insects at the mid-tree trunk line and higher while the females tend to feed lower. They feed on insects, especially wood boring beetles and grubs, but they also eat fruits, berries, and seeds.

Saving the Red-cockaded Woodpecker depends on increasing their nesting habitat by setting incentives to encourage the perpetuation of old growth pine forest and maintaining corridors between the bird's nesting areas. The southern long-leaf pine tree is one of the most valued trees for lumber. It will be difficult to get the timber industry to reduce clear-cutting practices and wait longer between timber harvests.

More funding is needed for the National Forest Service and parks to control the encroachment of hardwood trees that compete with the pines and to use fire to control other undesirable species of plants in the understory of the pine forest. Also, efforts are needed to keep nesting cavities free from competitors and predators if this little woodpecker is going to survive.

My wife and I were pleased to see and photograph the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker in its natural habitat. I hope that birders in the future will be able to see it too.



## **The American Crow**

**by Carol Berrier**

American Crows have adapted well to life with humans, but we have not always adapted well to them. Crows like open areas where they can feed on the ground, and also tall trees where they can roost and nest. They have found both habitats in our farm fields and woodlots. Crows' fondness for oats, wheat and corn infuriated some farmers, although the birds mostly gleaned wasted grain left on the ground after the harvest. And the beneficial service that crows perform as insectivores was not always appreciated. Crows soon learned to watch for guns. Now as a protected species, crow populations have increased along with human populations.

As we have become more urbanized, so have crows, often nesting and roosting in parks and foraging in city dumps. Crows are omnivorous and opportunistic in their eating habits. Besides grain, seeds, acorns and fruit, they enjoy insects, spiders, earthworms, fish, frogs, birds' eggs, road-kill and garbage. Crows help us keep our roadsides clean, even to the extent of moving animal carcasses into nearby driving lanes where they are soon rendered easier to eat.

Crows are not only adaptable, they are intelligent. They have learned to ignore scarecrows and to stay out of gunshot range. They are known to place hard-shelled nuts in traffic lanes, retrieving the nut meats when exposed; and to drop shellfish on rocks to crack them open.

Crows delight in creative play. They will take turns sliding down a slippery slope. A favorite game is to noisily mob a sleepy owl and chase it from its daytime roost. Crows can mimic bird calls and they enjoy pulling the tails of mammals. Rev. Henry Ward Beecher said in the mid-1800's, "If men had wings and bore black feathers, few of them would be clever enough to be crows."

Crows' lifespans may reach fifteen years. Their first two or three years are spent with their parents, helping them in collecting nesting materials or in feeding nestlings. By age three or four they are ready to breed on their own.

Most Americans can identify these twenty-inch, all black, gregarious birds by their noisy caws. "If a person knows only four birds," wrote Edward Forbush, an early ornithologist, "one of them will be the crow."

## What a year it has been!

As you know, we have not been able to hold our Des Moines Audubon program meetings since February, and we will not be able to meet in person at the Northwest Community Center until it is opened again. This month Denny Thompson will be leading a field trip and we hope you will be able to attend. There are several organizations that provide information about birds and conservation online. Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, American Bird Conservancy, and National Audubon Society all send information at least monthly by email. Des Moines Audubon has a Facebook page that you can visit and Iowa Ornithologists Union has a Facebook page in addition to their website. Bird sightings are also available on the Des Moines Audubon website: [dmaudubon.org](http://dmaudubon.org). Feel free to share any articles on birds and conservation issues with for the newsletter. Please stay safe and enjoy birds in your backyard and in our parks and wildlife areas.

### From: The Birding Community E-bulletin, September 2020

Bird watching in the United States has experienced an historic phenomenon before. During WWII, with gasoline rationing, poor roads, access restrictions, regional blackouts, and other impediments, going out birding beyond one's immediate region was difficult.

Unfortunately, we often think of nature as something that we need to travel a long way to access. Fortunately, simply changing the way we think about our definition of nature can assist us in forming deeper connections with the natural world closer to home. Right outside your door there is a whole world to explore... and that includes birds! The scientific and natural history literature is studded with accounts by naturalists and ornithologists who have made outstanding discoveries by doing this very thing.

We would encourage you to stay close to home, and to do your best to engage in medically safe and local birding. This is still a perfect time to check out nearby under-birded parks, forests, and refuges.

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