

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



Saturday, November 14 Field Trip

Meet at **8:30 a.m.** in the parking lot of Saylorville Lake Visitor's Center on Saturday, November 14th. From there we'll venture to various locations around the lake and in the surrounding area, looking for waterfowl, loons and gulls. Sparrows may be found in brush piles and weedy edges. Bring binoculars 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 or 515-254-0837 for more information.

Des Moines Audubon Christmas Bird Count
Saturday, December 26

Des Moines Audubon Society's 2020 Christmas Bird Count will be held on Saturday, December 26 beginning at 8:00 a.m. The annual Christmas Bird Count will take the place of our regular field trip in December—plan for a day or part of a day of counting birds in the Des Moines count circle. Please contact Denny Thompson at 515-254-0837 or cnthomps@gmail.com ahead of time if you plan to participate. *Dress warmly and appropriately.* Bring your own food and beverage for the day and plan to stay as long as possible. If you wish to remain at home but still want to be a part of this count, you may do so by keeping track of the birds visiting your neighborhood, in your backyard and at your feeders. Keep track of how many of each species you see during the day and at the end of the day, report to Denny. The Des Moines 15-mile diameter is centered at 63rd and University and it runs from Saylorville Dam to Lake Colchester (north of Norwalk) and the I-80 rest stop to the fairgrounds. The Des Moines CBC has been held since 1948.

***Please note there will be no December field trip other than the Christmas Bird Count**

Dallas County Christmas Bird Count, December 19

Join Dallas County Conservation Board (DCCB) and Raccoon River Watershed Association (RRWA) for a day of birding with a purpose! Each year around the Christmas holiday, local bird enthusiasts "take a snapshot" of which birds are in their area by observing birds in their preferred area and collecting information. The National Audubon Society has been using this data to analyze the long-term health of bird populations for the last 100 years. This year's Dallas County Christmas Bird Count will be Saturday, December 19.

A change for 2020 is participants will be socially distanced as a family group or as individuals, each covering their preferred area of the count circle. Some people hike their territory, while others drive, based on weather conditions and mobility issues. We also need people to watch bird feeders, which is valuable because they often see birds that are missed out in the field. No matter if you are a beginning or experienced birder, young or young-at-heart, the day is filled with beauty and opportunities for learning.

For information please contact Mike Havlik at mike.havlik@dallascountyia.gov.

Carolina Wren

By Carl Nollen

One of our best songsters is the Carolina Wren. It is certainly the loudest of our local singers. The wren family, along with the thrush family, are known world-wide as two of the best of the bird singers. I enjoy the scissory singing of the House Wren which nests every year in the acorn birdhouse I hang from our eaves. But these wrens migrate, and the Carolina Wrens do not, so I can enjoy their songs year 'round.

As the name implies, the Carolina Wren is a southern bird that has expanded its range in the last century due to suburbanization, bird feeders and a warming climate. A very good map on the National Audubon website shows how this species has expanded its range over the northern half of Iowa. A century ago, it was rare in Iowa. The Iowa Ornithologists Union says it has been reported in 77 of the 99 counties. It probably can be seen in the other 22 as well.

Why does a species that is mainly insectivorous stay around? A mystery of bird behavior I would say. At my house, it favors the pickings under the suet feeders. It will come to seed feeders; but likes peanuts best. This always curious, very active bird forages around the ground, needing brush piles, bushes and unkempt landscapes. In a snowy, icy winter, it will suffer, and the population will decline. Our bird feeders are especially valuable for this wren.

The months after our spring and summer singers are gone are notable for their lack of bird song. But the Carolina Wren comes through, singing loudly anytime of the year. One day in October at my place, one bird was calling and another was replying in a rapid call and response sequence that lasted several minutes. Was this the female or a third bird? The female supposedly doesn't sing the male's loud song, but it does sing. And I have seen a pair at my house.

The best identifying feature of the Carolina wren is its prominent white eyebrow. The Bewick's wren also has an eyebrow, but it is less defined, and is a slightly smaller, darker bird, and has been reported from only 20 of 99 counties, mostly in southeast Iowa. The Carolina Wren's plumage is rusty or cinnamon brown above and buffy below. The prettiest wren, I would say.

There are great photos of this bird on the Internet, of course, and Wikipedia has the most information. If you still use field guides, as I do, the American Museum of Natural History Birds of North America, Stokes Field Guide and Tekiela's Birds of Iowa are among the best. The best local printed source is Gladys Black's Iowa Birdlife book printed in 1992. Her narrative on the Carolina Wren covers over a page with her experiences with this species when it was not yet common in her Marion County area.

Pine Siskin

By Carol Berrier

Ornithologist Kenn Kaufman called it "a goldfinch in disguise" when describing a pine siskin. The tiny four and one-half inch siskin is a finch with habits similar to those of the five-inch American goldfinch. Both species like to forage in flocks, hanging upside down at times to retrieve seeds from dried flowers, weeds, trees, and grasses. Pine siskins also feed on insects, buds, and nectar. Often, they visit our bird feeders, sharing them with goldfinches and house finches.

The brown, heavily streaked siskin is easily distinguished from the goldfinch, but is sometimes confused with the female house finch, which is grayer and larger with streaking mainly on its flanks. In identifying a siskin, one should look for a bit of yellow in its wings and tail (evident mainly in flight) and listen for its buzzy *shreeee*. The siskin has a small sharply pointed bill and a notched tail.

The siskin pair raises one or two broods in a northern mixed conifer forest. We see these gregarious birds after their young have fledged and they join flocks going south to more open spaces where seeds and feeders are abundant. However, if food is plentiful up north, we may not see siskins in the Midwest.

On a chilly October 17, several siskins are feasting at my finch feeders as I write. These little birds are fearless. I once had a siskin perch on my finger while it ate from a feeder I was holding. And years ago, I read an account of a man who liked to sleep with his window open a crack, even in cold weather. One morning he was sleeping later than usual, and a little pine siskin entered his bedroom, sat on his chin and tugged at his mustache. The bird feeder was empty!

Murmurations **By Carl Nollen**

The acrobatic aerial dance-clouds of certain species are known by a special word – murmurations. Here, the starling is the bird of the word; thousands of them flocking together after the breeding season at dusk to show off their special talents. This pest-bird, enemy of our native hole-nesters, has this one redeeming value. Maybe you also enjoy the males' breeding season speckled, iridescent plumage. Scientists are just beginning to understand how a flock of thousands can wheel, deal, turn, twist, rise, wave and swirl in unison into continually changing clouds in the sky. How do they do this without flying into each other? Why do they do this?

Seven is the number. Scientific research so far has found that any bird in the flock pays attention to only its seven neighbors. These seven birds affect seven more birds, their movements rippling incredibly rapidly through the flock. Scientists still don't understand how they are able to perform this ballet of nature. Flocking is a safety mechanism to confuse aerial predators like hawks. Why they choose to make these bird-clouds is their secret.

Sibley's Guide to Bird Life and Behavior doesn't mention murmurations. Mozart's Starling, by Lyanda Haupt, a book about the famous composer's pet starling, devotes four pages to describe how starlings take flocking into the realm of high art.

Other species that make these spheres, funnels and ellipses in the sky are queleas in Africa, rosy starlings in India, and yellow-headed blackbirds in North America. Queleas belong to the weaver family, the same as our house sparrow, and are considered the most numerous bird in the world. It is a great pest to grain crops but it is native to Africa.

The October 2020 issue of Arizona Highways magazine devotes eight pages to the murmurations of yellow-headed blackbirds. Great photos of their flight patterns show they can rival starlings so the whole of the flock turns into a single organism, synchronized perfectly. A flock "bends and folds across the sky like some colossal scarf of the gods."



Some Mysteries of Bird Behavior **By Carl Nollen**

1. The month of September. This is the month fruits, nuts and seeds are at their peak. But the bird population is at its ebb. Most of our migrants have gone south or are hurrying on their way, only stopping to stock up for a day. Our summer songbirds are quiet, if they are even still here. The year 'round residents seem to have disappeared. Are they still molting? The bird feeders have only occasional visitors. What is Nature's plan - producing the most food at this time of year for the least number of birds to eat it?

2. Tree swallows flocking. They start getting together already in July. How do they all find each other? Where do they find all the cavities they need to nest? I drove through the back roads of northern Marion County in August and saw thousands of tree swallows in just a few miles. Close to the upper reaches of Lake Red Rock, in this dry year the water receded east to show only the Des Moines River channel. Even in this ideal habitat there couldn't have been enough trees with enough cavities for their nests. And where did they roost before we humans built all these utility lines for their benefit? There couldn't have been enough dead trees in the pre-European settlement days. I have monitored a bluebird "trail" for 20 years in Yellow Banks Park on the north side of the Des Moines River in Four Mile Township. Tree swallows formerly used some of the 30 bird houses there. But they have disappeared from this area for several years now. If this is a sign of declining population in Polk County it certainly isn't evident in Marion County.

3. House wrens using spider egg sacs for their nests. House wrens are the main competitor to bluebirds for cavities or nest boxes. In all my years of looking into the nests of house wrens I commonly find many white sacs in amongst the twigs. How do the wrens find them? How do they know these spiders will hatch to eat mites and keep parasites under control? Does any other species use any method to keep their nests free of pests? Unfortunately, this doesn't deal with ants which are common in bird house nests. They may stay in the bottom of the nest, but putting some diatomaceous earth there will quickly dispatch the ants.

4. This isn't a mystery, but some bird trivia. Here are some bird names that are also human surnames: Bunting, Crane, Crow, Finch, Goose, Gull, Hawk, Jay, Mallard, Martin, Quail, Robin, Sparrow, Starling, Swallow, Swift, Thrasher, Willet, Wren. And of course, Bird.

The Common Nighthawk **By Carol Berrier**

During the height of their fall migration in late August, a pair of common nighthawks was spotted flying with barn swallows in the air above our house. Both species are aerial insectivores with long angular wings and notched tails. At nearly ten inches, nighthawks are larger than the seven-inch barn swallows. Both species have short bills with large gapes to accommodate their prey. Nighthawks are not related to hawks and do not forage exclusively at night. In fact, they are crepuscular, choosing to fly and hunt most actively during dawn and evening hours. They often hunt after dark above the lights of a city. Among the fifty or more insect species that make up the nighthawks' diets are mosquitoes, flying ants, beetles, and bugs.

Common nighthawks are easily identified in the air. Their erratic flight is accompanied by incessant nasal "pee-ik" calls. During courtship males display with loud "booms" made by forcing air through wing feathers at the bottom of steep dives. When birds of both sexes are flying, one can see their white throats and the broad white bars on the under-sides of their wings. The males also have a white band on their tails. Nighthawks, like their cousins the whip-poor-wills, have extremely short legs that are not adapted to perching.

When resting on the ground, or horizontally on a branch, nighthawks are well camouflaged with their mottled brown feathers that can pass for dead leaves. In fact, they don't build nests, but lay their two eggs on bare or sparsely vegetated ground, plowed fields, railroad rights-of-way, or (perhaps their favorite) graveled roofs of city buildings. Unfortunately, the advent of smooth rubberized roofs has meant a decline in nighthawk population numbers. The installation of gravel pads in rooftop corners should be encouraged. Nighthawk numbers have decreased by 61% since the mid-1960's. Pesticides have also played a part in the decline.

Common nighthawks, often in big flocks, leave their northern breeding grounds by mid-October to winter in Brazil and Argentina where they will find aerial insects. After molting in January and February, they start their journey north in March.

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