

***THE WARBLER***  
**DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
**VOLUME XXVIII, NUMBER 8**  
**NOVEMBER 2021**  
**EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK**



### **Saturday, November 13 Field Trip**

Meet at 8:00 a.m. in the parking lot of Saylorville Lake Visitor's Center on Saturday, November 13<sup>th</sup>. From there we'll venture to various habitats and locations around the lake and in the surrounding area, looking for waterfowl, loons, grebes, gulls and other migrating species. Kinglets, White-throated Sparrows and juncos will be busy flitting among the trees and fallen leaves. Bring binoculars if you have them and dress for the conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Contact field trip leader, Dennis Thompson at [cdnthomps@gmail.com](mailto:cdnthomps@gmail.com) or 515-254-0837 for more information.

### **Colombia--Avian Wonderland, Tuesday, November 16, 7 p.m.**

\*Masks are required in Polk County Buildings and social distancing guidelines will be required.

Join Des Moines Audubon Society members Stuart Sparkman and Karen Viste-Sparkman on Tuesday, November 16, as they share stories and images of beautiful Colombia. Karen and Stuart experienced a three-week birding tour to this South American avian wonderland in November of 2019. The journey began in the southwestern city of Cali, and covered the western, central, and eastern cordilleras of the majestic Andes, as well as Colombia's two major river valleys, the Cauca and the Magdalena. From the windswept paramo over 12,000 feet to the mangrove swamps of the Caribbean coast, this trip sampled a staggering cross section of the country's physical geography. But the biggest treasure of all was the bird life. From antpittas and tapaculos to tanagers and flowerpiercers, Colombia vibrates with avian life. This friendly and beautiful country is thought to have the world's largest bird list with over 1850 species, including over 80 endemics.

Stuart retired from Ames High School in 2019 after a thirty-five-year career teaching advanced mathematics in Oregon and Iowa. Karen is the refuge biologist at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge in Jasper County, Iowa. The two have been birding together in North America and around the world for over 35 years. Join them as they remember and share some magical experiences in lovely Colombia.

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 515-223-5047 or [jrclark@radiks.net](mailto:jrclark@radiks.net).

## **THE AMERICAN TREE SPARROW**

### **One of Iowa's Winter Residents, by Ray Harden**

Note: This article by Ray Harden was first published in the February 2021 e-newsletter of the Raccoon River Watershed Association. Watch for American Tree Sparrows at your feeder this winter.

This has been a difficult winter for birds. The ice and snow have covered their natural foods bringing more than the usual numbers of birds to my feeder. I have even had a few pheasants eating the seeds that have fallen on the ground. The last few warm days that have given a hint of spring has caused even more activity at the feeder. The birds are eating ravenously in preparation for their spring migration.

I have enjoyed watching the American Tree Sparrows this year. Its name "tree sparrow" is a misnomer; it is not closely associated with trees. While they are living in Iowa, they roost in brush piles and shrubs. During their breeding season they nest in shrubs and grass in the Arctic tundra.

Tree sparrows spend the winter in Iowa, arriving in early November and staying until the first part of April. They can survive temperatures of -20 F if they can find food. In early spring when they head toward their summer breeding areas in northern Canada and Alaska some of them fly more than 2,000 miles. It has been found that many of the birds return to the same wintering areas year after year during their nine-year life span.

The tree sparrow is easy to identify. It resembles the common house sparrow but there are differences. The tree sparrow has a rufous crown, two white wing bars on its brown wings, and a long, notched tail. Its most distinctive feature is a small dark spot in the middle of its gray breast. It is often confused with a Chipping Sparrow. The Chipping Sparrow arrives in Perry in the spring, about the time the tree sparrow leaves.

Both of these birds are in the group called "New World Sparrows", as opposed to the house sparrows which are not native to the United States. This group contains small to medium sized birds, with rounded wings, brownish streaked appearance, and short conical bills that are used to husk seeds.

The normal diet of the tree sparrow in winter is made up of weed and grass seeds and dry berries. One study found over a thousand seeds in the bird's digestive system; the seeds found were ragweed, lambsquarter, chickweed, and sunflowers. They provide a valuable service to farmers and gardeners by eating noxious weed seeds. At feeders they will eat millet seed, cracked corn, sunflower seeds, and peanut butter. In summer in the Arctic their diet shifts to insects, especially when they are feeding young.

They are interesting birds to watch at a feeder. They will frequently do a "double scratch"- the claws on both feet moved backward at the same time. In their natural environment they do this to move leaf litter to find food, and they do it instinctively when standing deep in bird food where there is no leaf litter to remove. The tree sparrow has an average weight of eight tenths of an ounce and they eat one third of their body weight in seeds per day. This is equivalent to a 150-pound person eating 50 pounds of food each day.

Another species of sparrow, a large Harris's Sparrow, arrived at the feeder a few days ago. This bird is only seen in Perry during the spring and fall migrations. It too nests in Canada; it will stay here for a week or so before heading north. I have often noticed that when the Harris's Sparrow departs it seems to take the other birds that nest in the north, like the junco and tree sparrow- maybe it is their guide bird to Canada.

The juncos and tree sparrows are birds that live in Perry during the winter. They will be leaving soon. Then we will know that winter is over and that spring is on the way.

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"The tree sparrow, or 'winter chippy,' is a neat, trim bird...

They often chase one another through the weeds or shrubbery, singing in slight, broken sparrow strains; their notes reminding one of the tinkling of ice-clad weed-stalks -- a delicate cymbal music."

.....Selden Lincoln Whitcomb, 1866-1930, writing of Grinnell, Iowa. Whitcomb was born in Grinnell, graduated from Grinnell College in 1887, and was professor of English at the college from 1895-1905.

## OUR BEHAVIOR, BIRDS, AND THE PANDEMIC

Of course, and as we've already mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic has reduced – or geographically shrunk – many of our own bird-related activities. It also drastically reduced almost everyone's "human mobility." This has affected wildlife, including birds, and we'll probably be studying it – reviewing collected data - for years. Indeed, the investigation has already started.

Toward the end of September, a paper in *Sciences Advances* reviewed some of these preliminary observations in the U.S. and Canada dealing with urban habitat, near major roads and airports, and in counties where "lockdowns" were more pronounced or occurred at the same time as peak bird migration.

Using records of 4,353,739 observations of individual birds from 88,846 checklists from the eBird database, the researchers found that counts of 66 (80%) of their 82 "focal bird species" changed in pandemic-altered areas, usually increasing in comparison to pre-pandemic abundances.

Behavioral adaptations - or plasticity - have enabled some bird species to cope with, or even benefit from, certain types of human disturbances, but not others. Future investigation could assess whether the effects of these lockdowns on birds were likely caused by decreased noise, traffic mortality, air pollution, or other factors. This would help us to understand why counts of some species increased in relation to some measures of human activity but decreased in relation to others. Nonetheless, the researchers concluded that the effects of lockdowns tended to increase the number of birds counted in human-altered areas when activity and traffic declined.

Among other things, these researchers concluded that we could make urban spaces more attractive to birds by reducing traffic and mitigating the disturbance from human transportation as we emerge from the pandemic. You can check it out in more detail here: <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abf5073>

\*From: The Birding Community E-Bulletin, October 2021

## BOOK NOTES: MIGRATION!

Scott Weidensaul's latest book *A World on the Wing: The Global Odyssey of Migratory Birds* (WW Norton & Co., 2021) is almost certain to become an ornithological classic. Using both extensive personal experiences, as well as informative descriptive material on the increasing use of research technology (e.g., miniaturization of satellite transmitters, geolocators, Motus tagging, audio recording, etc.) readers are presented with a marvelous collection of some of the most current and sophisticated research technologies currently being used to study bird migration. Extensive descriptive scenarios of important migration findings, and also chilling descriptions of conservation bottlenecks, will inform and enlighten readers about some of the most current discoveries in bird migration research, as well as providing entertaining personal anecdotes from the author's global experiences.

This is a wonderful, one-stop-shopping overview of the current state of how bird migration is studied these days, along with offering much information on what's new in the world of avian research. We can't recommend this new release highly enough. It's a must read!

\*From: The Birding Community E-Bulletin, October 2021

"There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds...  
There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature –  
the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter..." Rachel Carson

**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 \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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