

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



Bird Watching at Raccoon River Park
Saturday, April 10, 8:30 a.m.

**Join Des Moines Audubon Society and West Des Moines Parks Department
for a bird watching hike.**

All levels of bird watchers are welcome from "what is that bird called?" to "can you hear that Eastern Phoebe?". Meet at the parking lot of the Raccoon River Boathouse just off Grand Avenue in West Des Moines at 8:30 a.m. After checking out the birds on the trail at Raccoon River Park, we will be traveling to Walnut Woods State Park and Purple Martin Lake. We'll be looking for early migrants and other resident birds. Bring binoculars if you have them and dress for the conditions, which might include walking in wet grasses or on damp trails. There is no need to register, just show up for some birding fun. Questions? Call West Des Moines Parks at 515-222-3435, or email Denny Thompson of Des Moines Audubon Society at cdnthomps@gmail.com for information.

Downy Woodpeckers Nesting in The Dead Elm Tree
By Ray Harden

On a pleasant day in mid-February of 2020 a male downy woodpecker was drumming on a snag of an elm tree in the northwest corner of my property. He froze when he saw me; he probably hoped that the human would move on. But when I didn't move, he slowly moved around to the other side of the tree, putting the dead tree between us. I finally walked on and after a minute he continue his drumming.

Several days later I returned to the area and he was pecking away on the same tree. He seemed to have purpose to his hammering. He was not just making sound, now he was drilling a hole into the tree.

The dead elm was a little more than foot in diameter and it was just a bare stem not more than twenty feet tall. He was hammering near the top where most of the bark had peeled off and he had chosen a spot just below a joint where a limb had broken off. Later a female downy joined him and was pecking at the hole too. She was chiseling away with the same determination as the male. Obviously, they had decided to make their nest in the dead elm tree.

Continued on the next page.

Downy Woodpeckers Nesting in The Dead Elm Tree (continued)

It is easy to identify the sex of the adult downy woodpeckers. The male has a small red cap on the back of his head, but the female's head is just black and white. They are called "downy" because of the patch of "peach-fuzzy" like feathers at the base of their bill.

I decided to set up my bird blind near the tree so I could watch and photograph the events of their nest making. Soon the birds were able to get half of their bodies into the opening. The industrious pair kept excavating the opening and by April 26th they could go into the hole where they were completely hidden from view. They would take turns going into the tree and bring a beak full of wood chips to the opening and drop them. Soon there was a small pile of sawdust material at the base of the tree.

One day, when the male was inside the nest hole throwing out woodchips, a house wren stopped to investigate. It was probably looking for a nest site too. The little downy exploded out of the tree and chased the wren. Both of them were squawking as they flew around the trees and bushes. When the wren was gone the male returned to the tree and continued his task.

On a very windy day I was sitting in the blind observing their behavior. The female was inside the tree cavity and occasionally dumping out large mouthfuls of woodchips. Soon the male arrived and landed next to opening and peered inside. The female came out and flew to a nearby branch. The male flew and landed next to her and jumped on her back. By the time I got my camera out and focused she had flown away and the male went inside the tree and began removing more woodchips. I expected to see babies in a few weeks.

The wood chiseling activity stopped about the first of May and the incubation process began. The birds would take turns sitting on the nest inside the tree. They seemed to have the timing to about one-half hour each inside the tree then relieved by the mate. When it came near time for the exchange of places, the bird would look out of the hole as if it wondered why its mate was late.

It seemed that the male spent more time on the nest than the female. On one occasion he went into the tree and stayed inside. When the female returned, he stuck out his head and looked at her, then went back inside. I don't know what he communicated to her, but the female flew away.

On May 19th the pair were coming to the tree with food in their mouths; the eggs had hatched and the feeding had begun. About every ten to fifteen minutes the birds would arrive with a mouth full of insects or caterpillars. I would look at all the nearby trees and shrubs trying to locate them before they arrived at the nest. But I seldom saw them until they were at the opening. They flew in from a different direction each time. Ornithologists report that birds do this behavior to keep predators from following them to the nest.

The birds went predictable directions when they left the tree. The female usually flew south, while the male usually flew east down the fencerow. They probably had preferred hunting areas. Also, when they left the nest, they would frequently have a fecal sac in their beak.

At the end of May there were some peeping sounds coming from inside the tree, but no baby woodpeckers were seen. At this time when the birds returned with food, they didn't enter the tree. They stayed outside and put their heads in the hole to feed the young.

A week later, on June 8th, I saw a baby bird moving inside the tree. It seemed strange that the parents were staying away longer periods of time between feedings. Sadly, I missed observing the woodpeckers for the next three days. Upon returning there was no feeding activity. The female was never seen again at the nest and the male came once and he did not go inside the tree. When a wren went inside the hole, I knew that the young had fledged. What a disappointment- I had hoped to get some photos of the babies coming out the old elm tree.

Downy woodpeckers have been coming to my feeders all winter eating sunflower seeds and suet. Maybe this coming spring I can witness their nest building activities again.

Turkey Vulture By Carl Nollen

One of Iowa's most easily identifiable birds is the turkey vulture (*Cathartes aura*). They roll around heaven all day sniffing out dead meat. Their superior olfactory sense smells odors a mile away. You might scare them away from a road kill on the highway, but you are more likely to see them soaring in the skies, rocking side to side in a dihedral or v-shape pattern. Taking advantage of rising warm thermals, vultures are at home above us with little effort or wing-flapping. They may also be seen in exposed perches in the morning with wings spread, warming up or drying off the dew. Their keen sight also helps to find their food.

The nonbirder may ask "What good is this bird?" It's one bird economically important to our ecology by ridding the landscape of dead animals. How can a bird with such a "fine" sense of smell stick its bare head and neck into odoriferous rotting flesh? Lucky for us humans, we don't need to know. We are glad their purpose in nature is to digest the deceased. A vulture's stomach has such corrosive acid it is not sickened by all kinds of toxins and bacteria.

The word "vulture" comes from the Latin "vulturus" and means "tearer" in reference to tearing into flesh. "Cathartes" comes from the Greek and means "purifier" as it "cleanses" the land of decay. The "turkey" part of its common name refers to its red head and black plumage, which resembles the wild turkey. The spread wings overhead are two-toned black and dark gray underneath. "Buzzard" is a common name and was used in place names such as neighborhoods or country schools in the 19th Century.

This species is one of our migrating birds that comes early and stays late. Its season in Iowa is March through October, with some sightings in November. This day migrant needs warm spring thermals to make its way into Iowa from the southern states and then spreads its way into all 99 counties. Over 4000 were counted in September, 2010, migrating south over the Hitchcock Nature Center in Pottawattamie County.

It's somewhat of a mystery to me how this relatively common species is successful in reproducing, since it commonly nests on the ground and needs remote habitats. Iowa doesn't have that many cliffs, caves or undisturbed woods. Abandoned farm buildings may also offer refuge. Usually two blotched, dull white eggs are laid which take over a month to hatch. The young need nine or ten weeks to fledge. The family will stay together until fall. Vultures have no syrinx or vocal organ, so they can only grunt or hiss. But their 6-foot wingspan can scare off many predators if their nest is threatened. They have weak feet and cannot carry off prey like hawks or eagles.

There is plenty of information and many photographs of turkey vultures on the internet. If you still use bird books, one of the best pictures is the color drawing in the 2005 book, *Iowa Birds*, by Ann Johnson, who is also webmaster for the Iowa Ornithologists' Union. Gladys Black, Iowa's famous ornithologist, had much to say about vultures in her writings (*Birds of Iowa*, 1979, and *Iowa Bird Life*, 1992). She noted that the Lake Red Rock area had the largest population in Iowa, with at least 150 residents. She also noticed that the resident flocks would powwow in the air with migrants in the fall.



"There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. ...Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasqueflower is a right as inalienable as free speech."

--Aldo Leopold

Adapted from Birding in Central Iowa, Spring 2020
By Ray Harden

During our birding in Spring of 2020, we recorded 107 species of birds; fourteen of these were warblers. We also saw several species of other birds, such as waterfowl, thrushes, sparrows, and the birds that are Iowa's permanent residents. There were several "LBBs", little brown birds that we only got a quick glimpse of and were not able to identify.

The first warbler we spotted was the Yellow-rumped, which is often affectionately called a "butter butt". It is one of the most abundant warblers and the first of the group to arrive in Iowa. Because of its yellow marking it is easy to spot as it hops in the tree limbs looking for insects.

Three hundred and ninety species of birds have been identified in Iowa. The members of the Raccoon River Watershed Association (RWWA) keep a running list of all the birds seen in this central Iowa watershed during the year. From January 1 to June 1, 2020 the group had recorded 242 species of birds that have been seen by members of the RRWA. The list is managed by Mike Delaney and Roy Adolphson.

My wife and I did our bird watching in county parks, state parks, wildlife areas, boat ramps, cemeteries, and while driving on gravel roads. All of the places were less than an hour drive from our house. In a four-acre wooded area in a Perry City Park I had recorded twenty-seven species of birds by June during my morning walk.

Birding is a safe and fun outdoor activity that can be done alone, with your family, or in a small group. This reduces worries about the Covid-19 disease and the walking is good exercise. Birding is also inexpensive-all that is needed is a pair of binoculars and a field guide of birds. Birds can always be seen close by, at a feeder in your back yard, a walk around the block, or in a city park.

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