

***THE WARBLER***  
**DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
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**JUNE 2021**  
**EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK**



**Field Trip—Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge**  
**Saturday, June 12**

The Des Moines Audubon Society field trip will be held on Saturday, June 12th and the destination will be Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. Meet in the parking lot of the McDonald's on University Avenue in Pleasant Hill at 8:00 AM. We'll be looking for Henslow's Sparrows, Yellow-breasted Chat, Bell's Vireo, and Willow Flycatcher. Please contact Denny Thompson for more information at [cndthomps@gmail.com](mailto:cndthomps@gmail.com) or 515-254-0837.

**Henslow's Sparrow (*Centronyx henslowii*)**  
**By Karen Viste-Sparkman**

Henslow's Sparrow is the bird that most epitomizes the tallgrass prairie avian community. Its breeding range coincides closely with that of the historic tallgrass prairie. Henslow's Sparrows prefer to inhabit tall, dense grassland with scattered forbs that provide perches. One key indication of suitability for Henslow's Sparrows is the presence of a deep litter layer, largely dependent on the amount of time since the grassland has burned. In tallgrass prairie, one year without fire is enough to provide sufficient litter to support Henslow's Sparrows. When not singing, the birds spend most of their time on the ground, preferring to walk rather than fly whenever possible, and foraging for insects among the duff.

Although drab, Henslow's Sparrow has a subtle beauty, with a golden-green wash to the face and brown and reddish streaks on the back. It is often overlooked due to its secretive nature and insect-like song, a high-pitched two-note hiccup. The song is often sung from a prominent location, so the bird can often be picked out by scanning likely perches. Unfortunately, people who have experienced high-frequency hearing loss may not be able to hear the Henslow's Sparrow song, making the birds tough to find.

Henslow's Sparrow was named by John James Audubon in honor of his friend John Stevens Henslow, a professor of botany at the University of Cambridge and a teacher of Charles Darwin.

Like most grassland birds, the Henslow's Sparrow has experienced population declines due to habitat loss. Happily, the species is one of the biggest wildlife successes of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Formerly rare in Iowa, Henslow's Sparrows began increasing in the state during the 1990s, when their spread seemed to follow that of CRP grasslands. Now they are fairly common in large prairies and other grasslands in much of the state, although these areas are still scarce. Protecting and restoring tallgrass prairie will continue to benefit this iconic species.

\*Karen Viste-Sparkman is the Wildlife Biologist at Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge. This article was previously published in the Fall 2020 Iowa Prairie Network newsletter and is used with permission.

## **Barn Swallows: A Sure Sign of Spring**

**By Ray Harden, March 2021**

A farmer friend of mine said that he knew that the chance of frost was past because his Barn Swallows had arrived. He has a dozen or more of the birds that have been nesting in the out buildings of his farm for over thirty years.

The swallows are a sign of warm weather because they don't arrive until insects begin to hatch. A late frost would be very detrimental to them because it would kill the insects that they need for food.

Barn Swallows have beautiful markings; their back is a dark glossy blue. The female's belly is a cream color but the male's belly is orange. The male has a longer forked tail than the female. These forked tail feathers allow the birds to have agility during flight. Some ornithologists believe that females are attracted to males that have the longest tail feathers. In the late 1800's Barn Swallows were killed by the thousands for their colorful feathers that were used to decorate ladies' hats.

Swallows forage for food in open areas and often fly behind farm machinery or lawn mowers, feeding on the insects the machinery stirs up. Their aerial acrobatics are interesting to watch, as they bank, swoop, and dive through the air catching insects.

Their short broad bill can be opened wide and the bristles around the beak help funnel prey into their mouths. The birds also use their funnel-like bills to drink water. Their mouth is held open as the birds skim along the surface of water.

Colonies of mud nests attached to barn rafters are a distinguishing characteristic of Barn Swallows. My friend's barn and storage shed have over two dozen nests and some have been used for many years. The nest must be sheltered from rain so the mud does not dissolve. Nesting in colonies allows the birds to protect each other from predators and to share information about food sources.

Barn Swallows build their nests by scooping up a mouthful of mud and rolling it into a pellet along with a few blades of grass. Then they use their beaks like a trowel to construct the nest, laying the pellets like a brick layer building a wall. It takes the adult birds six to twelve days and hundreds of mud pellets to complete the structure. When the mud dries it has a hard texture similar to adobe that will last for many years.

The female lays three to five eggs in the nest that has been lined with soft grass or animal hair. She will also line the nest with feathers from her breast; the bare breast forms a "brood pouch". This area of bare skin allows for the female's body heat to be transferred to the developing embryos in the eggs.

Normally swallows will have two batches of young in a summer. The first group of young stay near the parents and will frequently help feed the second hatch of babies.

By the end of September, swallows begin to form large flocks as they prepare for the migration to Central and South America. Hundreds of them are frequently seen sitting on fences and electrical wires neatly spaced a wing span apart from each other.

The Barn Swallow is a common bird in Iowa and is not endangered. However, ornithologists are reporting a slight decrease in their numbers. This is due in part to pesticides and Bt corn that has reduced the corn borer population. Another reason for their decline is that many farmsteads lack the older wooden barns and sheds. New metal buildings on farms are tightly sealed and the birds cannot get inside to build nests.

My farmer friend likes to have Barn Swallows on his farm because they eat many insect pests so he makes sure there is an opening in his sheds and barn so the swallows can return and nest on his property every year.

**Iowa Important Bird Areas Spotlight Species:  
Least Tern (*Sternula antillarum*)  
By Doug Harr**

At only 9 inches in body length, the Least Tern is smallest of all terns in North America. The interior U.S. population is listed as endangered species by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and Iowa DNR. For that reason, Least Terns are one of Iowa Audubon's "criteria species" for designating Important Bird Areas. Given their small size, Least Terns are often known for intolerance of intruders, sometimes so much that noted birding author Pete Dunne has provided the nickname of "Easily Piqued Beach Pixie". Swift, diving attacks with highly acrobatic movements are used to attempt chasing away anything that might disturb nest sites or chicks.

Least Terns have a short body, short V-shaped tail and very long, pointed wings that extend beyond the tail when folded. With a pale gray back, white undersides, a white-V forehead in front of a solid black cap, bright yellow bill and legs, breeding-season adults are easily distinguished from midsized terns. Post-breeding adults have a black bill and head pattern more like that of a Common Tern. Juveniles also have a black bill and a vermiculated buffy-gray back.

This is a colonial species throughout the year, typical of most other terns. They prefer to nest on sandy beaches, whether seaside or on central U.S. rivers. Least Terns less commonly nest on gravel rooftops, where overheating may sometimes result in nest failure. On sandy sites, with little vegetation present, pairs make several shallow scrapes in the sand, the female picking the scrape where she will finally nest. Clutch size is typically 2 eggs, but ranging from 1-3, with incubation lasting 19-25 days. Adults usually brood hatchlings in the nest scrape for about 2 days in order to regulate nest temperature. After that, young birds might move up to 200 meters away but still will be brooded and fed small fish by parents, fledging in approximately 20 days.

Greatest threat to Least Terns is disturbance of beach nesting and feeding sites. Coastal beaches are increasingly used by humans for all kinds of recreation and cause frequent disruption of nesting. Interior nesting areas on the Missouri River from North Dakota to Missouri, very important to Least Terns, are becoming more frequently flooded due to climate change. Floods have wiped out multiple nesting sites over the past several years. Along the Missouri River in Iowa, Least Terns nest on sandbars, islands, backwater beaches, and even on fly ash piles at the Port Neal power plant, an Audubon Important Bird Area (closed to the public) near Sioux City.

Conservation of this species continues to be difficult. The Army Corps of Engineers has sometimes moved nestlings to safer sites when river levels rise on the Missouri. On coastal sites, fences and warning signs often are placed to encircle nesting colonies, and park managers or even volunteers work to keep humans and pets away from important beach nests. Federal funding and care for this interior endangered species must be increased for all Least Tern populations.

From: Newsletter of Iowa Audubon  
December 2018  
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"For observing nature, the best pace is a snail's pace."  
-- Edwin Way Teale, (1899 - 1980) naturalist, author

## TIP OF THE MONTH: PLANTING-TIME

Some Americans could still be playing it safe, avoiding crowds, limiting travels, and staying home. As we've written before, this has resulted in an increased interest in backyard birding and bird-feeding.

Big-time!

This means that it's a good time to plan and implement some spring and summer yard-scaping. This should include planting some flowers that attract hummingbirds, a seed garden with a variety of native plants, some large sunflowers, and even a new tree or large bush to add to your already bird-attractive yard, even if it's large, small, or tiny!

Remember, even small plots can add to the enhancement of stopover sites for migrants, as well as nesting and foraging areas. Local nurseries are filled with color and birds will respond accordingly. Around home, we can take a special joy in the colors and sounds of the birds we host. And always remember, by using native instead of nonnative plants - especially fruiting shrubs - you can give your birds natural foods without causing them to spread invasive species across the landscape.

Adapted from: Birding Community E-bulletin, April 2021

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"A bird in the bush is worth two in the hand"

-- Frank Chapman, (1864 - 1962) ornithologist, author, conservationist

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