

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
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JANUARY 2022
EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



Field Trip Saturday, January 8

We'll meet in the circle drive at the bird blind in Walnut Woods State Park at 8 AM on Saturday, January 8. We'll check out the birds at the blind and in the woods at the park and might also check for more birds at Maffitt Reservoir if there is open water. Maffitt Reservoir, primarily located in Polk County, also has corners that reach into Warren, Dallas and Madison Counties. The reservoir was constructed in the early 1940s, as a backup water source but it is also a popular birding spot. Bring binoculars and dress for the conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Contact field trip leader, Dennis Thompson at cnthomps@gmail.com or 515-254-0837 for more information.

Des Moines Audubon Program, Tuesday, January 18, 7 p.m. Iowa Young Birders, by Tyler Harms

*At the time of publication of this newsletter,
masks are required in Polk County Buildings and social distancing guidelines are recommended.

Tyler Harms has been the Executive Director of Iowa Young Birders since 2015. A Kossuth County native, Tyler's first involvement with the organization was as a volunteer leader for the first ever "Young Birder Day" in Ames in 2013. Since then, he has helped plan more than 70 field trips, special events, and virtual learning opportunities for young birders across Iowa. A birder himself, Tyler has been an active member of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union since 2009 and has served the organization on the Board of Directors, Special Projects Committee, ad hoc Membership Survey Committee, and as the Spring Field Reports Editor. Tyler currently lives in Ames with his wife Ashley and two sons Graham (9) and Otis (4), all of whom enjoy the outdoors and birds as much as he does.

During the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, thanks to support from the Des Moines Audubon Society and other organizations, Iowa Young Birders launched a unique summer birding program to encourage youth to spend time outdoors watching birds while social distancing. Similar to a typical summer reading program offered by public libraries, the summer birding program asked kids to log their time spent watching birds and participating in bird-related activities. Tyler will talk about the impact of this program in 2020 and 2021 as well as results from a post-participation survey

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.

THE PECKING ORDER AT YOUR FEEDER

Supplied with a wonderful database of almost 100,000 bird interactions, the gang at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "Project FeederWatch" announced the decoding – a virtual pecking order – of feeder-visitors. This power-ranking, covering scores of species, made something of a splash last month, and the listing wasn't always related to a size-order as expected.

Yes, the grouping and chart-display did start with the hefty Wild Turkey at the top, and it ended with the small and retiring Brown Creeper toward the bottom, but a size-hierarchy wasn't always the rule. For example, Mourning Doves might outweigh other species, but they also give way to smaller species. Woodpeckers are tough – they peck after all – but the large Pileated Woodpecker also proves to be fairly docile.

Some bird rivalries at the feeder are too complex for a simple ranking. The House Finch usually dominates the Purple Finch, and the Purple Finch almost always dominates the Dark-eyed Junco. But when the House Finch and Dark-eyed Junco face off, the latter often dominates.

The most complex relationships are probably between American Goldfinches and the closely-related Pine Siskin. When these species show up – usually in flocks – they appear to get into serious squabbles both among themselves and with almost every other species.

Since 1987, thousands of backyard feeder-watchers across the U.S. and Canada have participated in Project FeederWatch, a project jointly run by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Birds Canada. And since 2016, observers have been able to report specific bird power-interactions.

"The birds are at a food source, so it's a place where they're more concentrated and even more likely than usual to have these behavioral interactions," said Project FeederWatch leader Emma Greig.

For some of us, especially those with some bird-banding experience, it was a surprise to find that chickadees – both Black-capped and Carolina – often perceived to be quite feisty, were actually the least dominant of the more common feeder-birds.

In a 2017 study in *Behavioral Ecology*, Project FeederWatch researchers applied the first wave of their data into algorithms to condense the complex of relationships into a simple rank. Since the project had a network of 30,000 citizen-scientists, this meant the team could collect data at a continental scale. And now, a vastly expanded data set of 99,376 interactions between almost 200 species, up from 7,685 interactions in the 2017 study, is able to provide more serious findings.

The whole situation was nicely summarized in *The Washington Post* in November:
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2021/11/28/bird-feeder-pecking-order/>

*From: The Birding Community E-Bulletin, December 2021

Book Review by Doug Harr

GRINNELL: America's Environmental Pioneer and His Restless Drive to Save the West. John Taliaferro, 2019. Liveright Publishing Corp., NY, NY. 624 pp.

George Bird Grinnell was the original founder of the Audubon Society and also co-founded the Boone & Crockett Club with Theodore Roosevelt. These were the first bird and big game conservation organizations in our nation. But this biography tells far more: Grinnell's childhood at Audubon Park, NY, owned by John James Audubon's widow; life-long work as writer and editor of *Forest & Stream* publication; exploring, naming and helping create some of our earliest national parks; serving as a paleontologist with General Custer's exploration of the Black Hills; and his extensive efforts to protect Native Americans. A very lengthy read, it is nonetheless an amazing history about the man who led our country in protecting wildlife, parks, native tribes, and much more.

*From: Iowa Audubon Newsletter, April 2020, Volume 16

Urban Crows in Winter

By Carl Nollen

When I worked in downtown Des Moines, the walk to my car took me through a warehouse area east of the Des Moines River. In mid-winter the sun had already set, but the crows were staging on the buildings and trees centered around East 4th and Market Streets. Watching and waiting for darkness, some cawing and crowing, some silent and still, some milling and socializing, they are worthy of any birder's attention. What are they up to?

An article in the November, 2020, issue of *Birding* magazine, revived my interest again in this most intelligent bird. "The Winter Crow Roost of Lawrence, Massachusetts," tells us about the concepts of staging and roosting. Staging begins an hour before sunset and continues until about a half hour after sunset; roosting begins around a half hour after sunset. They enter their roost under the cover of darkness at nearby tops of deciduous trees. In that old city there is a Crow Patrol composed of several dozen people interested in learning more about this aspect of crow behavior.

Crows are birds we love to hate. In big city downtowns they can be pests with their noise and droppings. An article in the *Des Moines Register*, February 5, 1941, wrote that over 1000 had been shot in Woodland Cemetery and a bounty of 10 cents per bird could be collected from the County Auditor. You had to bring in their heads and feet. (Imagine bringing in something like that to a Courthouse office today!). Another article, February 7, 1949, named two detectives who gunned away for one evening in Glendale Cemetery, shooting over 100 crows. A much more sympathetic story by Lance Kinseth in the *Sunday Register*, March 15, 1998, asked us to reconsider our negative image of crows. A flock of crows is called a murder. We are made to "eat crow" when we have to admit a mistake. We "crow" when we boast. The Crow Indians were named by European settlers as a racial slur. Could it be we are envious of crow smartness?

An article in the January 13, 2015, *Register*, tells about a study which suggests crows use their smarts by using analogical reasoning. Scientists previously thought only humans and apes could master this skill without training. Anyway, we already knew crows are clever. Do scarecrows really scare crows? No, they quickly learn otherwise.

I have a dozen books on crows. *Crow Planet, Essential Wisdom from the Urban Wilderness*, by Lyanda Haupt, tells us that you can't escape nature by living in the city. Even downtown. Let crows be our guides to this zoopolis. *Crows, Encounters with the Wise Guys*, by Candace Savage, has such interesting pictures, crow folklore and poetry, on these birds in black (ravens, too). Barb Kirpluk, in her book, *Caw of the Wild, Observations from the Secret World of Crows*, tracked three crow families in her urban midwestern locale and studied the psychology of urban crows in winter. She noted the cacophony of sound as they first arrived at their roost and how they changed roosts often from night to night.

Carol Berrier wrote about the American Crow in our October, 2020, *Warbler* newsletter. She noted that crows have become more urban just like we humans. This native bird is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty, but has a hunting season in Iowa, October 15-November 30 and January 14-March 31, no limits.

**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 _____

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Snowy Owls **by Carol Berrier**

Take a closer look at that white plastic bag lying in the field, it might be a Snowy Owl.

Snowy Owls are large birds, weighing three to six pounds and measuring two feet, with a five foot wing span. Their large feather-covered feet are equipped with sharp talons. As with all raptors, male Snowy Owls are smaller than females. The Snowy Owl sports a thick down coat under its beautiful white feathers with black barring. This makes for perfect camouflage and insulation in the Arctic tundra where they nest on the ground, and also in the snow-covered fields of the Upper Midwest where they sometimes spend the winter. Females have more black barring than males. Large yellow eyes peer from white facial feathers, eyes that can dilate on an individual basis, but are stationary in their sockets. Acute hearing enables the owls to locate prey under the snow.

Accustomed to perpetual summer daylight, Snowy Owls are diurnal hunters, flying about ten feet above the ground, or scanning from a perch on a hummock or rock. These nomads may choose a field, marsh, prairie, or beach when hunting their prey of rodents, birds, or ducks.

Monogamous only during the breeding season, Snowy Owls are usually solitary. They may breed only once every four or five years, perhaps reflecting the food supply. When lemmings are abundant in the tundra the owls raise large broods. It is thought that bumper crops of fledgling Snowy Owls, and a subsequent food shortage, may play a part in the occasional irruptions of large numbers of Snowy Owls in Canada and the U.S.

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