

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



**Field Trip—Walnut Woods State Park
Saturday, October 8th**

For the Saturday, October 8th field trip, Des Moines Audubon will meet at 8:00 a.m. at the circle drive by the bird blind at Walnut Woods State Park. We will observe birds at the feeders and also be looking for migrating species in areas of the park. We will check out nearby Purple Martin Lake and possibly Maffitt Reservoir. Tim Gedler, former Walnut Woods State Park Manager will be the trip leader. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend. For information about this field trip, contact Jane Clark at jrclark@radiks.net or 515-223-5047.

**Monarch Movement Ecology, 7 p.m. Tuesday, October 18th
By Kelsey E. Fisher**

Our guest speaker for Tuesday, October 18th is Kelsey E. Fisher, Postdoctoral Researcher in Iowa State University's Department of Entomology. Dr. Fisher's research is focused upon Monarch butterfly movement ecology during the breeding season, and her program will also include discussion of Iowa's Monarch Conservation.

Kelsey E. Fisher is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Iowa State University (ISU) under the guidance of Steven P. Bradbury. She earned her PhD in Entomology from ISU in 2021, MS in Entomology from the University of Delaware in 2015, and BS in Biology from Widener University in 2013. Kelsey's research focuses on discerning animal movement patterns and space use in fragmented landscapes to understand movement behavior of vagile insect species at various spatial scales. Her professional goal is to serve as a research scientist planning and conducting research that directly supports and improves the sustainability and conservation of native species. She envisions actively and effectively communicating research plans and findings within the scientific community, with decision-makers, and with stakeholders to help inform implementation of science-based recommendations.

Kelsey will discuss monarch butterfly biology and conservation needs, the collaborative work on monarch butterfly conservation conducted at Iowa State University, and how her research informs conservation strategies in Iowa.

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 email: jrclark@radiks.net.

Red-breasted Nuthatch--Prone to Irruption

Scientific Name: *Sitta canadensis*

- Population: 19 million
- Trend: Increasing
- Habitat: Coniferous and mixed forests, especially those with spruce and fir.

Once known as the Canada Nuthatch or Red-bellied Nuthatch, the active, compact Red-breasted Nuthatch is a common resident of northern and western coniferous and mixed forests in the United States and Canada. Usually well-hidden within the thick forest it favors, this bird's distinctive, tinny-sounding call is often heard before it is seen. Once spotted, the adult Red-breasted Nuthatch is unmistakable, with an eye-catching black-and-white head pattern, blue-gray upperparts, and a reddish-orange belly.

Like its larger relative the White-breasted-nuthatch, the Red-breasted Nuthatch has strong feet, toes, and long, curved claws that allow it to climb down trees headfirst, or to clamber upside-down along the undersides of branches.

Winter Wanderer

The Red-breasted Nuthatch is the most migratory member of its normally sedentary family. This species stages regular "irruptions" — during which large numbers of individuals move farther south than usual in response to a lack of winter food. Other boreal bird species stage similar irruptions, including the Pine Siskin, Evening Grosbeak, and Snowy Owl, and White-breasted Nuthatches were recently found to do the same, though on a much smaller scale. In the case of the Red-breasted Nuthatch, poor cone crops spur this bird's periodic movements southward. Sometimes, wayward Red-breasted Nuthatches travel as far south as the Gulf Coast and Northern Mexico. This species is even a very rare vagrant to Europe — the only North American nuthatch to have made the long journey across the Atlantic. It has also been recorded on St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, not far from Russia.

Although the Red-breasted Nuthatch is normally resident in most of its range, it may withdraw from the northernmost areas in response to severe weather and/or food scarcity.

Its breeding range covers much of the conifer forest belt that stretches from Alaska to Newfoundland and Labrador, south through the Great Lakes region, northern New England, and also in the higher elevations of the Appalachians to eastern Tennessee and North Carolina. In the West, it occurs in coniferous forests south to California and Arizona.

Tiny Tin Trumpet

The call of the Red-breasted Nuthatch is a nasal, tinny yank-yank, higher-pitched than the White-breasted Nuthatch. The "tin horn" quality of this call is reminiscent of a much larger bird — the Ivory-billed-woodpecker. Unlike other nuthatches, the Red-breasted also uses song to woo females during courtship.

A Switch in Diet

The Red-breasted Nuthatch forages by gleaning its way up and down tree trunks and branches. During the spring and summer, this bird seeks insects and spiders and their larvae and eggs; in the winter, the diet switches to conifer seeds and nuts. These latter food items can be tough to break apart, but the resourceful nuthatch overcomes that challenge by wedging a tough seed or nut into a bark crevice, then hacking it into smaller pieces with its strong, slightly upturned bill. This distinctive habit, called "hatching," gives the birds in this avian family the name "nuthatch."

This scrappy little nuthatch readily visits backyard feeders for nuts, seeds, and suet, holding its own against larger feeder visitors such as the Tufted Titmouse, Northern Cardinal, and Blue Jay. Like other winter residents such as the Black-capped Chickadee, the Red-breasted Nuthatch caches extra food under bark and in tree crevices and holes. These hidden stores help these birds survive food shortages during harsh weather.

A Sappy Entrance

The Red-breasted Nuthatch is monogamous during its breeding season, and pairs may remain together on their territory through the following winter. The male courts his mate in a swaying and singing display with raised head, drooping wings, and fluffed-out back feathers. He also brings food to the female during courtship.

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Red-breasted Nuthatch--Prone to Irruption (Continued from previous page)

One interesting facet of Red-breasted Nuthatch biology is that mated pairs prefer to excavate their own nest cavities, rarely using existing cavities or nest boxes. Both male and female work to excavate a nest hole, usually in dead or decaying wood, then collect sticky pine resin to smear around the entrance. Similarly, the Red-cockaded Woodpecker takes advantage of sticky sap around its nest cavity entrance, presumably to deter nest predators. Both members of the Red-breasted Nuthatch pair also construct their nest, a cup of twigs and grass lined with softer material. The female lays a clutch of five to six eggs, and both parents work together to raise the young.

Nuthatch Conservation

The conservation consortium Partners in Flight has reported the good news that Red-breasted Nuthatch numbers are increasing, although they do face the same threats many other species do, such as predation from outdoor cats and mortality from collisions with windows and buildings. American Bird Conservancy has a number of programs in place to reduce these threats, including the Cats Indoors program, which encourages pet owners to keep cats and birds safe, and Glass Collisions program. Explore <https://abcbirds.org/get-involved/bird-smart-glass/>.

*This article was reprinted in the Des Moines Audubon Newsletter, *The Warbler*, courtesy of American Bird Conservancy, <http://www.abcbirds.org> A direct link to the Red-breasted Nuthatch species account in their Bird Library can be found at: <https://abcbirds.org/bird/red-breasted-nuthatch/>

WHAT??? **By Loren Lown**

For those who are young and can hear well, as most of us once could, it is an unrecognized gift that is too often taken for granted. They can hear the whisper of the wind, the “tinkle” of warbler song, and can locate a gnatcatcher by ear.

For several years, I have realized that my past exposure to chainsaws, shotguns, and Grateful Dead concerts had hurt the higher ranges of the hearing that I was blessed with. Now, crowd noise and family holiday tables have become more difficult to navigate. AND I was losing my ability to bird successfully.

My spouse would say, “What bird is that?” and I would say “What bird?”. It wasn’t long before the list of birds that I could no longer hear grew unacceptably large. I acquired the Merlin App for my phone which helped immensely. The sound recording feature identified the birdsong I could no longer hear and I was then able to spot the elusive little guys but only because I knew that they were there. Once you know a brown creeper or warbling vireo is there, it is much easier to spot them. While doing a botanical survey and sneaking in a little birding with a friend who has excellent hearing – I saw more warblers in a day than I had in a year.

Finally, I swallowed my pride, yielded to my spouse and children, and went to the audiologist. My family was tired of yelling to me and interpreting the audio world. The audiologist confirmed that I was really “hard of hearing”. My upper range hearing was pretty much gone and what remained was damaged.

The result was my purchase of two expensive aids that I suspected wouldn’t help that much. I was wrong. The difference is a wonder. Armed with electronics, some of my “birding” skills returned. I had forgotten how many vireos there are in Iowa. I have even begun telling friends that they need hearing aids. While working with another botany friend in the field recently, I commented on the very noisy sedge wrens cursing at us. He could not hear them or the indigo buntings.

The suggestion for this article came as I was finishing a book by Ed Yong called, “The Immense World”. It is a truly good read about how other creatures interpret the world around us and the hidden world humans don’t sense. It has a chapter, “All Ears”, that is fascinating. The detailed description of bird song and the information encapsulated in their language is a must read for a curious naturalist. He states, “few animal sounds are as beautiful to human ears as the song of birds.”

Hearing aids do not repair the years of careless youthful abuse I inflicted on myself. I still need to be fairly close before I can hear the wood peewees, but I can now hear many old friends and find them in the canopy. Using electronics to assist my perception of the natural world has allowed me to continue enjoying an inspiring part of our natural world. So, if a spouse or friend says – “you need a hearing aid” – listen to them and the birds. To all you young folks – use hearing protection before you lose a precious tool for interpreting your world.

**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 _____

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