

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



Des Moines Audubon Field Trip
Saturday, March 12, 2022

Meet at the Saylorville Visitor Center at 8:00 a.m. Hopefully there will be some open water and we'll look for waterfowl and gulls. These monthly field trips provide outdoor experiences for Des Moines Audubon members and guests. Not only are these opportunities to see some good birds, they are also times of socializing with people who enjoy the same things that you do. Beginners are welcome and this is a great way to improve your birding skills by joining a wide range of birders. Dress for conditions and bring binoculars if you have them. Please contact Denny Thompson at 515-254-0837 or cndthomps@gmail.com for more information.

Des Moines Audubon Program, Tuesday, March 15, 7 p.m.
Waterfowl Identification by Ty Smedes

Unfavorable lighting can leave you evaluating a silhouette. A mixed flock may include several species to sort out - and given only a few seconds a fast-flying duck can be very difficult to identify. We'll take a look at the various waterfowl families, defining shapes, unique plumage, social traits, feeding techniques, and preferred habitat.

Spring is on its way and migrating waterfowl will soon find their way into Iowa! Join us as we brush up on our identification techniques by studying the characteristics that make waterfowl so unique and interesting!

Ty's photos have been published by many major magazines and book publishers, including Outdoor Photographer, Sierra, The Nature Conservancy, Smithsonian, Ducks Unlimited, and Iowa Outdoors Magazine to name a few. He specializes in wildlife, prairie wildflowers, and landscape images. As a feature writer for the Iowa DNR's Iowa Outdoors Magazine, his goal is to educate the reader by writing about and photographing many of the lesser-known birds, animals, and places.

*Masks are required in Polk County Buildings and social distancing guidelines are recommended.

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 jrclark@radiks.net or call 515-223-5047.

2022 Bald Eagle Midwinter Survey

Iowa DNR Wildlife Diversity News, February 8

Every winter during the early part of January, Iowa participates in the national Bald Eagle Midwinter Survey. Over 1,600 miles of rivers and lakeshores are surveyed and all of the bald eagles that are seen are counted. Between 2011 and 2021, an average of 3,104 bald eagles have been counted annually during this survey. In 2022, a whopping 5,404 adult and immature eagles were counted along 1,626 miles of water!

This huge number translates to about 3 eagles per mile of waterbody surveyed though that density increases to about 12 eagles per mile on the Iowa River. The other waterways with large numbers of eagles hanging around this winter were the Mississippi River with 10 eagles per mile and the Des Moines River with an average of 6 eagles per mile.

While counting, surveyors distinguish between adult eagles and immature eagles and the ratio of young birds in the count is an important metric. Since 1991, the number of immatures has made up around 30% of the count and if this number decreased consistently over several years in a row, it would raise concerns about the bald eagle population's reproductive success rate. In 2022, 1,852 immatures were counted making them about 34% of the count.

But where did they come from and why are they here?

Well, that's a little tricky to figure out since eagles don't generally communicate in English but we have some ideas. We know that most eagles only move as far as they have to in the winter to find food and no further. During mild winters they will stick close to their nest. The eagle nesting season in Iowa kicks off in late February, so it doesn't make sense to stray too far.

So, it is safe to assume that many of these winter eagles are resident birds that also nest in Iowa and just move to wherever they can find open water. These resident birds are likely joined by birds drifting down from the north, primarily Minnesota and Wisconsin. These two states hold LARGE populations of nesting eagles and some of them likely wander down to Iowa particularly when it gets this cold!

Why are there so many eagles that are sampling Iowa's delights this year? It's hard to say but it is probably related to how cold - and frozen - January was. Much of the water to the north is frozen and parts of the southern Des Moines and Mississippi Rivers offer some of the best open water. Our count may also be increased by how concentrated birds are around small areas of open water, making them easier to count.

Wherever they are from and for whatever reason, they have definitely brought some excitement to this cold winter and to the many Iowans that have been privileged to watch them!

BALD EAGLE ENCOURAGEMENT

Birding Community E-bulletin April 2021

In late March, 2021, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) announced that populations of Bald Eagle have actually quadrupled since 2009, according to a new report by the Service and its partners. Don't forget that Bald Eagles once teetered on the brink of extinction, reaching an all-time low of 417 known nesting pairs in 1963 in the lower 48 states.

But after decades of protection through varied laws (e.g., the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, and the Endangered Species Act), the banning of DDT, and on-the-ground and educational conservation efforts engaging numerous partners, the Bald Eagle population has flourished, growing to more than an astounding 71,400 nesting pairs. This includes an estimated 316,700 individual Bald Eagles in the lower 48 states.

Detailed information on the current scene is now available in a new technical report:
<https://www.fws.gov/birds/management/managed-species/eagle-management.php>

BALD EAGLE WOES

Birding Community E-bulletin April 2021

And while we are on the subject of Bald Eagles, a quarter-century-old mystery concerning the deaths of 70+ Bald Eagles in Arkansas has finally been solved. And it's an amazing story. These raptors died because of a remarkable tiny alga that lives on a specific invasive water plant and makes a novel toxin, but only when the algae are present in unique circumstances. The key elements in this complex story include odd behavior noted on the part of Arkansas Bald Eagles that were observed exhibiting disorientation that included flying into trees and cliff-faces! This was then followed by significant scientific detective work conducted at the National Wildlife Health Center in Madison, Wisconsin.

What the follow up research revealed was that a never before identified cyanobacteria (a type of blue-green algae) was covering the leaves of an invasive water plant, *Hydrilla verticillate*, a favored food of American Coots that are common on many southern lakes, especially in the winter. Further research eventually showed that toxins contained in the bacteria were being passed through the food chain to Bald Eagles that were regularly preying on American Coots.

This chain of death was not unlike what happened to Bald Eagles and other raptors and waterbirds during the DDT era before the deadly effects of DDT were discovered and the pesticide was eventually taken off the market in the 1970s. That story was graphically told in Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, which ultimately led to the removal of DDT from the marketplace.

To find out more about this fascinating story see the article by Sarah Zhang in *The Atlantic*:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2021/03/humans-accidentally-created-death-trap-bald-eagles/618413/>

Sharp-shinned Hawk

by Carl Nollen

Faster than a speeding bullet! Able to leap tall bushes in a single bound! A dove-sized bird flashed by our front window, scattering terrified birds in all directions. This super flyer can maneuver through trees and bushes better than any other bird. But I don't think it was successful this time. The next day I noticed a suspicious lull all around the bird feeders. Too quiet.

I looked through the windows in another direction. On the ground in plain sight was a Sharp-shinned Hawk tearing into a Downy Woodpecker. Two days later I spied this same hawk perched in a globe arborvitae bush by the front window, keeping watch over the bird feeders, its back to me. I got good looks at the beautiful blue gray plumage, the streamlined body, and long tail with its wide, squared end. What a beautiful bird. What a predator on our bird feeder birds! Finally, I got tired of admiring it and opened the door to scare it off. It will come back another day.

The Sharp-shinned Hawk is a native bird in the same class as the cowbird--we would really like to never see them. This hawk, our smallest hawk, is the prime enemy of the birds we want to hang around our bird feeders in the winter. We attract birds to help them survive the cold winters by feeding them seeds and suet. This benevolence by thousands of bird lovers also attracts the Sharp-shinned Hawk and puts the birds we want to protect in danger of a bird whose diet is 90% birds.

Fortunately, this hawk is not commonly found here during the summer nesting season. It really prefers evergreen forests and those are not common in Iowa. But it is such a secretive bird in the summer and its preference for nesting in tree canopies makes it hard to study.

The sharp shin refers to a keel or leading edge on its bare legs. Typical of hawks, the female is larger than the male. It is 11-15" in length with a wing span of 23-27" whereas the male is more likely 9-12" long and a wing span 17-23." Females also may pursue larger birds than the male, thereby avoiding conflict with its mate. The male may be a third the size of a male Cooper's Hawk while the female Sharp-shinned could approach the size of it.

Peterson's wonderful, new Field Guide to North American Bird Nests has a picture of this hawk's large, stick nest viewed from a distance and another photo of an egg. This species' egg was prized by oologists due to its beautiful markings before this collecting hobby became illegal.

Several years ago, a Sharp-shinned Hawk flew into our glass sun porch door. I had a chance to see it up close before I donated it to the Jasper County Conservation Board in Newton. If you are lucky enough to observe this bird facing you before it sees you, notice the rufous bars on its white breast. This beautiful, graceful, agile bird fulfills Nature's role to decide survival of the fittest of the smaller birds in our landscape.

**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 _____

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Telephone _____ E-mail _____

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