

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



Field Trip Saturday, January 14

We'll meet in the circle drive at the bird blind in Walnut Woods State Park at 8 AM on Saturday, January 14. 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. At least 192 species of birds have been reported at some time of the year by birders visiting Walnut Woods State Park. Maffitt 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 cold 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.

Program Tuesday, January 17, 7 p.m.

Color Vision in Birds, UV Plumage Colors and Hidden Color Differences in Birds

**By Muir D. Eaton, PhD, Professor/Curator of Vertebrates
Biology Department, Drake University**

Dr. Muir Eaton received his PhD in Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior from the University of Minnesota working with Dr. Scott Lanyon as his advisor. He also spent three years at the University of Kansas for a post-doc working with Dr. Town Peterson in the Natural History Museum. This work included several biodiversity surveys in Argentina and Peru. Dr. Eaton came to Drake University in 2007 as the Vertebrate Biologist, and to curate the vertebrate collection in Drake's Biodiversity Center. His research focuses on evolution of avian vision and plumage coloration in American Blackbirds and Waterfowl, and teaches courses ranging from Introductory Biology to Evolution to Ornithology and Vertebrate Biology.

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 515-223-5047.

Tufted Titmouse **by Carl Nollen**

This perky passerine, like the chickadee, is a member of the Paridae family. Found over the southeastern two-thirds of Iowa, this formerly southern bird is slowly increasing its range. This is thought to be due to warming winters, many winter bird feeders, and maturing woodlands. In Iowa it prefers deciduous forests, although the famous bird painter, John James Audubon, portrayed it in a pine tree attacking a pine cone. But then, there aren't many coniferous forests in Iowa. Its genus is *Baeolophus*, which means "small crested."

Titmouses (yes, titmouses is acceptable!) are common visitors to our bird feeders, especially in winter. Its Old English name, *mase*, became corrupted to *mouse*, understandably due to its gray, mousy size. There are several similar birds in Europe known as tits, such as coal, crested, blue, etc. Tit is an Old English word for small bird. In the U.S., there are five titmouse species; the other four are found in western states.

The titmouse's notable features are its crest, big black eyes, gray plumage with rusty flanks on a white breast. They are cavity nesters, depending on finding woodpecker holes or natural cavities. It is one of many cavity nesters. This might lead one to think such competition for a nesting site would affect its population. To the contrary, the overall population is increasing, a good thing to know in this age with the population of so many species declining. They do not often use nest boxes. They prefer a cavity higher than bluebirds use. They typically build a voluminous nest and may like a large cavity. Hair and fur are commonly used as nest material. I have never found a titmouse nest in a bluebird box in all my years (over 20) of monitoring bluebirds. Their breeding is limited to one brood; usually six white eggs with reddish purple spots. The young may stay with their parents throughout the winter, not dispersing till spring.

The calls of titmouses are commonly represented as "peter peter peter," compared to our chickadees' "dee dee dee." They are active and acrobatic and will hang upside down to forage. Like woodpeckers and chickadees, they will also cache seeds. Titmouses are high energy birds, fearless and adaptable, and will eat suet, insects and seeds. They do not like to cross open spaces. They come to my peanut feeder in stages, from tree, to bush, to feeder. Like many other birds at my peanut feeder, they will hurriedly take a nut and then fly off. No dallying around.

You will find more written about this species in A.C. Bent's multivolume *Life Histories of North American Birds* than any other source. His account in 1947 referred to the titmouse several times as a southern bird, finding its way to Illinois in winter. Bent often used observations of many other people, many from the 19th Century. This timeline is valuable in knowing a life history. Gladys Black wrote much about her experiences with titmouses in her *Iowa Birdlife* book. But she did not like the males. She noted that they mate for life, remaining together throughout the year, with the male definitely dominant. At her feeder she observed that the male would not allow its mate to eat with him. This bothered her immensely, so "I fixed that little male chauvinist pig." She put up three more seed feeders so the poor female would not have wait in line. Since titmouses are not dimorphic, you would have to observe behavior to judge male and female.

Birdsong Calming!

Listening to birdsong appears to have a positive impact on mental health and mood, a recent study suggests. A German team of researchers probed the effect of urban traffic noise versus natural birdsong on the mood and cognitive performance of participants. The study was published recently in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

The study's lead investigator, Emil Stobbe, based at the Max Planck Institute, said, "If someone is seeking an easily accessible intervention to lower distress, listening to an audio clip of birds singing might be a great option... Going for a walk in nature to consciously listen to birds sing in reality could even have a stronger impact... with respect to experience connectedness to nature."

The study showed that brief exposure to birdsongs reduced anxious and paranoid states in healthy subjects, independent of whether the birdsong came from two different or more different bird species. "The presence of birdsong may be a subtle indication of an intact natural environment signaling a vital, biologically valuable and threat-free safe space for humans," Stobbe added.

An alternative explanation is that humans may associate positive experiences with natural sounds, like birdsongs, which, when heard, "activates these memories and relieves stress."

You can find a summary of the research at this site:
<https://www.newsweek.com/listening-birds-reduces-anxiety-paranoia-study-1752039>

CATCHING UP ON WATERFOWL NUMBERS

Since 1955, the Waterfowl Breeding Population and Habitat Survey (WBPHS) has informed and guided waterfowl and related habitat management for decades and used by researchers worldwide to shed light on large-scale wetland and associated grassland management.

The survey is usually conducted by airplane, helicopter, and ground-coverage over a two- million square mile area through the principal breeding areas in North America. It includes parts of Alaska, Canada, and the northcentral and northeast U.S. Unfortunately, the recent global pandemic and associated travel restrictions prevented pilot-biologists and ground crews from conducting spring waterfowl and habitat surveys in 2020 and 2021. This resulted in a serious two-year gap in the population data collected, important information concerning the status of North America's ducks, geese, and swans.

With the release of the 2022 survey, we now know that a lot happened during those two years. This included the intensification of a multi-year drought across much of the western U.S. along with the onset of the most severe and widespread prairie drought in at least two decades.

The waterfowl population estimates in 2022 were notably mixed, with some species showing declines while others were either steady or else showed some increases.

The estimate for total ducks in the larger traditional survey area, which spans from Alaska to western Ontario and south into the Dakotas and Montana, was 34.2 million birds, a 12% decline from the 2019 estimate and a 4% decline from the long-term average.

The results from the smaller eastern survey area, which covers central Ontario eastward to Newfoundland and south to Maine, were more encouraging. Populations of nine of the most abundant duck species in that area totaled 4.5 million birds, representing a 10% increase from 2019 and a level similar to the long-term average.

Some decreases raise concerns: populations of Gadwalls, American Green-winged Teal, and Northern Shovelers were down substantially from 2019 but at least remained near or above their long-term averages. Mallards declined by 23% and were 9% below their long-term average. American Wigeon declined by 25% and were 19% below their long-term average. Most distressingly, Northern Pintail numbers, fell to the lowest level in the survey's history, down 21% compared to 2019 and 54% below the long-term average.

Still, the declines were not altogether unexpected and have previously been observed. Even though the traditional survey area encompasses habitats in the Boreal Forest, Alaska, and the Arctic Coastal Plain, major swings in duck populations are typically driven by cyclical drought on the prairies. And as recently as the early 2000s, there have been declines of 30% or more in total duck numbers, only to have the populations rebound sharply when wetland conditions on the prairies improved.

Clearly, we will know more next year, especially since a series of late-winter snowstorms and spring blizzards this year delivered potential relief to the dried landscapes across the Dakotas, southern Manitoba, and southeastern Saskatchewan. An abundance of recharged wetlands will hopefully see things pick up over the next couple of years.

You can review the actual report from the USFWS at this site:

<https://www.fws.gov/library/collections/2022-waterfowl-breeding-population-and-habitat-surveys-field-reports>

From The Birding Community E-bulletin, December 2022

**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 _____

City/State/Zip Code _____

Telephone _____ E-mail _____

Winter Birding

January is eagle time. Once a rarity in our area, the majestic Bald Eagle may be found sitting on the ice on Saylorville Lake, feeding below the dam or roosting all along the Des Moines and Raccoon rivers. Favorite places for eagle viewing within the city of Des Moines are at the SE 6th Street bridge and Gray's Lake just south of downtown on Fleur Drive. If you find some open water you will probably find an eagle or two or ten or...

Another fairly recent phenomenon has been a night-time winter roost of Merlins. These small falcons may be found coming in to Glendale Cemetery on the north side of University Avenue west of 48th Street. Go to the far north section of the cemetery and watch as sunset approaches. This group consists of both prairie and taiga sub-species and they generally give the viewer a great opportunity to observe the differences.

Glendale Cemetery can also be a destination for winter finches. Check the various conifer plantings for winter finches such as Pine Siskins and both Red and White-winged Crossbills. Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Red-breasted Nuthatch may also be discovered by watching and listening carefully. If you're lucky you may even find a Common Redpoll in one of the weedy areas of the cemetery.

Unless the temperature is incredibly cold, one can usually find open water in the Des Moines River below Saylorville Dam and in downtown Des Moines. Unusual wintering gulls may sometimes be found here.

*From Our Webpage

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