

**THE WARBLER**  
**DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY**  
**VOLUME XXX, NUMBER 2**  
**FEBRUARY 2023**  
**EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK**



**Des Moines Audubon Field Trip**  
**Saturday, February 11, 8 a.m.**

Meet at the Saylorville Visitors' Center at 8:00 a.m. We'll check the feeders at the Visitors' Center, and then we will visit Jester Park pine trees and the bird blind at the park. 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 [cnthomps@gmail.com](mailto:cnthomps@gmail.com) for more information.

**Purple Martins, by Tim Gedler**  
**Tuesday, February 21, 7 p.m.**

Tim Gedler's presentation will highlight many aspects of Purple Martins in North America including their history, biology, and migration. Aspects of attracting and maintaining Purple Martin nest boxes will also be highlighted.

Tim has been a lover of birds and nature since growing up and delivering newspapers in south Des Moines in the 1970s. He graduated from Simpson College with a B.A. in Environmental Science. His work experiences include Interpreter positions at Wind Cave National Park/Jewel Cave National Monument in the Black Hills and Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in south Texas. Tim is recently retired from working 33 years with the Iowa Conservation Commission/Iowa Department of Natural Resources as a Park Manager. He spends much of his spring and summer time these days managing four Purple Martin Colonies established in SW Des Moines and Warren County beginning in 2012, including the one at Purple Martin Lake near Walnut Woods State Park.

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](mailto:jrclark@radiks.net) or 515-223-5047.



*"The most characteristic real song of the month is the phoebe strain of the chickadee. On winter days it is delightful just because there are few other birds singing." (Selden Lincoln Whitcomb describing birds around Grinnell, Iowa, in 1885)*

## Des Moines Audubon 2022 Christmas Bird Count, by John Cecil

The Des Moines Christmas Count was held on Monday, 12/26/22. It was a cold windy day with a high of 18 degrees. There was snow cover of 2-5 inches and a recent cold spell had left most of the open and moving water frozen. We had 16 participants in a total of 9 field parties. Our species total of 60 was the lowest for the count since 2008 and the 11 species of waterfowl is the lowest since 1999. Unusual were a few species that were missed for the count. There were no gull sightings, a first since 2010. In the history of the count, there have only been four years where American Kestrel was not observed and the last was 1965 (one was reported during the count week). The absence of a Great Blue Heron was also notable. Observations of note where count records for Trumpeter Swan (354) and White-crowned Sparrow (9). Highlights included Long-eared and Short-eared Owl, Snow Bunting, Fox Sparrow and Savannah Sparrow. Thanks to all the participants for making the count a success.

Snow Goose	1	Northern Flicker	18
Canada Goose	12595	Pileated Woodpecker	5
Trumpeter Swan	354	Blue Jay	83
Wood Duck	1	American Crow	5871
Gadwall	1	Horned Lark	1
Mallard	842	Black-capped Chickadee	147
Ring-necked Duck	9	Tufted Titmouse	17
Lesser Scaup	3	Red-breasted Nuthatch	2
Common Goldeneye	128	White-breasted Nuthatch	110
Hooded Merganser	16	Brown Creeper	1
Common Merganser	2	Carolina Wren	1
Ring-necked Pheasant	2	Eastern Bluebird	28
Wild Turkey	27	American Robin	2
American White Pelican	39	European Starling	20243
Bald Eagle adult	127	Cedar Waxwing	4
Cooper's Hawk	3	American Tree Sparrow	154
Red-tailed Hawk	19	Savannah Sparrow	1
Merlin	2	Fox Sparrow	1
American Coot	3	Song Sparrow	16
Rock Pigeon	308	White-throated Sparrow	22
Mourning Dove	16	Harris' Sparrow	11
Great Horned Owl	1	White-crowned Sparrow	9
Barred Owl	3	Dark-eyed Junco	529
Long-eared Owl	1	Snow Bunting	1
Short-eared Owl	1	Northern Cardinal	147
Belted Kingfisher	2	Red-winged Blackbird	65002
Red-headed Woodpecker	5	Common Grackle	3
Red-bellied Woodpecker	54	House Finch	88
Downy Woodpecker	86	American Goldfinch	50
Hairy Woodpecker	11	House Sparrow	258

## **HARRIS'S SPARROW**

### **Iowa's Largest Sparrow, by Ray Harden**

There was a fight taking place on my platform bird feeder. A big stranger, a Harris's Sparrow, had flown in and two male House Sparrows were trying to drive him away. The two smaller sparrows pecked at him and hit him with their wings, but the big guy stood his ground and fought back. After a few unsuccessful attacks the House Sparrows gave up and flew away. The new arrival began eating the seeds without interruption. The Harris's Sparrow is a stout looking bird 7 ½ inches long. That may not seem big but he is 20% larger than the 6 ¼ inch long House Sparrow. It is the largest sparrow seen in Iowa.

The Harris's Sparrow is not a common winter bird in central Iowa, I only see a few of them a year. But it seems like I saw more of them this fall. Central Iowa is on the eastern edge of their winter home range; they are more commonly seen in southwest Iowa. The bird's main wintering area is a narrow strip of the western Great Plains, from southern Nebraska to Texas. In the spring they fly over a thousand miles to their summer breeding ground in the northern parts of Canada.

Harris's Sparrows that have been banded by ornithologists show a strong homing instinct; like many birds they come back to their same territory every year. The banding studies also show that the birds have an average life span of two and one-half years. The oldest recorded Harris's Sparrow lived to be eight and one-half years old.

The Harris's Sparrow is a handsome bird. An adult has a black crown and black bib. Its chest is white and it has a gray face with a pinkish cone shaped bill. The bird's tail is long and is square at the end. Its back and wings are brown like most sparrows. The males and females have similar markings.

The bird was named by the famous ornithologist John James Audubon in honor of his traveling companion Edward Harris. Audubon discovered the bird in Kansas on his western trip in 1843. He later found out that it had been identified ten years earlier by another scientist, James Nuttall who called the bird a morning finch. Probably because Audubon was better known his name for the bird is used today.

But it wasn't until 1934 that scientists from Cornell University discovered the bird's nesting area in the Northwest Territories of northern Canada. There they build their nests in mossy bogs and shrubby trees at the edge of the arctic tundra. Their diet is about 90% seeds and berries. When they are raising young, they depend on insects, spiders, and worms to provide the young with protein and fat for energy. They often feed in the open in small flocks and are frequently seen along the edges of gravel roads. Harris's Sparrows feed on the ground and backyard platform feeders. They usually stay close to cover and when they are frightened, they will fly high into trees for protection from predators. This is a different behavior from most other sparrows that fly low into shrubs or into dense grass for cover.

When Harris's Sparrows are in a flock there is a definite pecking order; the oldest and darkest marked male is the dominant bird. To prove this, ornithologists bleached the head of the dominant birds and darkened the heads of young males. The result was a complete role reversal. The younger birds began to behave in a dominant manner. While the older birds that had their heads bleached were forced into more and more combative situations and soon, they began to behave like subordinates.

On the Dallas County Christmas Bird Count, held in December of 2021, only five Harris's sparrows were observed. None were seen on the 2021 Des Moines Audubon Christmas Bird Count. Although, it is not a common bird in central Iowa, if you see a sparrow that looks darker and larger than other sparrows, look closely it might be a Harris's Sparrow.

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## **TAKE A HIKE**

### **From: Birding Community E-bulletin, September 2022**

A recent study published in the journal, *Molecular Psychiatry*, offers convincing evidence that a simple walk in nature can lower activity in stress-related brain regions. The experiment revealed that participants who walked for an hour "in a forest" showed decreased amygdala activity during a stress task, while those who walked for an hour in the city did not.

"There has been solid research showing that exposure to nature is beneficial for mental health and cognition, but no study so far has examined neural mechanisms lying behind these effects," explained Sonja Sudimac, one of the study's key researchers.

While the study did not emphasize the added element of bird watching, it seemed to verify what many birders have often felt after spending time outdoors: relaxed and renewed.

The study, "How nature nurtures: Amygdala activity decreases as the result of a one-hour walk in nature", was authored by Sonja Sudimac, Vera Sale, and Simone Kühn.

Sudimac and her colleagues discuss the possible implications of their study. The results suggest that spending more time in nature might increase the amygdala's threshold for activation, leading to reduced amygdala activity during stress. This means that exposure to nature could potentially buffer the negative impact of urban living and lower the risk of mental disorders among city dwellers. The study authors press that urban planning should include efforts to modify and design cities with better access to green spaces in order to protect and improve the mental health of residents.

"We hope with our study to raise awareness about importance of accessible green areas in cities," Sudimac said. "I would like to add that these findings are also important because they confirm the importance of accessible green environments in cities," she continued. "Since more than half of the world population lives in cities and urbanization is rapidly increasing, it is crucial for urban dwellers to have a nearby park or a forest where they can to restore or 'recharge' from stressful urban environment. With our research we aim to draw attention to importance of presence of nature in urban environments and to provide evidence for urban design policies to create more green areas in cities that would be accessible to all citizens in order to enhance their mental health and well-being."

**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 \_\_\_\_\_

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