

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
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MARCH 2023
EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



Des Moines Audubon Field Trip
Saturday, March 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 visit areas around the lake and perhaps below the dam for waterfowl and gulls. As many as four species of geese could be making their way north and the number of ducks could be increasing day by day with open water. Beginners are welcome and this is a great way to improve your birding skills by joining a wide range of birders. Dress for cold or windy conditions and bring binoculars if you have them. Please contact Denny Thompson at 515-254-0837 or cndthomps@gmail.com for more information.

Jamaica
By Stuart Sparkman and Karen Viste-Sparkman
Tuesday, March 21, 7 p.m.

Jamaica, the mountainous island. Via its beautiful beaches, stunning forest vistas, and a rich mixture of European, African, and indigenous persons and cultures, Jamaica captivates the visitor with its welcoming spirit. And its landscape holds a trove of hidden avian gems for the patient traveling birder. From Montego Bay to the Pirate Coast of the east, through the Blue and John Crow Mountains to Kingston, the capital, a thorough visit of this island can be made in a single week, and with a bit of luck a birder can spot all 28 endemic species, as well as a few other Greater Antillean endemics. Start with the captivating Red-billed Streamertail, the conspicuous national bird (locally the "Doctor Bird"), and two of Jamaica's other hummingbird species, the Vervain Hummingbird (second smallest bird in the world) and the stunning purple Jamaican Mango. Mix in Chestnut-bellied Cuckoo, Crested Quail-Dove, Arrowhead Warbler, Rufous-throated Solitaire, and the lovely Orangequit. Top it off with monotypic oddity the Jamaican Blackbird, and the irresistibly spritely Jamaican Tody and you've got a tropical bird bonanza.

Join Stuart Sparkman and Karen Viste-Sparkman as they recall a lovely November trip to this beautiful island, where passersby greet one another with a friendly "Eh, mon!" Come and experience some lovely photos and a few anecdotes of their recent birding experiences in Jamaica. Stuart and Karen have been birding and traveling together for nearly 40 years, including numerous international birding trips to five continents. Stuart is a retired teacher and Karen is a wildlife biologist.

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.

Brown Creeper

by Carl Nollen, January 2023

This busy little body spirals up a tree paying no attention to the birders watching its movements. Without its tree-hugging movements, you would have a hard time seeing it. It is our best camouflaged local bird. And one of our most under-appreciated, overlooked species due to its scarcity. During the summer it really favors old growth stands of conifers with dead or dying trees in river bottom forests. Therefore, its preferred habitat is not common in Iowa.

The brown creeper is a rare breeder in Iowa, most likely to be encountered during a Christmas bird count. Even so, if you see more than one, consider yourself lucky. Its range increases in the winter to other habitats when it may occasionally flock with nuthatches, chickadees, and others. The Christmas bird counts for 2019 reported 314 individuals, and field reports for the year, 185 for 322 individuals. In 2020, Christmas counts found 217, a 16-year low, with field reports for the year, 234 for 281 individuals. In 2021, Christmas counts found 412, noted as a rebound from the year earlier, and field reports for the year, 454 reports (assume individuals). Most birds were found in the eastern counties. Close to Des Moines for the 2021 Christmas count, Ames 13, Des Moines 18, Saylorville 10, Neal Smith NWR 0, Red Rock 2, Dallas County 3. [*Editor's note: For the 2022 Christmas count in Des Moines, there was only 1 reported.] The North American Breeding Bird Survey says the brown creeper population is stable or slightly increasing. The Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas shows the same stability

Brown creepers are small, only about 5 ½ inches long, and almost half that is its tail. Its brown streaked back and head match the tree trunks of old trees they favor to look for insects and insect eggs hiding in the furrows of those old trees. Its nest is a work of avian architecture. I have never seen one and other birders here likely have not either. Hidden under a loose flap of bark, it will be very well concealed. Its base has no support. Instead, the two corners of the nest are held up by fine strips of bark attached to the inside surface of the loose bark. This nest in the shape of a hammock or crescent is lined with a few feathers which will hold five or six white eggs marked with brown blotches. The structure and placement of the creeper's nest shows us just one example of the genius of bird brains.

A notable habit of the brown creeper is how it works the trees to find its food. It will fly to the bottom of a furrowed tree trunk, working upward around and around in a spiral, using its sharp downturned beak to pry into bark. Occasionally backing down, it will not creep upside down like the nuthatch. When it reaches a height where loose bark or furrows become absent, it will flutter down to another tree and start at the bottom there.

One way to attract brown creepers to your yard, if it has mature trees, is to spread on a trunk, "Bark Butter," a spreadable suet which you may find at a store specializing in wild bird items.

"...the quiet insect-like brown creeper is "busy as a bee." It is curious to note how many times the creeper is seen and heard in days of light rain or mist. He seems to be in the best of spirits on such days." (Selden Lincoln Whitcomb describing birds around Grinnell, Iowa in 1885")

Support Wildlife Diversity

Iowans can support amazing birds like the Black-capped Chickadee and the Brown Creeper, along with the 1,000-plus other species of songbirds, bald eagles, owls, salamanders, turtles, monarchs and bees and more that make up the majority of wildlife in Iowa by contributing to the Chickadee-checkoff on their state income tax form. The Fish and Wildlife Fund, commonly known as the "Chickadee Check-off," is a mechanism the Iowa Legislature created in the 1980s for Iowans to donate to wildlife conservation on the Iowa state income tax form. Before this time, so called "non-game" wildlife had no dedicated funding. It is one of the only funding sources for the Iowa DNR's Wildlife Diversity program, which is responsible for these species. The Fish and Wildlife check-off is on line 57a of the 2022 IA 1040 Iowa Income Tax Return. Once located, donating is easy: simply write-in the amount to donate and the sum is either automatically deducted from the refund or added to the amount owed.

Funding helps to improve wildlife habit, restore native wildlife, provide opportunities for citizens to learn about Iowa's natural resources and much more. Recent projects have been investigating the nesting success of Barn Owls and determining the status of the endangered Rusty-patched Bumblebee. Donors who miss donating on the tax form, can donate to the non-game program on the web at <https://programs.iowadnr.gov/donations> . Donations can also be sent by check (made out to Iowa DNR) to the attention of Stephanie Shepherd at the Boone Wildlife Research Station, 1436 255th St., Boone, IA 50036.

THE GREAT HORNED OWL

By Ray Harden, December 2022

I was awakened with a loud “Who-who-who” coming from the trees outside my bedroom window. It was the Great Horned Owls mating call right on schedule. Their calling begins in mid-December and can continue through January. Owls have made their courting calls from the large evergreen trees in my yard for many years. It is probably the same owl that was there in previous seasons because they seldom fly more than fifty miles from their birthplace

The Great Horned Owl is the most widespread of all species of owls; it is found across the North American Continent wherever there is any woodland habitat. It is about two feet long and weighs three pounds with a wingspan of nearly four feet. Females are a little larger than the males and the females tend to be a darker brown with more pronounced dark horizontal bars on their belly. Both sexes have a white bib of feathers under their chin.

They are one of the earliest nesting birds in Iowa. After mating the eggs are laid in February and are incubated for thirty-five days. During the incubation period the female remains on the nest while the smaller male hunts for their food. When the babies hatch both parents feed them for two months or more. By April the babies are big enough to fly and by August they are hunting on their own. Sometimes during summer nights, the young owls can be heard giving a loud squawking-like call—they are begging for their parents to feed them. The young owls stay near their parents until fall. They do not become sexually mature until they are two years old.

Great Horned Owls do most of their hunting in the evening, feeding on mice, rabbits, birds, frogs, and even fish and they are one of the few animals that will eat a skunk because they have a very limited sense of smell. The non-digestible parts of its food are regurgitated in the form of pellets. These pellets are often used in biology classes for students to learn about food chains.

The owl is a silent hunter as it flies through the air because it has tiny comb-like teeth on the leading edge of its wing feathers and the fuzzy upper surface of the wing muffles sound. Its talons are strong enough to crush the skull of a rabbit and the bird’s outer toe can pivot from front to back to allow the owl to get a strong grip on its prey.

The Great Horned Owl is doing very well in Iowa. The population numbers have increased after the banning of the pesticides DDT and Dieldrin. Adult owls have no predators but they are frequently harassed by American Crows and Blue Jays. The greatest danger to owls is the automobile. The owls hunt the mice that live in grassy roadside ditches and when they swoop down to get a mouse they are often hit by cars. A threat to baby owls is disease they get from their dirty nest. Most birds keep their nest clean, but not owls. They allow the uneaten remains of the prey to accumulate in their nest.

Humans have always been interested in owls. Their images can be found on many household items, pictures, and figurines. Even since ancient times people have been fascinated with owls. The Greeks associated them with Athena, the goddess of wisdom, and had the figure of an owl on one of their coins. The Egyptians mummified owls and put them in the tombs with their dead kings.

The Great Horned Owl is an important link in the food chain. They are birds of prey that help keep rodent populations in check. Today ecologists see no threat to the Great Horned Owl population and they are a protected species. They are about as plentiful as the Red-tailed Hawk and like the hawk, owls are very adaptive to changes in the environment. I am sure that I will continue to hear their winter mating call outside my bedroom window for many years to come.

Peregrine Falcon Viewing

LOCATION: East side of Iowa State Capitol, Des Moines

DATE/TIME: approx. March 13-18

The recovery of the Peregrine Falcon is one of the most dramatic conservation stories. With the help of the falconry community, these birds are now nesting on historical cliffs of the Mississippi River. The closest nest to Dallas County is along the Des Moines River on the cliff known as the State Capitol Building. Dallas County Conservation Board will be monitoring the location and the weather for best viewing opportunities during spring break.

*Register to be put on notification list. Phone: 515-465-3577 Email: conservation@dallascountyiowa.gov

Black-capped Chickadees' Astonishing Secrets
From Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Iowa DNR News, February 14, 2023

Black-capped Chickadees survive the harshest winters with amazing adaptive behaviors and abilities. From adjusting their core body temperatures to shedding and adding brain cells to memorizing hundreds of locales of stashed foods, these tiny wonders have astonishing secrets.

Weighing only one-half ounce, chickadees consume as much as 30 times the amount of food in winter as it does in the summer, using a strategy known as scatter hoarding to maintain that diet. Chickadees would store one or two bits of food - tree-infesting caterpillars, insects, spiders and seeds - in hundreds or thousands of places over several acres during warmer months.

In far northern latitudes, they may hoard a half-million items. Caches are usually within feet of where the food is found. Sunflower seeds from feeders are taken farther away, secretly stashed from competitors. Before stuffing and concealing the item in rough bark, branches and crevices, chickadees will remove larvae heads, moth wings and the shells of large seeds. How does it remember the hundreds of hiding spots of newly hidden food caches? In October, chickadees grow new cells in the brain's hippocampus, critical to memory. By spring, millions of these cells die as hidden food dwindles and memory is less vital.

Surviving a cold Iowa winter requires more than down and fat, so chickadees shiver to maintain minimal body temperatures. By gradually lengthening times between shivers, body temperatures drop as much as 10 degrees, requiring 20 percent less in caloric needs. By reducing metabolism at night, an extra layer of fat is added by morning. On cold nights, modest energy stores last until dawn by lowering their normal 108-degree temperature to 86 degrees through controlled hypothermia. This nocturnal semi-hibernation slows metabolism rates by 25 percent.

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