

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



Des Moines Audubon Field Trip
Saturday, April 8, 2023, 8 a.m.

We will meet in the parking lot of the Grimes library at 8:00 a.m. The parking area is just northwest of the corner of First Street and James Street. From there we will head to Guthrie County and visit Marsh Farm Wetland on the way to Bays Branch, Lakin Slough and Springbrook State Park. Our primary focus will be on waterfowl and any early shorebirds. 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. Contact Denny Thompson at 515-254-0837 or cdnthomps@gmail.com for more information.

Once Upon a Time...in Iowa, By Doug Harr
Tuesday, April 18, 7 p.m. Program

"Once Upon a Time" ...in Iowa" is a history of wildlife in Iowa, including those varieties that are native to different habitats of Iowa, have been endangered or have recovered, plus some short history of the Iowa Conservation Commission (renamed Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in 1986). The program focus is upon how humans, agriculture, industry, and various landscape changes have often badly affected our wildlife, as well as what has or must be done to save our environment for Iowa's wildlife. Also featured will be some of the most famous people who contributed to conservation, not just here in Iowa, but to our entire nation.

Doug Harr spent over 38 years working for the DNR. He has B.S. and M.S. degrees in Wildlife Biology from South Dakota State University and is a Certified Wildlife Biologist by The Wildlife Society (professional organization). From 1972-2001 he worked as a Wildlife Management Biologist in NW Iowa. In 2001 he transferred to be a Wildlife Diversity Research Biologist at Boone Wildlife Research Station and in 2002 was promoted to DNR's Des Moines headquarters as State Coordinator of the Wildlife Diversity Program. Since retiring Doug has served as President of the independent Iowa Audubon Society and serves on the Advisory Board for Audubon Minnesota-Iowa-Missouri, a regional field office of the National Audubon Society. His favorite hobby is bird and wildlife photography.

Dickcissel "Nomadic Nester"

- Scientific Name: *Spiza americana*
- Population: 27 million
- Trend: Stable

• Habitat: Open grasslands, including prairies or pastures, and overgrown weedy fields. Uses wetlands and marshes during migration

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The male Dickcissel resembles a big sparrow or miniature meadowlark, with a black, V-shaped throat patch contrasting its bright yellow breast. The female is duller overall, lacking the throat patch and having only a faint hint of yellow on the chest. Both sexes have a large, thick bill resembling that of a northern-cardinal or rose-breasted-grosbeak.

This species was once known as the "Black-throated Bunting," although it's not closely related to either the "Old World" bunting species of Eurasia or "New World" buntings in the genus *Passerina*, such as the blue-grosbeak or indigo-bunting. In fact, the Dickcissel continues to confound ornithologists' efforts to find a perfect perch for this species on the "family tree" of songbirds.

A Genus All Its Own

While the Dickcissel is currently included in the cardinal family (Cardinalidae), it continues to stump scientists trying to determine its closest relatives. In the past, it had been considered part of the New World sparrow and blackbird families. For now, it is considered a monotypic species in a genus (*Spiza*) of its own, with no close relatives.

Songs and Sounds

This bird is named for its loud, persistent song. The typical song sounds like "dick-dick-ciss-ciss-ciss," but there are variations. The Dickcissel's short, sharp flight call sounds somewhat like an electric buzzer.

Breeding and Feeding--Part-time Granivores

Dickcissels forage on the ground, or by perching on stalks to pluck seeds. During the breeding season, they are omnivorous, taking seeds and also spiders and insects including grasshoppers. During winter and while migrating, they switch to a predominantly granivorous (grain-eating) diet.

Managing Multiple Mates

Like the red-winged-blackbird, the Dickcissel is a polygynous species, with one male mating with multiple females. A male Dickcissel will defend a territory that contains both suitable nesting and foraging areas, and may have up to six females nesting in his territory, although most attract only one or two. Males with territories containing the best nest sites attract more females.

Male Dickcissels continue to defend their territories while the female(s) that take up residence select nest sites, build the nests, then brood and raise the young. The nest, a bulky cup of weeds and grass stems, is built on or slightly above the ground, in dense vegetation or in a small shrub or tree. The female incubates her clutch of three to six pale-blue eggs for 12 to 13 days. After the nestlings hatch, she feeds them a variety of invertebrates until they are ready to leave the nest.

Region and Range

The Dickcissel breeds in the central U.S. and far south-central Canada, then migrates to Mexico, Central America, and northern South America for the winter. This bird is known to be a notorious wanderer, appearing in large numbers in suitable breeding habitats one year, only to be absent the next.

On migration and during the winter, the Dickcissel forms large flocks, some so large that they may contain 10 to 30 percent of the global population. These large flocks can damage rice and sorghum crops, and farmers use noise-making aids including cannons, bottle rockets, or banging pots and pans to scare flocks away from their fields. A few farmers deliberately poison Dickcissels during the winter, although many conservation groups have worked with farmers to find alternatives to poisoning.

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Conservation--Work to Keep Dickcissels Singing

While the overall Dickcissel population is still large and likely stable overall, the species has shown significant declines in many states. Like other grassland species such as the Henslow's Sparrow Loggerhead Shrike, the Dickcissel has been impacted by habitat loss and pesticide use. Dickcissels also risk glass-collisions with towers, turbines, and glass during their nocturnal migrations.

American Bird Conservancy (ABC) is working with landowners, agencies, and a variety of programs including Migratory Joint Bird Ventures, to conserve habitat for Dickcissels. Their BirdScapes program, which aims to restore breeding, wintering, and stopover habitat for migratory birds, provides another boost for this species.

Help support ABC's conservation mission!

ABC is advocating for measures to be included in the latest farm bill that have the best chance of helping U.S. grassland bird species rebound. The recommendations included in ABC's Bird Saver Platform would help the Farm Bill channel funds designated for conservation to the programs that would make the biggest difference for grasslands.

We joined with partners to file suit against the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in 2016, alleging insufficient federal regulation of neonicotinoid pesticides, which are toxic to birds, bees, and other wildlife. Despite increasing evidence that “neonics” are lethal to grassland birds and pollinators, the EPA recently denied a petition request from ABC and partners to change a regulatory loophole that allows continued use of seeds coated with the pesticides.

In February, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER) and ABC spearheaded a regulatory filing with the EPA on behalf of 65 nonprofit groups. The filing proposes major reforms in the way the agency regulates systemic insecticides, particularly neonicotinoids.

Get Involved

Policies enacted by the U.S. Congress and federal agencies, such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have a huge impact on migratory birds. You can help shape these rules for the better by urging lawmakers to prioritize birds, bird habitat, and bird-friendly measures. Living a bird-friendly life can have an immediate impact on migratory birds in the United States. Doing so can be as easy as adding native plants to your garden, avoiding pesticides, and keeping cats indoors.

With the help of international partners, ABC has established a network of more than 100 areas of priority bird habitat across the Americas, helping to ensure that birds' needs are met during all stages of their lifecycles. These are monumental undertakings, requiring the support of many.



Dallas County Conservation Board Hike, April 22

April Bird (and Awe)Hike: Voas Nature Area, Dallas County: April 22, 8:30-10:30am DCCB is offering seasonal bird hikes as part of the Beginner to Birder (B2B) Project, meant to nurture new birders or those who want to ramp up their skills. The diversity will increase each month as new birds arrive. Binoculars and books will be provided. *Registration required <https://DCCBAprilBirdHike.eventbrite.com> or email conservation@dallascountyia.gov or phone: 515-465-3577.

Earth Day Celebration, April 22 Saving Our Avian Resources (SOAR) Colby Park, 6900 School St, Windsor Heights, IA

Stop by the Community Event Center in the park to visit with a Saving Our Avian Resources (SOAR) educator and ambassador. Join them to learn about raptors and their place in our environment! Noon to 3:00 p.m. The City of Windsor Heights has a day-long Earth Day celebration that ends at Colby Park!

2023 Bald Eagle Watch at Saylorville Lake, By Ray Harden

The annual Bald Eagle watch at Saylorville Lake was held Sunday February 26th. Below the dam my wife and I observed more than 100 Bald Eagles. Most of the eagles were perched in the trees above the Des Moines River looking down into the fast-flowing river for fish. We also saw a dozen or more eagles standing on the ice-covered lake. They were trying to scratch through the ice to get to dead fish.

In the late afternoon the eagles rode the warm rising air currents and began to soar above the river. Some of them appeared to be doing a courting flight. The soaring birds against the clear blue sky gave an opportunity for some good photographs.

Many other species of birds were in the water feeding. American White Pelicans, Trumpeter Swans, green-headed Mallard Ducks and three species of geese, Greater White-fronted Geese, Snow Geese, and Canada Geese made very interesting color patterns on the water.

A short distance below the dam Doug Harr of Iowa Audubon and Denny Thompson, of Des Moines Audubon, had telescopes available for people to look through in order to get a better view of the Bald Eagles.

At the Cottonwood Recreation Area, further downstream, Mike Havlik, Chris Adkins, and Erica Northwick, naturalists from the Dallas County Conservation Department were posted at the river's edge with spotting telescopes and binoculars to assist members of the public view these fascinating birds and answer questions about their behavior.

It was a good day for seeing eagles but we saw many other birds; a total of twenty-eight species that day. The most interesting ones were a pair of Common Goldeneye Ducks, a Pileated Woodpecker, a Merlin and a pair of Eastern Bluebirds that seemed to be looking for a nesting site.

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