

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



Saturday, August 12, Field Trip
Walnut Woods State Park at 8:00 a.m.

The Des Moines Audubon Society field trip will be held on Saturday, August 12th. Meet at the bird blind at Walnut Woods State Park at 8:00 a.m. For this field trip we will be birding at Walnut Woods and Purple Martin Lake where we will be focusing on early migrants and late summer bird activity. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Please contact Denny Thompson for more information at cndthomps@gmail.com or 515-254-0837.

Fall Programs Begin on Tuesday, September 19, 7 p.m.

Des Moines Audubon meetings begin at 7:00 p.m. and are held on the third Tuesday of the month. We meet in the lunchroom of 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.

Tuesday, September 19
Rex Andersen, Birds of Ecuador

Tuesday, October 17
Cathy McMullen, Grassland Bird Management at Camp Dodge

Tuesday, November 21
Al Farris, A Year of Birding



"The first autumn sounds to reach my ears are the lispings notes of traveling warblers among the trees and the 'chink-chink' of southbound Bobolinks passing high overhead -- invisible but audible."
.....John Kieran, (1892-1981) journalist, sportswriter, author, radio and TV personality

Yellow-headed Blackbirds

By Ray Harden

I was telling some friends about my latest birding trip to Union Slough near Algona, Iowa. They politely asked what I saw and what species of bird was I looking for? I told them I was trying to get some good photos of Trumpeter Swans and Yellow-headed Blackbirds. These two species are known to nest in Union Slough. Their reaction was "What kind of black birds?" They had never heard of a Yellow-headed Blackbird, much less had seen any.

It is not an uncommon bird but its preferred habitat is in areas that humans seldom visit and it does not come to backyard feeders. It is mainly found in the northwest quarter of Iowa in marshes, wetland, and sloughs. However, I have seen them in central Iowa at Voas Nature Area west of Minburn, Brenton Slough near Granger, Snake Creek Marsh north of Rippey, and Goose Lake in Green County.

The males are easy to see. Their body is black with a bright yellow head and throat. When they fly white patches are visible in the middle of the wings. Their call is also distinctive. The famous ornithologist David A. Sibley describes the male's call like a rusty gate turning on hinges. Females make a chattering sound that might be called a song.

The Yellow-headed Blackbird spends its winters in the southwestern part of the United States and Mexico. The males arrive in Iowa in April and begin to establish their territories in the nesting areas; the females join them a month later. In 1984 a study done by Iowa State University estimated that there were 36,000 of this species in Iowa and today ornithologists believe that the population is about the same. Yellow-headed Blackbirds are in the Icteridae Family, the same group with other blackbirds, orioles, and larks.

They nest in large colonies and sometimes there will be several hundred pairs of them in a wetland and as many as twenty pairs per acre if there is an abundant food supply. The males will mate with two to six females and keep them from other males and protect them from the Marsh Wrens that harass the female when she is sitting on eggs. Only the dominate males breed, leaving many of the younger males without mates.

The female Yellow-headed Blackbird is about the size of a robin with a brown back and wings. Her head and breast are a dull yellow color. After the birds mate, she does all of the work of raising the family. She builds a basket shaped nest from dry stems, weaving the fibers in an intricate pattern. The nest is about two feet above the water's surface in dense vegetation of cattails, bulrushes, or reed grass. She lays four light colored eggs which she incubates for twelve days and then feeds the brood for nearly two weeks until the young birds fledge. The male provides very little care for the young birds.

If there is a nest failure due to storms or predation, she will usually attempt to raise a second brood. Nest predators are mink, raccoons, muskrats, and snakes that will eat the eggs and the young while they are still in the nest. The little Marsh Wren will also eat the eggs and harass a sitting female. Once the young have fledged, they are often attacked by hawks and owls.

Yellow-headed Blackbirds seems to be doing well in Iowa and they have a stable population. Their biggest threat is loss of habitat and lack of water in their nesting areas. Prolonged droughts such as Iowa has experienced the last few years could have a serious impact on these beautiful birds.

Book Notes--A Wing and a Prayer: The Race to Save Our Vanishing Birds

In the fall of 2019, we were presented with grim findings published in Science that concluded that 2.9 billion breeding adult birds in North America had been lost since 1970, including birds from every ecosystem. This is the sobering backdrop that drove Anders Gyllenhaal and Beverly Gyllenhaal to launch a 25,000-mile trip in 2021 to connect with birds, researchers, and land-managers - both public and private - that is recounted in their recent book, *A Wing and a Prayer: The Race to Save Our Vanishing Birds* (Simon & Schuster, 2023).

Their journey, mostly while pulling their reconfigured Airstream trailer, was one of engagement and discovery, and covered sites in Louisiana, Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Texas, Kansas, Wyoming, California, and other states, with extensions to destinations as far-off as Hawaii and Ecuador.

At each place, the couple examined the vexing problems – and sometimes the solutions – confronting bird populations. Some of the particularly memorable sections of the book are the ones on Spotted Owls and timber issues, different grassland and sagebrush birds whether in Kansas or Wyoming, disaster and recovery when it comes to Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and the Department of Defense, and the frustrating environmental dilemmas confronting Hawaiian birds and the people trying to save them.

Perhaps the best parts of the book are those dealing with new conservation concepts in which birds and people can cohabit ranches, farms, suburbs, military bases, and cities. In all these cases the Gyllenhaals do a splendid job describing efforts to bring back the birds, especially given the consequences of the “Three Billion Bird” revelations.

The chapter titled “Conclusion: Making the Case for Birds” is especially vital in that it builds on the arguments made in all previous chapters without apology: “The system built for protecting wildlife is falling steadily further behind. Funding is inadequate to keep up with even determining which species are in need of help.” And the Gyllenhaals are not hesitant to criticize the US Fish & Wildlife Service, slow to rise to the occasion and seemingly, in their words, “to manage the declines.”

Clearly, the “Afterword: How You Can Help” should not be neglected by readers. In under 14 tight pages, it covers 17 key suggestions that anyone can do to at every level to help save birds. It’s all wonderful material, but it doesn’t seem enough to outline where to “go next.”

This is partially because the Gyllenhaals will regularly touch on how these researchers doing great work have unfortunately been unable to “communicate effectively, to engage, of perhaps even enrage, a broad audience” (p. 39). And they cite those who wonder what it would take “to grab – and keep – public attention” (p.45). Or they touch on the problem of tearing down “the wall between the game [hunting] and nongame [wildlife-watching] folks” (pp. 194-200). And they do this while pointing to those who are frustrated about getting scientists “to break out of their myopic focus on their research and recognize the part that average people play in conservation,” or the task of “making better arguments to the people that matter” (pp. 211-215).

These concerns are raised, but, regrettably, in-depth solutions are not.

In fairness, these specific engagement or motivation problems are not the reason the Gyllenhaals wrote the book. Their work chronicles the plight of our vanishing birds, and they do a very good job. Hopefully, perhaps their next book – or someone else’s - will pursue those aspects of what they describe toward the end of the book as “Conservation Birding,” a combination of wonder, welcome, recruitment, and building a constituency for dedicated repair.

In the meantime, grab this book. It’s really a good read.

From: THE BIRDING COMMUNITY E-BULLETIN
July 2023

**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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