

THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
VOLUME XXXII, NUMBER 9
OCTOBER 2026
EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK



Des Moines Audubon Field Trip
Saturday, October 10th, 8:00 a.m.
Walnut Woods, Purple Martin Lake, Maffitt Reservoir

Join Des Moines Audubon members on Saturday, October 10 at Walnut Wood State Park. We will meet in the circle parking lot near the bird blind at 8:00 a.m. We'll view birds at the feeders before exploring the trails through the woods and along the drive. We will also visit Purple Martin Lake and later Maffitt Reservoir. Bring binoculars or scopes if you have them.

Please dress for conditions and trail walking. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Contact Dennis Thompson at cnthomps@gmail.com or 515-229-9615 for information about field trips.

Des Moines Audubon Program Meeting
Tuesday, October 20, 2026, 7:00 p.m.
Nebraska Birds, by Ty Smedes

Ty Smedes, will present his program on exploring Nebraska for birds at our regular meeting night, Tuesday, October 20th at the Northwest Community Center.

Although a drive through Nebraska is sometimes referred to as "boring" or "uninteresting", our neighboring state plays host to a wonderful variety of birds, and other wildlife. This presentation will introduce you to a stunning variety of Nebraska wildlife, which is unique because of its location "where East meets West". Along with the scenic beauty of the sandhills, we'll experience the Sandhill Crane Migration along the Platte River, and visit the waterfowl and wetland birds of The Rainwater Basin. We'll also travel to a ranch, where we will enjoy Prairie Chickens displaying on an ancient lek, along with the amazing array of birds and mammals that call the Crescent Lake National Wildlife Refuge home. Along the way, we'll also discuss viewing blinds, visitor centers, and locations to stay, for those nature-lovers who might want to visit!

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, please contact Jane Clark at jrclark@radiks.net or 515-707-7648.

American White Pelican

by Carl Nollen

One of the most noticed birds during our fall migrations is the American White Pelican. The last time a pelican article appeared in the Warbler newsletter was October 2012. Once again, I would like to highlight the flight of the pelican. Some species of our birds are particularly notable due to their flying habits. The crazy, batlike flight of flocks of fall-migrating nighthawks. The soaring and dihedral dipping of turkey vultures which use warm updrafts (thermals) to fly without flapping. The well-known V-formation of Canada Geese. The beautiful shape-shifting murmurations of a large flock of European Starlings. Viewing this spectacle is the one saving grace for this invasive pest here in America.

Then we have the pleasing sight overhead of big white birds slowly gliding, soaring, wheeling as they settle down on water they have spied. Locally this might be the Des Moines River, Lake Red Rock or Saylorville Lake. This sight of our migrating pelicans with their steady, ponderous flight in synchrony never gets old.

The largest bird to be found in Iowa is the American White Pelican. Aside from a breeding colony near Clinton, Iowa, those birds that fly through Iowa most likely bred in Manitoba, North or South Dakota, or Minnesota where they find islands in wetlands or lakes. While so handsome in flight, they appear ludicrous on land with their oversize yellow-orange beaks, pouches and feet. Their pouches will hold 3 gallons of water, an ideal size to scoop schools of fish. They know how to catch their “prey” by teaming up in a floating semicircle to drive fish to a shallow area.

The bright white plumage helps to spot pelicans flying high overhead. Black primary feathers are visible in flight. The horn or “nuptial caruncle” near the end of its beak is very noticeable on both sexes. The purpose is to signal that it’s time to mate. After the first eggs are laid, this temporary ornament loosens and falls off.

Pelecanus erythrorhynchus is Greek for Pelican red beak. Why this misnomer? Back in 1785 John Latham, an English ornithologist first named the “rough-billed pelican.” He did not use binomials. Along came Johann Gmelin, who in 1789, mistook “rough” for the French “rouge” and applied the Linnaean classification system to use Latin or Greek terms for this species. And so, the binomial misnomer of rouge for red still stands. John James Audubon gave us a magnificent portrait of the white pelican in 1831 and added “American” to its common name.

Pelican Rapids, Minnesota, has a Pelican Fest in July. The Iowa City Bird Club likewise has an annual Pelican Fest, this year held on August 30. The Brown Pelican is the state bird of Louisiana and the New Orleans Pelicans are a professional basketball team. Central College in Pella, Iowa, had an annual yearbook called *The Pelican*, which was published from 1907-2008.

One of the most famous birdy verses goes like this:

A wonderful bird is a pelican
His bill can hold more than his belican
He can take food in his beak
Food enough for a week....

Bell's Vireo

We heard the bird calling before we got out of the car. It was singing an unusual song, one that I have never heard. Furthermore, it sounded like two birds calling to each other, with one bird calling more than the other.

We were parked on the gravel road cul-de-sac at the northeast corner of Jester Park. Margaret and I just left the Audubon field trip on September 5th, and were going to have lunch. However, this little bird got our immediate attention, lunch could wait.

The Merlin sound ID program on our phones flashed Bell's Vireo every time the bird called. This bird was not on our Life List. I was anxious to get a photo, but like many species of vireos, I knew they are heard more than they are seen.

Margaret spotted it in the grape vines growing on a tree stump; all I saw was a little bird flying away. The singing stopped. We waited, hoping that it would return. After a few minutes, it was back and landed in a small dead ash tree perching in the open and posing for our cameras.

The gray overcast sky did not provide adequate lighting, so I quietly moved around trying to obtain a better photo. I was surprised the bird didn't fly away when I moved. We took lots of pictures.

When I first saw the bird, I thought it was a female goldfinch or perhaps a ruby-crowned kinglet. However, from Merlin Sound ID, my photographs, and the description from the field guides, I definitely identified it as a Bell's Vireo. Furthermore, its habitat description fit this area perfectly—a riparian area with dense, low-growing vegetation and near water. Margaret and I were thrilled; another species was added to our Life's List.

I have probably seen this bird in the past and did not identify it correctly. The Audubon guide says its markings are "confusingly plain"; another book called it "totally non-descriptive." Its plumage is yellow-green and with weak wing bars and has a faint eye ring. As for its song, Audubon describes it as "a jumbled clinking sound, as if it had a mouth full of marbles". It is certainly a call I will remember.

I did some research on this new addition to my life's bird list. In the early 1900s the Anderson Report said Bell's Vireos were common across the state. James Dinsmore says that they are now uncommon residents, to locally common in southwest Iowa. Habitat loss, and cowbirds often victimizing their nests, have contributed to their population decline. They have been observed in many Iowa counties. Dennis Thompson, the Des Moines Audubon field trip leader, reports they are frequently seen in the Saylorville Lake area.

This little bird was named Bell's Vireo by John J. Audubon after his friend John G. Bell. He was a taxidermist from New York who traveled with Audubon on a trip up the Missouri River in the 1840s. The Bell's Vireo arrives in Iowa in May, and leaves Iowa in September and winters in western Mexico and Baja California.

Ray Harden
September 2026

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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 515-707-7648.
Please make checks payable to "Des Moines Audubon Society"**

Membership Levels and Dues:

Student (under 18).....\$1.00
Individual Adult..... \$15.00
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*Additional Contribution for Conservation Projects _____

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