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

Des Moines Audubon Field Trip
Saylorville Lake
Saturday, November 14th, 8:00 a.m.

Join Des Moines Audubon members on Saturday, November 14 at 8:00 a.m. Meet in the parking lot of Saylorville Lake Visitor's Center. From there we will travel to various habitats and locations around the lake and in the surrounding area. We will be looking for migrating species such as waterfowl, loons, grebes, and gulls. Bring binoculars if you have them and dress for the conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! For questions, please contact Ray Cummins at <raymond.madeline@gmail.com> or Diane Dentlinger at <dianed_200@hotmail.com>.

Des Moines Audubon Program Meeting
Tuesday, November 17, 7:00 p.m.

Anna Buckardt Thomas is the Avian Ecologist for the Iowa Department of Natural Resources. She focuses on monitoring, habitat management, and conservation of non-hunted birds across the state. She also organizes the state's Motus Wildlife Tracking System, a series of automated telemetry receivers that detect tagged birds as they migrate through Iowa. From 2024-2026, she led efforts to place Motus tags on Wood Thrush breeding in Iowa to better understand their migration and survival. Join Anna as she discusses the fascinating lives of Iowa Wood Thrush as they journey across the Americas during their annual life cycle.

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 at radiks.net or 515-707-7648.

Reminder, no meeting in December.

Pileated Woodpecker
by Carl Nollen

Sighting this bird will stop you in your tracks! You don't need binoculars. Similar to the even larger, presumed extinct Ivory-billed Woodpecker, the Pileated Woodpecker is named after its pileum, the top of its head from bill to nape crowned with a striking, flame red crest.

Whether you say Pie-lee-ay-tid or Pill-lee-ay-tid, either pronunciation is acceptable. The genus name, Dryocopus, is said, Dry-OCK-oh-pus, from the Greek, for tree cleaver. Yes, it will cleave or seriously cut into dead or dying large trees. One showed up in my yard in August, attacking a dead trunk of a maple tree, not 30 feet from my front window, 10 feet off the ground. It provided me with great looks, slashing large chips of wood off this trunk. What a hammer! Its large bill makes short work of rotting wood.

This woodpecker is a keystone species, which means it has a large effect on the environment.

It plays a crucial role in excavating large nesting and roosting cavities that many other birds and animals use, from wood ducks and screech owls to bluebirds and bats. It is possible its numbers have increased due to the emerald ash borer which caused so many ash trees to die in recent years. So, it provides a strong line of defense to control non-native forest pests. Although carpenter ants are its favorite insect, other insects, fruits and nuts are also part of its diet.

Fortunately, the Pileated Woodpecker has adapted well to human changes in the landscape, appearing in suburban and urban habitats if there are enough mature trees. Allowing dead or dying trees to stand are important to attract them to establish a territory of 150-200 acres. The Field Reports for Fall 2025 in the Iowa Bird Life journal noted that reports came from 60 counties compared to 2015 when there were just 10 counties. The Winter 2025-2026 reports came from 50 counties in December and January.

The Breeding Bird Atlas II by the Iowa Ornithologists Union notes that flood plain forests are particularly valuable and many atlas records were from public land blocks and state forests. Near where I live, the upper reaches of Lake Red Rock, with hundreds of acres owned by the U.S.A. offer good places in the river bottom timber for the Pileated Woodpecker to live.

They do not use the same tree hollow twice. All the good for other birds looking for a ready-made cavity. The more holes they provide, the more cavities available. They don't drum at a steady rate like other woodpecker species, but start slowly, then accelerate. Their call, as you may expect from such a large bird, is a loud, escalating shriek, likened to a maniac's laugh. In courtship, the male likes to spread its wings, show off its white wing patch and swing its head back and forth. Both sexes may drum, excavate and incubate, with the male known to cover the nest at night. They work as a team. Four eggs are the usual clutch, and like many cavity nesting birds, they are plain white.

Pileated Woodpeckers are non-migratory, but are still protected by the U.S. Migratory Bird Treaty Act which covers native species in family groups outlined in treaties with other countries, and birds which may move around locally, not necessarily flying long distances across continents.

Des Moines Audubon Christmas Bird Count
January 2, 2027

John Cecil will be the contact person for the annual Des Moines Audubon Christmas Bird Count which will be held January 2, 2027. Contact John at mailto:jcecil01@gmail.com or 515-850-9694 if you are interested in participating.

Des Moines Audubon Bird Hike
Walnut Woods State Park

On October tenth, nineteen members of the Des Moines Audubon Society met at Walnut Woods State Park for a birding hike. Denny Thompson was the group's leader.

Identifying birds in the fall is a little more difficult because of the variation in color within a species. Some male birds have lost their breeding plumage, juvenile birds have not developed the adult coloration, and because males are not mating there is less singing and calling during the fall migration.

In ancient times people thought that birds hibernated in the winter, but the technology of bird banding, radio telemetry, and the MOTUS Tracking System has allowed ornithologists to better understand bird migration. Many species, like terns and plovers, migrate tens of thousands of miles, while other species only move a few hundred miles.

In late summer or early fall, after the young have fledged, a trigger activates the birds' instinct to migrate. Many scientists think it is due to shorter daylight hours or changes in the weather that brings on migration.

More than fifty percent of Iowa's summer birds are neotropical, such as, killdeer, catbirds, and turkey vultures. They spend summers in the northern temperate climate and fly to the southern United States and Central America in the winter.

On the bird hike a total of forty-six species of birds were observed; several of these were neotropical birds that are only summer residents in Iowa, and will soon be leaving, flying to a warmer climate.

Some species of birds spend very little time in Iowa; they only pass through in the spring and fall migrations. A few examples are, most of the warblers, the white-throated sparrow, the ruby-crowned kinglet, and the yellow-bellied sapsucker. During the summer they breed in Canada, and they winter in Central America. These small birds cannot store much body fat, so they stop to feed in Iowa as they migrate. Many of them rest during the day and fly at night, using the stars for navigation or their internal compass and the Earth's magnetic field.

Some members of the group saw an eastern phoebe, a common bird of Iowa's woodlands. In the summer it raises its young, feeding them insects, but when frost comes and the insects are gone the phoebe flies to the southern United States and Mexico, where it can obtain food.

Also observed was a flock of double-crested cormorants flying south in a "V" formation. Cormorants live near Iowa's largest rivers and lakes, where they feed exclusively on fish, so they must move south where the water is open all winter.

Only one dark-eyed junco was spotted. But in a few weeks, there will be many more, along with American tree sparrows. These are two examples of birds that nest in Canada and return to Iowa for the winter.

It is common to see flocks of flying water birds migrating, such as geese, ducks, and pelicans. Large groups of other neotropical birds, such as the eastern kingbirds, red-winged blackbirds, and swallows, can be seen sitting on fences or utility wires as they rest during their fall migrations. Robins are a prime example of birds that migrate short distances in small groups, often juveniles and their parents.

If you see birds on the move this fall, take a moment to think about the distance they travel and ponder one of the mysteries of nature.

Ray Harden,
October 22, 2026

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 515-707-7648.
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_____
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