THE WARBLER
DES MOINES AUDUBON SOCIETY
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MAY 2026
EDITOR: JANE R. CLARK

Des Moines Audubon Field Trip
Saturday, May 9th
Saylorville Visitor's Center at 8:00 a.m.

Join Des Moines Audubon members on Saturday, May 9th as we celebrate the return of migrating songbirds. Meet in the parking lot of the Visitors' Center at Saylorville Lake at 8:00 a.m. Migration should be in full swing and morning could find the air full of song with the arrival of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Baltimore Orioles, Indigo Buntings, and wood warblers. The main species we will be searching for will be the warblers, but there could be a good variety of migrating birds. Please dress for conditions. All levels of bird watchers are encouraged to attend! Contact Dennis Thompson at cndthomps@gmail.com or 515-229-9615 or information about field trips.

Des Moines Audubon Program Meeting
Tuesday, May 19, 2026, 7:00 p.m.
Trees for Pollinators

Want to learn how to support our pollinator population with trees? Join Brenton Arboretum Executive Director, Melissa Burdick, for a review of excellent trees for Iowa landscapes that are especially beneficial to our local pollinators. Our conversation will range from large overstory trees to selections for the smaller landscapes as well as shrubs that will have your garden humming with happy bees.

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 Jane Clark at jrclark at radiks.net or 515-707-7648.

Plant a Tree, Save the Song Birds

Birds and trees go hand in hand. Trees aren't just part of the landscape; they're lifelines for birds. They provide shelter in every season, safe nesting sites in spring and an endless buffet of insects that nourish adults and their hungry offspring. Simply put: more trees = more birds. Habitat loss is the biggest factor for the decline in bird populations. You can be part of the solution right in your own backyard. Planting a single native tree creates food, cover and nesting opportunities for local birds, while also making your environment healthier and more vibrant.

From Wild Birds Unlimited

SANDHILL CRANE MIGRATION
By Ray Harden

I started seeing cranes feeding in cornfields near Grand Island, Nebraska, and the numbers of the birds increased as I got closer to Kearney. The Rowe Sanctuary south of the town of Gibbon, at I-80 Exit 285, was my first stop to get a closer look.

There is an elevated wooden boardwalk that overlooks the Platt River and provides excellent viewing of the cranes when they land in the river at sunset to roost for the night. There is no fee for viewing at the Rowe Wildlife Sanctuary.

Another viewing area is the Fort Kearny State Park bicycle trail bridge, which is also an exceptional spot to see the cranes. The park is a few miles south and east of Kearney. If you visit the state park, there is a fourteen-dollar fee for out-of-state residents. Also, it is necessary to walk a third of a mile on the paved bicycle trail to get to the viewing area. There is no seating at either viewing area, so you might want to take a lightweight chair.

On the day of the visit., it was estimated that four hundred thousand cranes were in the area; this is about 80% of the lesser sandhill crane population. The birds feed in the nearby cornfields during the day and roost in the Platte River at night.

Most of the birds are coming from the south and southwest and flying into central Nebraska like an inverted funnel. When they leave in April, they disperse across northern Canada and Alaska, and some fly on to northeast Siberia for their spring nesting.

I wanted to see the cranes landing on the sandbars at sunset. When I saw the river, it was obvious that there was a problem. The past couple of years of drought did not allow for any flooding in the river to wash away the vegetation. Cranes don't like the tall weedy plants growing on the sandbars; they want open spaces so they can see predators. The closest sandbar where I saw the cranes coming in to roost was a half mile upstream.

By parking on the side of a gravel road near the river, thousands of cranes can be seen feeding in the cornfields. I took many pictures of the birds flying low above the car. The cranes were circling, using the thermals to soar like raptors and pelicans.

Sometimes cranes can be seen performing their courtship mating dance. They jump a few feet into the air and flap their wings in front of a potential mate. Occasionally they will pick up a stick or corn stalk and throw it into the air as another method to attract a mate.

Cranes form mating bonds for their lifetime, but if one of the pair dies, the remaining bird may mate again. The female incubates two eggs for a month on a nest of sticks and grasses near the edge of a marsh. After the chicks hatch they are able to follow their parents and feed on their own in two days or less.

It is difficult to determine the sex of the cranes; both sexes have the same outward characteristics, but males are noticeably larger than the females. Juveniles are smaller and do not have red skin on the top of their heads. Cranes don't develop this characteristic until they are at least two years old. Juveniles also have more brownish feathers on their neck and wings than the adults.

According to ornithologists, there are six subspecies of sandhill cranes. The birds that migrate to the center of Nebraska are the lesser sandhill cranes; they are the most numerous of the total crane population. The subspecies found in Florida and a few of the southern states are the smallest, least numerous, and non-migratory. Other places that are noted for large numbers of crane migrations are Wilcox, Arizona, and the Rio Grande River Valley at Bosque del Apache NWR in New Mexico.

Sandhill cranes are large birds with a wingspan up to seven feet, and they are about four feet tall, weighing from eight to fourteen pounds. The weight depends on the sex and the age of the bird. If you see a flock of cranes migrating, look carefully; there might be a whooping crane migrating with them.

When cranes fly, their necks are extended straight; great blue herons have a curve in their necks when flying. Cranes can be identified when they are standing in a cornfield by their tertial feathers that form a bustle on their rear ends. Great blue herons don't have this clump of feathers.

Sandhill cranes were extirpated from Iowa in the late 1800's due to market hunting and the draining of wetlands. The last nesting pair was observed in Hancock County in 1894. But, in 1992, a pair of cranes nested in Tama County's Otter Creek Marsh. They are returning to Iowa and are now nesting in forty counties. The birds can be seen at Chichaqua Bottoms in Polk County and Brenton Slough in Dallas County

Every time that I have seen these birds, I have been amazed by their numbers and behavior. Seeing this phenomenon of sandhill crane migration in central Nebraska is something every birder should see.

Red-winged Blackbird
by Carl Nollen

Our most numerous, native nester is the red-winged blackbird. The males show up early in March dominating the feeders in my yard even though their favored habitats are not nearby. Whether sunflower seeds in the feeders or cracked corn on the ground, they are not particular. Getting along well with their own kind and other species, they do not yet show their feistiness.

They do not yet show their "red badge of courage," that bright red patch on the wing coverts, the shoulder of the wing. Also known as an epaulet, it is the most recognizable identifier of this species. Soon they will abandon my yard and move down to the Des Moines River bottom to find the cattail marshes they prefer. Why are they so numerous? What contributes to their success?

1.Diverse habitats. While many wetlands and marshes have been drained, they adapt to hayfields, roadside ditches, and the like. A ditch with cattails along a busy interstate highway is okay with them.

2.Polygamy or polygynous mating. One male may have up to 15 female mates. With 4 eggs in a nest, and 2 clutches in a summer, there can be up to120 hatchlings. Females are known to also mate with other males outside their territory.

3.Aggressive defenses. Males will defend their territory against much larger predators –humans, raccoons, crows, hawks—all are fair game.

4.Omniverous diet. Seeds, grains, insects, spiders.

5.Flocking behavior. Outside the breeding season they will gather together in the thousands, even millions of birds. There is safety in numbers.

6.Widespread range. They breed from Alaska to Newfoundland, south throughout the U.S., into Central America. With this range there are bound to be regional differences, accounting for 20 – 24 subspecies.

Various bird counts list many examples of the red-wings' success. The 2025 Des Moines Christmas Count found 17,620. The Summer 2025 Field Report of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union did not even list the Red-winged Blackbird. The Spring 2025 report mentioned a high count of 33,333 on April 9 in Story County. The Winter 2024-2025 report counted 100,000 in Johnson County.in December, and up to 23,000 in January at Water Works Park in Des Moines.

Cowbirds are known to victimize nests, but with the great number of red-wings in a colony, they don't seem to affect their numbers. Other predators are handicapped by the group nesting colonies and the nests above water.

The female does all the work in building her nest as well as incubating the eggs. The male helps somewhat with feeding the young. A beautiful example of the over-under weave of a nest is photographed on page 49 of the Peterson Field Guide to North American Bird Nests. Donald Stokes' Guide to Bird Behavior, volume 1, devotes 13 pages to the Red-winged Blackbird in his book, including 7 visual displays and 7 auditory displays which show in detail how the males and females communicate.

Agelaius, the genus name, is from the Greek for "gregarious." The species name, "phoeniceus" is likewise from the Greek, for "crimson."

There is one area of the red-wing's life where it is outclassed. Its "cousin," the yellow-headed blackbird flies in later, but is able to take over the best area of cattails and force the red-wings to shallower, more marginal habitats. Because it is a bigger bird? See if you can find a local marsh with both species to see if this is true here.

National Audubon's Conservation Ranching Program now in Iowa with new staffer

About a decade ago National Audubon started a new program in western ranching states, called the Audubon Conservation Ranching Program. It is aimed at natural land management to enhance grassland bird habitat, improve livestock forage quality, restrict pesticides on grassland grazing areas, and certify the land that beef and bison are raised on, to assure the sale of healthier meats. Beef and bison raised and sold under this program have a sticker like the one shown here, assuring meat buyers are getting healthy food raised on "Bird Friendly Land".

Until recently this program was conducted in 13 western states, plus Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Missouri, but early this year it was extended to include Iowa with a new Conservation Ranching Manager. Tucker Lutter was the person hired in partnership between Audubon's Upper Mississippi River Regional Office and Iowa DNR. Tucker is one of Iowa's birders well-known by members of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union and others in northwest Iowa where he also is a member of the Loess Hills Audubon chapter and serves on Bird Friendly Iowa's steering committee. We are excited to see Tucker Lutter working for National Audubon in Iowa.

Anyone interested in the program or who may know a farmer/rancher that would be a good fit for the program can email tucker.lutter@audubon.org or phone him at (712) 560-6770.

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