

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



Des Moines Audubon Field Trip
Saturday, September 5th
Note this is the first Saturday of September
Jester Park Nature Center

Join Des Moines Audubon members on Saturday, September 5th. We will meet in the parking lot of Jester Park Nature Center at 8:00 a.m. There are several areas to check for birds at Jester Park and Red Crossbill will be the “target bird” as several have been reported there recently. There is a variety of habitat in the park with possibilities for other migrating species.

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

Tuesday, September 15, 2026, 7:00 p.m.
Grassland Birds
by Lindsey Page, Polk County Conservation

This presentation will highlight key native species found across Iowa’s prairies and grasslands, examine a few population trends, and explore the vital role Polk County Conservation plays in protecting and restoring the habitats these birds depend on.

Lindsey Page is a naturalist with Polk County Conservation, where she’s spent the past five years inspiring Iowans of all ages, from preschoolers to senior citizens, through hands-on environmental education. Her work spans topics like agricultural conservation, water quality, native habitats, wildlife, and tree identification. Lindsey holds degrees from DMACC and Iowa State University in Forestry and Animal Ecology, and her passion for connecting people to nature has earned her recognition in DSM Magazine and the National Association of Interpreters’ Legacy publication. She is deeply committed to helping Iowans discover and protect the landscapes they call home.

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 jrc Clark@radiks.net or 515-707-7648.

Red Crossbills

Red crossbills typically live in mature forests across North America, Europe, and Asia. They favor regions with abundant pine, spruce, Douglas-fir, and hemlock trees, moving nomadically in flocks to wherever local cone crops are available.

Their geographic range includes North America: From Alaska and Canada down through the western mountains, the northern United States, and south into Mexico and Central America.

Their habitat preferences include High-Elevation and Boreal Forests: Most common in dense evergreen and pine woodlands. A finch of coniferous woodlands, the Red Crossbill forages on nutritious seeds in pine, hemlock, Douglas-fir, and spruce cones. Their specialized bills allow them to break into unopened cones.

They do not follow regular migration patterns. Instead, they wander unpredictably based on where seed cones are ripening. Erratic irruptions often occur during years with poor cone crops, but they are not a true migrant. Red Crossbills are nomadic, especially in winter, and in some years “irrupt” far south of their normal range. At these times they may show up in evergreen forests, planted evergreens, or at bird feeders.

Iowa's Grassland Habitat **Iowa DNR, July 10, 2026**

A Prairie State

Iowa sits at the heart of North America's tallgrass prairie region. Pre-settlement, two-thirds of the state (an estimated 25 million acres) was dominated by lush prairies, a sea of grasses and flowering forbs atop deep rich soils. The prairie was teeming with life; herds of bison and wapiti (elk) grazing, meadowlarks and bobolinks singing and catching insects to feed their young, Blanding's turtles basking on muskrat mounds and crane nests in pothole wetlands. As settlement progressed, the Iowa prairie which had developed over thousands of years, was tilled and converted to farmland. Less than 0.1% of that original (remnant) Iowa prairie exists today and just 14% of the state is grassland, with 13% in pasture/hay. Although some species, like bison, long-billed curlews, and whooping cranes were pushed out by settlement and have never returned, much of the diverse wildlife of the past still, or once again in the case of recolonization or reintroduction, finds a home here in the small pockets where habitat has been maintained or restored.

Providing Prairie for Wildlife

Given that Iowa was historically a prairie state, much of the work we do to support Iowa's wildlife revolves around restoring and managing prairies. This work helps more than 100 wildlife species of greatest conservation need (SGCN) in addition to many common species of wildlife associated with prairies and other grasslands. But not all grassland is created equal and not just any prairie will support all of our prairie wildlife.

Grasslands in Iowa come in many forms. Some, like remnant and reconstructed prairies, are composed of a large variety of native grasses and flowering plants while others, like hay fields and pastures, are often dominated by a small number of non-native grass species. A diverse prairie often supports a larger diversity of insects, reptiles, birds, and mammals but in the absence of prairie, hay fields and pastures are an important resource for Iowa's grassland wildlife. But it's not just the composition of the grassland plants that matters to wildlife, it's also the frequency and intensity of disturbance from things like burning, mowing, and grazing, that influences which wildlife you'll find. And no, disturbance isn't a bad thing, it's actually necessary for a healthy prairie.

For example, the Henslow's Sparrow is a prairie obligate that needs a nice layer of thatch, or old dead grasses, and thick vegetation for nesting, while a Vesper sparrow likes bare ground and sparse vegetation. These two birds need different types/stages of prairie, which requires different management to achieve. A Vesper Sparrow will readily nest in a prairie the spring after it has been burned, while a Henslow's Sparrow may not return for several years after a burn, by which time the Vesper Sparrow has moved on to find another more-recently disturbed site. Habitat managers utilize a combination of management strategies such as prescribed burning, mowing, native seeding, and woody species removal at varying intervals as a way to create a variety of prairie micro-habitats or conditions that can support the wide variety of prairie wildlife. By burning just part of any one parcel in a given year, managers can maintain mature undisturbed grassland areas for species like regal fritillary butterflies and smooth green snakes, right next to recently burned areas with new plant growth used by nesting horned larks and basking northern prairie skinks. Without disturbance, prairies become overtaken by shrubs and trees, and can no longer support prairie wildlife species. Maintaining Iowa prairie habitat requires active management and periodic disturbance. Without disturbance, prairies become overtaken by shrubs and trees, and can no longer support prairie wildlife species. Maintaining Iowa prairie habitat requires active management and periodic disturbance.

Horned Lark **by Carl Nollen**

The American Birding Association has chosen the Horned Lark to be its Bird of the Year. This program celebrates species that unite birders and highlight the wonder and urgency of bird conservation. This species is one of the most widespread birds of the northern hemisphere. Despite this range, it is often overlooked. People may drive past roadside flocks, mistaking them for dirty snow or stones. Take another look. This bird of harsh landscapes may most likely be seen on gravel roads, especially in winter. Extreme cold and snow do not faze the Horned Lark. Here in Iowa, they are year-round birds. Winter flocks may be augmented by migrants from Canada. Strictly a daytime migrant, they may be found in flocks of other species such as Longspurs and Snow Buntings.

The Horned Lark is our earliest nesting songbird. Early March is not too early. The male may court the female by singing with its tinkling sounds above its mate by flying in circles. The female builds the nest in the male's territory. She may dig a depression in the dirt and rim it with pebbles, dirt clods and corn stalks and line it with grass. Four gray-brown speckled eggs are the most common clutch. Two broods are not uncommon, with a second recorded as late as late August.

Males and females are dimorphic. The male sports distinctive "horns," which are feather tufts that can be raised or lowered on top of its head. A yellow throat, black throat band and black mask are the male's distinctive marks. The female is drabber, paler and lacks horns. Juveniles are "messy looking" with a dusty, mottled appearance. Horned Larks are sparrow-sized, but their yellow and black distinctive faces and bill shapes help differentiate them from sparrows. Horned Larks' bills are slender, with a sharper bill and finer point. Sparrows' bills are shorter, thicker and conical.

Eremophila alpestris translates roughly to desert loving bird of high mountains. Its species name has survived since the Swedish naturalist, Linnaeus, named it in 1758. The Alps mountains in Europe gave us the term, alpine, for treeless habitats in high mountains.

The population of Horned Larks is declining, but not a cause of great concern due to its wide distribution. Nests are destroyed by agricultural equipment. If they can fledge a brood, beginning in March in a soybean field, for example, they can be successful. They need some bare ground, plowed fields, gravel road shoulders. The loss of open spaces and short grasslands is a concern for many plains and prairie birds.

The Fall 2025 field reports reported by the Iowa Ornithologists' Union in the Iowa Bird Life journal did not report the Horned Lark. But January and February 2025 reports found high numbers such as 360 in rural Polk County and 800 in rural Boone County. Whether you go birding on the Christmas Counts or in midwinter to ease your cabin fever, remember the wide-open spaces where the Horned Lark is at home in snowbanks and roadsides in the frigid cold.

RESTORED FORESTS, BIRDSONG, AND WELL-BEING

As previously reported, many people have been attracted to bird watching, especially during and since the COVID Pandemic, resulting in an increase of bird-interest both at home and beyond.

At the same time, and not surprisingly, we have seen multiple studies looking at the "health aspects" of nearness to birds, nature, and the outdoors. In fact, an increasing body of research suggests that nature-related activities can support and restore aspects of mental health.

One study published last month concluded that just 10 minutes surrounded by trees and birdsong could significantly improve mood and psychological well-being. The study, "Both Restored Forest and Birdsong Promote Psychological Well-being," was published in *Environmental Conservation* (Cambridge University Press) and was authored by over a dozen researchers,

This study engaged 106 campus participants at North Carolina State University in an experiment to assess the impacts of soundscapes (i.e., traffic noise versus birdsong) and a restored riparian forest (compared to "gray space"). These results supported evidence that exposure to restored forest reduces stress, increases well-being and assists with perceived "restorativeness." They also suggest that "birdsong soundscapes have additive beneficial effects... and support the value of ecological restoration in urban areas," especially when such restoration is accompanied by an increase of bird communities.

**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 _____

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