



MARCH 2014

BIRDTRACKS

Newsletter of the Jackson Audubon Society

517.787.3453

www.jacksonaudubon.org

Snowy Owl Invasion

Don Henise

The North American continent is in the midst of a massive winter invasion of Snowy Owls. Hundreds of reports have been 1 to eBird, an online database of birding sightings (<http://ebird.org>), from throughout the midwestern and northeastern states. Many have also been observed south along the Atlantic coast and have been reported in all of the coastal states including one which has been in northern Florida near Jacksonville for several weeks. One individual was even reported far out to sea on the island of Bermuda. This current Snowy Owl invasion is truly a remarkable happening.

Snowy Owls breed in the high arctic regions of the world and have a cyclic population that is linked to the abundance of lemmings, which are their main source of food. The scarcity of lemmings is believed to be the primary reason that Snowy Owls will leave the northern latitudes in search of food elsewhere. The current massive invasion, however, is actually an indicator of an opposite scenario. An abundance of lemmings may have led to a highly productive breeding season and thus an overabundance of Snowy Owls in the arctic. The competition for food has pushed many of these owls south. For more details of this year's invasion see: <http://ebird.org/content/ebird/news/gotsnowies2013/>



Locally, a Snowy Owl was first reported on December 8, 2013. A Jackson City couple submitted a photo to Mlive of an owl that spent about 30 minutes in their back yard (<http://tinyurl.com/m9e6vag>). On Christmas Eve, Bob Ochs found one east of Grass Lake along East Michigan Avenue just west of Francisco Road. The Snowies have continued to be seen in this area.

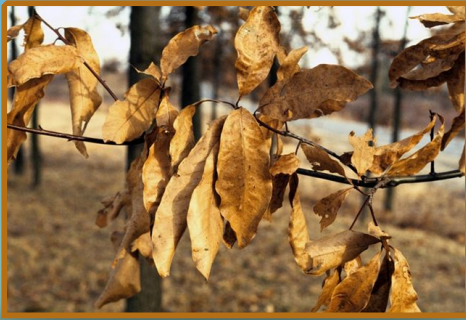
These are the first occurrences of live Snowy Owls in Jackson County in many years. The last major winter Snowy Owl invasion took place just two years ago, but the only record in Jackson County during that invasion was a deceased individual found along I-94 near the Jackson County Airport. This specimen is now mounted and can be seen at the Dahlem Center. It seems we need to go back to the 1970s for any earlier records of a Snowy Owl in Jackson County.

At 23 inches in length, Snowy Owls are large birds, similar in size to our resident Great Horned Owls. Snowy Owls breed in the open arctic tundra and they prefer the same type of open habitat for their winter haunts. Airfields and open farmland seem to be attractive to these winter invaders. Many times they will sit right on the ground, usually preferring a high spot. They may also perch on fence posts, hay bales, farm equipment, utility poles, barns or out buildings.

If you are fortunate enough to spot a Snowy Owl this winter, please consider reporting your sighting to the eBird database (<http://ebird.org>).

CAN YOU FIND A SHINGLE OAK?

Pegg Clevenger



Bob Venners, JAS Big Tree Director can. Lathe Claflin, Haehnle Sanctuary Steward, was surprised to find one on his own property. Although a rare species for Jackson County, a Shingle Oak (*Quercus imbricaria*) still stands in our own Kate Palmer Sanctuary.

Jackson County is one of only 9 counties with Shingle Oak in Michigan, according to the University of Michigan's online "Herbarium". The Kate's Shingle Oak is easy to see on the roadside of O'Brien, now marked with a thin red ribbon. The name is derived from the use of its narrowly split wood by early settlers to produce shingles for their cabins. But in your search, do not look for a "shingly-looking" shaggy bark. The bark is nondescript. They

may reach 60 feet tall by 70 feet wide at maturity, but only when found in the open.

According to "Herbarium", the majority of shingle oaks retain their dried and brown leaves in the winter, a tendency much less commonly observed in other oaks. The alternate leaves are elliptical to oblong, and are terminated by a single bristle tip which is present in early spring but may be worn away by summer and produces small acorns every two years. Fall color usually goes from green to chartreuse to brown (some trees may be reddish), and many leaves persist in the interior canopy throughout the winter.

Oak trees are valuable to our native birds. Oaks host the greatest number of larvae and insect species with which to feed their young. Shingle Oaks are unusual in Jackson County. Please report to me or to Bob Venners your success finding the Shingle Oaks of Jackson County and Bob will name a big tree award winner.

MONARCH WATCH

Ellen Rathbone – Dahlem Educ. Director



The number of monarchs overwintering in Mexico has plunged to a new low, with only 1.65 acres of forest covered with clustering butterflies. This record low compares to a peak of 51.8 acres recorded in 1996. At 20 million butterflies per acre, this year's population is estimated at 33 million monarchs compared to the peak of 1 billion in 1996. 2013 was rough on monarchs, and unless we help, it seems that monarch butterflies may soon become a thing of the past.

Last summer we noticed monarchs were absent. Every summer Dahlem tags and releases monarch butterflies. Our staff routinely raise upwards of a hundred of these butterflies each year, but in 2013 we tagged and released one. Jackson Audubon's own Connie Spotts had all of eight.

And it wasn't just here in south central Michigan, all across the United States monarchs were few and far between. A number of factors have played into this decline: Summer 2012 drought; Spring 2013 cold temps; Summer 2013 unproductive breeding; increased use of GMO's; weather extremes; deforestation on wintering grounds and habitat loss. In a normal year, it takes four generations of monarchs to make a successful migration from Mexico to Michigan. Then, another generation or two is produced, and the last generation flies all the way back to Mexico to overwinter in the mountains.

What can we do to help? Create Monarch habitat – plant native milkweed; provide nectar plants, avoid pesticides, become a citizen scientist and report your Monarch observations. Visit journeynorth.org for more tips and information.

HAEHNLE HAPPENINGS

Lathe Claflin

On a misty, rainy afternoon this past fall they climbed out of the van at the Wing Overlook. Like so many groups before them, they had come to experience the fall migration of Sandhill Cranes at Haehnle Sanctuary. They were middle schoolers from the Bryant Community Center in Ann Arbor on a Sierra Club-sponsored trip. They had little involvement with the natural world and I had had no experience with this age group. Here was an important educational opportunity, and I did not want to squander it. Except for showing them cranes up close in the fields and then later as they flew into the Sanctuary, I had no idea how I was going to keep these children entertained for the afternoon. How was I going to convey to young people with little experience in the outdoors, the value of a bird sanctuary or the history of our place? Fortunately my wife came to the rescue; she has led field trips for grade and middle school age children as part of Ann Arbor's Outdoor Education Program for over 20 years. She gave me some excellent tips. I felt reasonably comfortable and even excited.

So I gave them a brief overview of the Sanctuary and off we went to see cranes in the field. We easily found some. You cannot believe how excited these children were to look through a spotting scope - oohs and aahs from each. "Look at the red in the face! These birds are big! You can look them right in the eye and see them blink! I saw one sing!" Back to the Sanctuary where I took them on a walk to Eagle Lake. Some of the children were reluctant to go, but when I told them they could all run to the rock pile, they all took off. There I asked them why all the rocks were piled up. This led to a brief discussion of earlier farming activity at the Sanctuary and why we had restored this area to a grassland. On the way to the lake I showed them various seed heads and explained their importance for native birds. Lots of questions, some good ones, too. The children really liked being at the edge of Eagle Lake and seeing the Trumpeter Swans in the distance. At the Overlook we watched a few cranes fly directly overhead. They thought that was cool. Then they all piled into the van for the return trip. I felt that the trip had gone well, although I wasn't entirely sure. But when I stuck my head in the van to thank them for coming, I got my answer: "Birds rule!"



Lathe and students looking through a spotting scope - the smiles say it all!

A Rare Find in New Haehnle Tract

Ron Hoffman

One of the joys of being in the out-of-doors is finding a new species, especially when it is rare. I had such an experience last spring while exploring a section of the newly acquired land at the Phyllis Haehnle Sanctuary. Tulip trees, yellow paper birches, sugar maples and basswoods formed a canopy over an understory of spicebush, bladdernut, and blue beech while round-leaved hepatica, bishop's cap, May apple and bloodroot grew on the forest floor; all characteristic of a mesic hardwood forest. Walking through this species rich woodland led me to group of small trees which I did not recognize.

Most of them had trunks only 3 or 4 inches in diameter and stood nearly 20 feet high. Bark was smooth and gray. The leaves were high up so it was hard to get a good description, but I was able to see they were simple, alternate and up to 10 inches long. Later at home tree identification references confirmed what I suspected; they were pawpaw. Pawpaw is at the northern limit of its distribution in Michigan and considered rare even in the southern three or four tier of counties. Furthermore, none of the sources reported pawpaw growing in Jackson County. Later in the fall, I returned to measure the largest one that had a trunk diameter of 5 1/2 inches. It is now the reigning "Jackson County Big Tree" pawpaw.

Pawpaw fruit is eaten by both wildlife and people. In the fall, the mature fruit has a sweet, custard-like flavor similar to banana, but some people consider it nauseating and it is reported even handling them can cause a skin rash. It must be an acquired taste! However, birds and mammals relish the fruit often eating it before its ripe.

Pawpaw leaves contain a toxin, making them unpalatable to most insects. A notable exception are zebra swallowtail butterfly larvae who feed on the leaves. Once ingested traces of the toxin remain present throughout the life cycle, conceivably making them unpalatable to predators. This fast flying butterfly is uncommon in Michigan being confined to the same distribution as pawpaw. Zebra swallowtails have not been seen at Haehnle, so here is a good excuse for me to return this summer to the pawpaw stand and search for another rare find, zebra swallowtails.

Dear Members:

Don't forget to renew your Audubon membership which covers the period January 1, 2014 thru December 31, 2014. You should have received your renewal letter in the mail. Your membership is important to the success of Jackson Audubon as memberships are a major source of our funding.

Please notify us if you move, address correction is requested - Thank you!

Waterloo Recreation Area Christmas Bird Count - 2013

Don Henise

The Waterloo Recreation Area Christmas Bird Count was held on Saturday, December 14th. The ten teams endured a persistent snowfall that continued throughout the day dumping up to 8 inches before the day was over. The weather kept most bird numbers low, and we also ended up with a relatively low species count of 49. We have to go all the way back to 1988 to find another species count below 50.

Two species, American Tree Sparrow (549) and Dark-eyed Junco (970), were recorded in above average numbers with the junco count being a new record high. The old junco high count was 807 way back in 1985.

Joyce Peterson and Connie Spotts found a Golden Eagle that had been seen off and on along Dalton Road during the couple of weeks preceding the count. A Golden Eagle had been recorded during the count week in both 1991 and 2011, but this marks the first record of the species on count day. Other *uncommon* species were a single Wood Duck and one Northern Shrike.

Most of the water was frozen, so very few waterfowl were recorded. Only 57 Sandhill Cranes were counted and both Red-tailed Hawk (13) and American Kestrel (3) tied their record low numbers (1990 and 2005 respectively). The low numbers for the raptors was most likely due to the weather and poor visibility.

A few notable misses were Purple Finch, Belted Kingfisher, and Swamp Sparrow. Purple Finch has been recorded on 43 of 45 counts, Belted Kingfisher on 38 and Swamp Sparrow on 37 of those counts.

Robyn and I want to thank all of the participants for braving the conditions. For the first time, we decided to cancel the tally dinner at Steak's Eatery due to the weather and the fact that most of us were pretty worn out from combating the weather all day.

Mark your calendars!! The 2014 Waterloo Rec Area CBC will be held on December 20th.

JAS Birding the Kate Palmer Sanctuary Contest

Jackson Audubon has partnered with Michigan Audubon to create a contest, offering the Audubon Birding the Kate (A-B-K) prizes.

You can win two ABK prizes: a two-night stay at the Otis Farm Bird Sanctuary in Hastings and two nights at the Lake Bluff Bird Sanctuary Bed and Breakfast in Manistee.

Here are the contest rules:

1. The person who posts on **eBird** the most visits to the Kate by the end of the year in 2014 will win the two-night stay at the cabin at the Otis Farm Sanctuary.
2. Persons posting on **eBird** 100 Checklists with 100 total species seen at the Kate during 2014 will be put into a drawing for the free stay at Audubon's Lake Bluff Bed & Breakfast and be named the "2014 Jackson County Birder".

The sanctuary is located at the corner of McCain and O'Brien Roads, in Spring Arbor Township. **eBird** is a program of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (<http://ebird.org>).

How You Can Help Bluebirds This Spring

By Kurt Hagemeister ~ President Michigan Bluebird Society

The eastern bluebird has always been one of America's favorite birds. This cardinal-sized member of the thrush family has been nesting in backyards, farms, golf courses, and other open habitats for centuries. Historically, bluebirds were the first harbingers of spring in cold northern areas after arriving from their more southern wintering areas.

Although bluebirds are seen more commonly today, it hasn't always been easy for them. After peaking in the later 1800's, bluebird numbers steadily declined for the next 50 years due to habitat loss, the use of farming chemicals, and intense competition from two alien bird species - the Starling and House Sparrow. Fortunately, starting in the 1960's, bluebirds started their comeback when it was discovered that large numbers of actively-managed nesting boxes drastically improved their nesting success. The banning of the farm insecticide DDT in the 1970's also accelerated the recovery.

Bluebirds are one of the easiest birds to attract to nesting boxes and arguably the most pleasant backyard bird to have around. Both adults are dedicated parents and seem to like being helped by people. So, if you live in a good habitat for bluebirds, try putting up a nesting box this spring. You'll be helping one of America's favorite birds while learning a lot about how birds raise their young in the process.

How do you know if you can attract bluebirds to your yard? If you live in a generally open neighborhood and see bluebirds on a regular basis, you have an excellent chance. Bluebirds prefer open habitats like farm fields, open subdivisions, golf courses, office parks, meadows, and metro parks. Bluebirds will start claiming nesting sites in March in Michigan, with nest building usually starting as early as late March or early April. Bluebirds can have 2 or even 3 broods of young in a nesting season that can last into August.

The first thing you'll need is a quality-made nesting box of the correct dimensions. For more specific guidelines, including plans for building boxes, visit www.michiganbluebirds.org/nestbox-basics.

Once your nesting box is up, it's critically important to monitor it for the rest of the season. This involves going out and opening the box to see what is happening once or twice a week and recording your observations. Why do this? Being a bluebird "landlord" entails taking the responsibility of ensuring the housing you have provided is safe and that the birds are OK. Research has shown that actively monitored bluebird boxes fledge far more birds than those left up unmonitored. For example, you need to make sure that parasites haven't invaded the box or that invasive species like house sparrows haven't taken over, among other potential problems. Go to www.michiganbluebirds.org/monitoring-forms for more information.

2014 WORKBEES

SATURDAY, APRIL 12 - HAEHNLE SANCTUARY

9:00 a.m. to noon. Meet at the main parking lot on Seymour Rd. Call Lathe Clalin (517-522-3949) for more information.

SATURDAY, APRIL 19 - KATE PALMER CLEAN-UP AND BIRD/PLANT ID.

9:00 a.m. to noon Call Pegg Clevenger (517-750-4299 or 517-914-5180) for more information.

2014 SPRING/SUMMER ACTIVITIES SCHEDULE

Field Trips

MARCH 29 - EARLY WATERFOWL TRIP

Travel around the Jackson area to find early migrating ducks. Meet at the Eastside Meijer parking lot for 8:00 a.m. departure. For more information call Roy Dane at 517-914-1393

MAY 6 - DAHLEM/AUDUBON TRIP TO MAGEE MARSH WILDLIFE AREA in Ohio

This all day trip leaves from Eastside Meijer at 6:00 a.m. Call Gary Siegrist at 517-782-3453 for advanced sign-up.

MAY 17 - SHOPPING TRIP TO THE ANN ARBOR FARMER'S MARKET

View and purchase Michigan native plants. Visit website nativeplant.com to see variety of plants. Meet at the Eastside Meijer lot at 8:00 a.m. Call Connie at 517-529-9031 for more information.

JULY 19 - SOUTHERN EXPOSURE HERB FARM AND GARDENS

Located in the Battle Creek area

there are wonderful surprises at every turn. Optional lunch at Win Schulers. Carpool leaves Eastside Meijer at 9:00 a.m. Call Barb Anderson at 517-563-8230 for more information.

AUGUST 30 - SHOREBIRDS AT POINT MOUILLEE

View migrant shorebirds in

the Wildlife Management area. Reservations are essential. Call Don Henise to register (517-795-7752).

Meetings/Programs

THURSDAY, MARCH 13 - "THE FRIENDLY PURPLE MARTIN"

Penny Briscoe who has

hosted Purple Martins for 27 years will give an overview of this large swallow species and provide a glimpse of the efforts colony landlords to to in order to assist them in nesting successfully in eastern north America.

THURSDAY, APRIL 10 - "MICHIGAN BUTTERFLIES , HOW ARE THEY DOING?"

Jack Reinoehl,

Professor at Hillsdale College and Michigan Butterfly Surveyor, will answer that question for you and any others you may have.

Other Events

MARCH 1 - AUDUBON BIRDING THE KATE (ABK)

This new birding contest begins

with opportunity to win great prizes. Bird Kate Palmer and report your sitings each time to WWW.eBird.org. Call Pegg Clevenger for more information (517-750-4299 or 517-914-5180) See details in this Newsletter.

APRIL 26 - EARTH DAY CELEBRATION AT CASCADES PARK 1:00 - 4:00 p.m. In conjunction with the Jackson Area Outdoor Coalition ~ Booths, prizes, and Audubon bird walks.

JUNE 14 - AUDUBON/PURPLE MARTIN POTLUCK

11:00 a.m. at Connie's on the

lake. Come and relax with the birds. Bring a passing dish and a nature item for the raffle. Call Connie for directions (517-529-9031 or 517-230-2707).

AUGUST 16 - BIRDS, BLOOMS, AND BUTTERFLIES FESTIVAL 9:00 - 3:00 - Dahlem Center - Free programs, booths and guided birding, butterfly and dragonfly trips.

Jackson Audubon Society
P.O. Box 6453
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Jackson Audubon Society is a chapter of Michigan Audubon Society

Jackson Audubon Society Mission:

To promote among the people of the Jackson Area an interest, knowledge and appreciation of birds, wildlife and the environment.



Michigan Audubon – Connecting Birds and People for the Benefit of Both