

---

# Eastern Iowa Birdwatch



## The Iowa City Bird Club Newsletter

April 2021 • Volume 41 Number 1

---

### Schedule

**Field Trips and meetings** have been altered due to the pandemic. Our regular field trips are on hold, but may resume in the coming months. Meetings are being held via Zoom. Please watch our website and Facebook page for updates. For more information or questions email [iowacitybc@gmail.com](mailto:iowacitybc@gmail.com).

**April 8 – May 2. March Madness (in April) Birding Challenge.** Back for a third time! This Big Day tournament will be held on Thursdays through Sundays on successive weekends, starting either April 8 or 15, depending on the number of participants. Each week participants will be matched against another birder and will attempt to find the most bird species in one day. In each round, participants may bird on any or all days between Thursday and Sunday, and submit their highest one-day total. Consolation brackets will allow everyone to compete at least two weeks. To register, contact Chris Edwards by 8 p.m. Sunday, April 4 at [credwards@aol.com](mailto:credwards@aol.com) or (319) 430-4732.

**April 15, Thursday, 7 p.m. Zoom Meeting.** Marci Trana, Johnson County Conservation Education Specialist, will present “Birds and Renewable Energy.” How do wind and solar energy impact wildlife? What strategies are there for reducing and mitigating these interactions?

**May 8, Saturday. Johnson County Spring Migration Count.** We will bird individually or in small groups to count as many birds as possible across Johnson County. Last year 156 species were recorded. To participate, contact Chris Caster prior to count day at [cjcaster@q.com](mailto:cjcaster@q.com). Visit our website for more information.

**May 20, Thursday, 7 p.m. Zoom Meeting.** Anna Buckardt Thomas, Iowa DNR Avian Ecologist, will present “Trumpeter Swans in Iowa: The Restoration and Research of an Iconic Species.” Learn about the history of Iowa’s Trumpeter Swans, from local extinction to a thriving population.

### Announcements

**Field Trips:** Our regular field trips are still on hold due to the pandemic. They will resume as soon as we feel it is safe – possibly this summer. If you’re a member of our Google Group, watch your email inbox, otherwise check our website calendar or Facebook page for updates.

**Warbler Walks:** There will be no organized Hickory Hill Park Warbler Walks this spring. Mark Madsen will compile a checklist of individual sightings from April 26-May 25 for comparison with previous years. If you visit the park on weekdays during that time, feel free to email your species list to Mark at [mark-madsen@uiowa.edu](mailto:mark-madsen@uiowa.edu). When birding in the park, please respect other birders by maintaining an appropriate social distance.

**Meeting Recordings:** Our Zoom meetings are now being recorded. If you missed Chris Caster speaking on “Gulls on the Mississippi River,” check it out at <https://www.iowacitybirdclub.org/event/bird-club-meeting-11/>. Our March meeting is also available. We plan to record future Zoom presentations, so schedules and travel don’t get in the way of the latest on local birding. Find the link on our website calendar under the meeting date and description.

**Spotting Scope Checkout Program:** The club now has two spotting scopes available for one-week checkout by members. Birders new to scope use can practice a new level of birding—scopes are especially helpful for viewing waterfowl and shorebirds. Contact-free pickup is available from Linda Quinn’s home on the east side of Iowa City. Arrange your checkout by contacting Linda at [quinnhenry@msn.com](mailto:quinnhenry@msn.com) or (319) 330-3328. We appreciate the generous donations of equipment from Mark Bowman and Bill Schieble that make this possible.

## **2020 Iowa City Christmas Bird Count**

### **Chris Edwards**

The 70th annual Iowa City Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday, December 20, 2020. It was a count like no other – the coronavirus pandemic had a significant impact on how the count was conducted, and in turn, on the results. Instead of birding in small groups, most participants birded alone or with family members, and were assigned smaller areas to cover. We did not meet for mid-day or evening compilations. Because of the changes, we had a lot more parties in the field, and broader coverage of the area, and as a result many species were seen in record or near-record numbers – more on that later.

#### *Conditions & Effort*

The count area is a 15-mile diameter circle centered on Hwy. 965 and Penn Street in North Liberty, encompassing North Liberty, Coralville, Solon, Tiffin, and portions of Iowa City, as well as Lake Macbride and most of the Coralville Reservoir. Temperatures on count day were slightly above average at 21-34° F, with light variable winds and sunny skies. Rivers and streams were mostly open, still bodies of water were mostly frozen, and there was about an inch of snow cover.

The count effort this year was unprecedented. Although I don't have complete historical records for participation, I'm fairly certain we set records for the number of field participants (46), field parties (32), hours by car (63), hours by foot (90), and miles by foot (114). In comparison, the prior ten-year averages are 31 field participants, 11 field parties, 38 hours by car, 22 hours by foot, and 20 miles by foot. We covered a lot of areas on foot that have not been covered in previous years. Our feeder watching effort (20 locations, 55 hours) was also the highest in over ten years, and our owl watching effort (5 observers, 5.3 hours) was slightly higher than normal. This overall level of participation resulted in high counts for many species.

#### *Results*

We found 72 species, the most since the record high of 81 species in 2012. We counted 28,866 individual birds, an all-time high, in part thanks to 11,297 Mallards. Our ten-year count average is 68 species and 12,767 birds. Three species that are considered rare on our count were found: one Savannah Sparrow at Hawkeye Wildlife Area (third record all-time), four American White Pelicans above the Coralville Reservoir dam (fifth record all-time), and a Merlin in Coralville (eighth record all-time). Other unusual species (seen on four or fewer counts in the last ten years) were Northern Shoveler, American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Northern Saw-whet Owl, and Winter Wren.

Of the 72 species, fully one-third were counted at their highest level in ten years, including eight record high counts. Record highs were recorded for Trumpeter Swan, Mallard, American White Pelican, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Pileated Woodpecker, White-breasted Nuthatch, and Eurasian Tree Sparrow. Ten-year highs were recorded for Northern Pintail, Hooded Merganser, Ring-necked Pheasant, Wild Turkey, Bald Eagle, Barred Owl, American Kestrel, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Brown Creeper, Song Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Brown-headed Cowbird, Common Grackle, and Northern Cardinal. Additional species were seen in numbers significantly higher than usual, including Canada Goose, Great Horned Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Hairy Woodpecker, Northern Flicker, Blue Jay, American Crow, Carolina Wren, European Starling, and Red-winged Blackbird.

A small number of species, primarily raptors and fruit-eaters, were seen in significantly lower numbers than usual: Mourning Dove, Northern Harrier, Cooper's Hawk, Rough-legged Hawk, Red-headed Woodpecker, Eastern Bluebird, American Robin, and Cedar Waxwing. Only a few common species were missed this year: Common Goldeneye, Herring Gull, Eastern Screech-Owl, and Yellow-rumped Warbler.

*Special Awards*

Mark Brown deserves special recognition for this trifecta from Hawkeye Wildlife Area: rarest species (Savannah Sparrow), most species (42), and most individual birds (13,352)! The Night Owl Award goes to Chris Caster for 2.5 hours owling, nearly half our total. Unfortunately, he didn't find an Eastern Screech-Owl in any of the usual locations – we'll need to discover some new spots next year. Energizer Bunny Awards go to Tucker Dangremond and Torin Waters, who put in an incredible 13.4 and 12.0 miles walked respectively, with honorable mentions for Jamie McCoy and Mark & Deb Rolfes who all topped 9 miles. Golden Feeder Awards go to Cindy Asmussen, Teresa Elliott, and Jan & Rick Hollis, who all recorded 17 species at their feeders. And finally, special recognition to James Huntington, who exhibited exemplary dedication to the CBC by delaying his chase for the Spotted Rail in Texas until after he found the Northern Saw-whet Owl in Hickory Hill Park. Thank you to *all* of this year's participants!

Field participants: Elizabeth Aubrey, Barbara Beaumont, Phyllis Black, Fawn Bowden, Mark, Navina & Russell Brown, Chris Caster, Brandon Caswell, LeAnn Dahn & Brian Smith, Tucker Dangremond, Jerry Denning, Karen Disbrow, Sandy & Mark Eads, Chris Edwards, Scott, Margaret & Sam Ekroth, Jim Fuller, Rick Hollis, Jenny Hollis Miller, James Huntington, Ken Lowder, Terri Macey, Mark Madsen, Jamie McCoy, Jason McCurdy & Nick Benson, Ramona McGurk & Marita Eicher, Jason Paulios, Diana & Larry Pesek, Linda Quinn, Deb & Mark Rolfes, Linda Rudolph, James Scheib, Sharon Somers, Maria & Ryan Story, Torin Waters, Eliza Willis & Janet Seiz.

Feeder watchers: Jan Allen, Cindy Asmussen, Barbara Beaumont, Kyle & Lauren Belcher, Katherine Carolan & Ed Kuhrt, Carlyn Christensen-Szalanski, Anne Edwards, Teresa Elliott, Linda Fisher, Jan & Rick Hollis, Jenny Hollis Miller, Kate Kostenbader & Ted Lepic, Milana Mitchell, James Scheib, Sharon Somers, Cindy Spading, Jim & Terri Stoner, Danelle Waters, Ben West.

Nationally, this year marked the 121st consecutive Christmas Bird Count. The results of all counts from 1900 to the present are available at [www.audubon.org/bird/cbc](http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc). A table showing the results of every Iowa City count from 1951 to the present is available at [www.iowacitybirdclub.org](http://www.iowacitybirdclub.org).

**SPECIES LIST**

Cackling Goose	19	<i>Accipiter</i> sp.	1	White-breasted Nuthatch	197
Canada Goose	5293	Bald Eagle	176	Brown Creeper	10
Trumpeter Swan	13	Red-tailed Hawk	86	Winter Wren	1
Northern Shoveler	14	Rough-legged Hawk	2	Carolina Wren	8
Gadwall	15	<i>Buteo</i> sp.	1	Eastern Bluebird	9
American Wigeon	6	Great Horned Owl	7	American Robin	8
Mallard	11297	Barred Owl	8	European Starling	2774
Northern Pintail	3	Northern Saw-whet Owl	1	Cedar Waxwing	73
Canvasback	4	Belted Kingfisher	5	House Sparrow	674
Redhead	1	Red-headed Woodpecker	4	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	106
Ring-necked Duck	4	Red-bellied Woodpecker	119	House Finch	153
Lesser Scaup	19	Downy Woodpecker	186	Purple Finch	3
Bufflehead	1	Hairy Woodpecker	31	Pine Siskin	34
Hooded Merganser	9	Northern Flicker	11	American Goldfinch	144
Common Merganser	5	Pileated Woodpecker	10	American Tree Sparrow	253
Ring-necked Pheasant	54	American Kestrel	33	Dark-eyed Junco	426
Wild Turkey	40	Merlin	1	White-crowned Sparrow	15
Rock Pigeon	269	Northern Shrike	2	White-throated Sparrow	40
Eurasian Collared-Dove	14	Shrike sp.	1	Savannah Sparrow	1
Mourning Dove	84	Blue Jay	216	Song Sparrow	62
Ring-billed Gull	439	American Crow	451	Swamp Sparrow	19
American White Pelican	4	Horned Lark	15	Red-winged Blackbird	3630
Northern Harrier	2	Black-capped Chickadee	412	Brown-headed Cowbird	108
Sharp-shinned Hawk	1	Tufted Titmouse	101	Common Grackle	201
Cooper's Hawk	2	Red-breasted Nuthatch	9	Northern Cardinal	416

## Remembering Tom Kent

### Carl Bendorf

One of the leading figures in Iowa birding, Thomas H. Kent, passed away on November 21, 2020, in Iowa City. He was 86 years old.

Tom was a lifelong resident of Iowa City. He started birding with his parents at a very early age. In 1942 during a family trip to Colorado, Tom (age 8) went birding with family friends Alfred M. Bailey and R.J. Niedrach (who later coauthored *Birds of Colorado*). One of the resulting photos of young Tom laying down on the alpine tundra next to a White-tailed Ptarmigan chick later appeared in the July 1946 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*.

In May 1949, Tom and his father Fred W. Kent attended their first Iowa Ornithologists' Union meeting at McGregor, seeing one of the original nesting Peregrine Falcons along the Mississippi River palisades. At the meeting, Al Berkowitz handed out some sample checklists with a weekly format. Beginning then, every Sunday night the Kents recorded the birds they had seen the previous week around eastern Iowa. After Tom started college five years later, Fred kept up the weekly checklists for two more decades. In 1974, they published *Birding in Eastern Iowa*, summarizing their weekly records for 25 years and illustrated with many of their photos. Fred, founder of the University of Iowa photo service, was a keen observer whose enthusiasm for birds and zest for knowledge and recordkeeping was clearly passed along to his son. Fred was later honored with the naming of Johnson County's largest park, F.W. Kent Park.

In 1951, Tom published a study of nesting Least Bitterns, the first of many articles in *Iowa Bird Life*, the IOU journal. Seventeen-year-old Tom loaded his bulky photo equipment into a 1934 Dodge touring car for nearly 25 separate trips to Swan Lake in NW Johnson County. Some photos required him to lie motionless in the bottom of a canoe for up to an hour, gripping the manual shutter release while waiting for a bird to return to the nest.

Early the next spring, Tom was photographing a nesting Red-shouldered Hawk from a blind he built in Iowa City's City Park. A wandering mushroom hunter reported to the police that he had seen a hermit living in a tree. The officers interrupted Tom's vigil with their megaphones. After hearing his story, they called the Iowa City newspaper, which featured his photos a few days later. For many years, the visitor's brochure at Corkscrew Swamp in Florida featured one of Tom's photos.

After graduating from University High, Tom earned a B.S. in General Science in 1956 and a medical degree in 1959, both from the University of Iowa. He joined the faculty of the UI College of Medicine in 1966. In addition to research in the Department of Pathology, he was responsible for directing the department's teaching programs. In 1970, he founded the Group for Research in Pathology Education which grew into a national organization of which he served as director for 18 years. Tom always had fun with the group's acronym, GRIPE. Tom coauthored two textbooks, *Program Text in General Pathology* and *Introduction to Disease*. In 1990, he received the national Distinguished Teaching Award in Basic Science from the Alpha Omega Alpha honor society for medicine, followed by the Distinguished Service Award from the Pathology Chairman's Group in 1991. He retired in 1995.

Tom's medical career and young family put active birding on hold until 1973, when a side trip to Galveston Island in Texas following a medical meeting rekindled his interest. In 1979, Tom coauthored an article in *Iowa Bird Life* with fellow Iowa City birders Nick Halmi and Tom Shires in which they speculated about the number of species that could be found in Iowa in a single year. It was a hallmark of his influence as an Iowa birder that Tom has shared so many of his discoveries with others through his carefully researched and concise articles in *Iowa Bird Life*. For example, the 1979 article above was followed in 1980 by an in-depth analysis of the species found and missed by the three birders that year

and the specific strategies used. This article still serves as a model for other Iowa birders who have been inspired to later surpass these totals.

Looking for a different way to study the distribution of birds in Iowa, Tom decided in 1990 to concentrate on birding in Johnson County. During that year he drove every inch of the county's roads in finding 255 species, a remarkable total at that time for a single county. During peak migration, he sometimes visited the better spots three times a day, and he did a big day in each of the twelve months. Tom later wrote an article for *Iowa Bird Life* about his quest which was reprinted in *The Loon*, the journal of the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union, whose editor lauded it as a model of clarity and method.

Tom was a long-time member of the Iowa City Bird Club. With his son Bill Kent, he was an annual participant in the Iowa City Christmas Bird Count (started by Fred Kent in 1951) and served as the compiler for many years. Tom also encouraged Tom Shires and me when we started *Eastern Iowa Birdwatch* as the upgraded newsletter of the Iowa City Bird Club in 1981. From 1991 to 1994, Tom spearheaded a comprehensive breeding bird survey of the Coralville Reservoir, the results of which were published in *Iowa Bird Life*.

Beyond the Iowa City area, Tom Kent's impact on birding statewide was immense. In 1979, Tom was appointed editor of the field reports section of *Iowa Bird Life*. He authored/coauthored more than 30 seasonal reports over the next two decades. In the 1980s, Tom pioneered the entry of field report data into a personal computer database of his own design to compile and analyze the hundreds of records from dozens of contributors. Also in 1979, he was appointed to the IOU checklist committee (later the IOU Records Committee). He served as Secretary of that committee from 1980 to 1989 and 1991 to 1999, and served on the committee for 26 years through 2005. Tom also served as editor of *Iowa Bird Life* from 1986 to 1989, during which he introduced the use of the personal computer to produce camera-ready copy, introduced the use of cover photographs, reorganized content, and upgraded peer review and editorial controls.

In 1984, Tom was a coauthor of *Iowa Birds* published by Iowa State University Press, the first comprehensive annotated list of Iowa birds in fifty years. Twelve years later, Tom and coauthor Jim Dinsmore published an updated annotated list, *Birds in Iowa*, which is still widely used. In 2012, Tom published *Annotated References to Iowa Birds Prior to 1900*.

In 2014, I enjoyed the great honor of successfully nominating Tom for the prestigious Ludlow Griscom Award for Outstanding Contributions in Regional Ornithology given by the American Birding Association. The following is quoted from my nomination letter:

“For the last six decades, Tom Kent has been perhaps the most prominent role model and leader by example of the discovery and documentation of birds in Iowa. He has explored literally every corner of the state and is well-known as a very careful field birder. His rigorous methods and dogged determination have inspired multiple generations of Iowa birders to find and share information about Iowa birds. Whether in the field, at a bird club meeting, or by phone/email, Tom has always been willing to share his knowledge and provide encouragement to the many birders he encountered and mentored over the years. Tom was my own primary birding mentor starting in the late 1970s. I will never be able to repay Tom for his inspiration and encouragement over the years.”

*Carl Bendorf is a past member of the Iowa City Bird Club and founding editor of Eastern Iowa Birdwatch. He and his wife live in Longmont, Colorado.*

## Chasing the Johnson County Big Year Record

### Mark Brown

In 1990, well-known Iowa birder Tom Kent set out to see as many bird species as possible in Johnson County. By the end of year, he tallied 255 species, an extremely impressive total considering that communication with other birders was limited to landline calls and direct contact in the field, so the vast majority of these birds were found on his own. In recent years there had been chatter among the local birders that this record could be broken, especially with the multiple platforms by which sightings can now be shared in real time. Such a pursuit seemed out of reach for me, however, since my previous high count in one year for the county was 238 species in 2016.

2020 started out like every other year, with leisurely birding when time allowed and no real goals. On January 1, remaining open water at Goose and West Lakes in North Liberty produced ten species of waterfowl, with the most notable being a continuing pair of **American Black Ducks**. Other cool finds for January were a **Northern Shrike** at Hawkeye Wildlife Area (HWA) and a juvenile **Iceland Gull** at Terry Trueblood Recreation Area.

February started quite slow, with no new birds during the first two weeks, but the one that broke the drought was a dandy. On Valentine's Day, I did a routine check of the Iowa River Power Restaurant dam in Coralville for any unusual gulls or ducks. Right below the dam with a bunch of Mallards was an adult male **Cinnamon Teal**, a record early bird by eight days!

The bulk of the more expected waterfowl species arrived right on schedule during the first two weeks of March, highlighted by **Ross's Geese** and **Tundra Swans** at HWA and **Greater Scaup** at Goose Lake. On March 13 I had a very nice surprise while walking to work through University Heights – about a block from Kinnick Stadium, I heard a distinct finch-like chatter near some spruce trees, and located a lone male **Red Crossbill**. This was only my second sighting of this bird in Johnson County and easily the highlight of the month. A couple other decent birds were picked up during the second half of March, including **American Pipits** at Cedar River Crossing and **Merlin** at HWA, bringing my species count at the end of the month to 104.

By April 1, the entire country was shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of businesses and activities were closed and very little travel was taking place. However, with most of the natural areas in the region remaining open, birding was one of the few viable activities and most birders took advantage. In fact Chris Edwards decided to spice things up by creating a four-week bracket-style birding tournament among individuals that motivated us to get out as often as possible!

The first good sighting was a **Northern Mockingbird** on April 5 west of North Liberty, and on April 9 Sandy Beach at the Coralville Reservoir drew the first **American Avocets** of the spring. But the highlight of the season showed up on April 11 at HWA, when Dean Hester and Brandon Caswell spotted an alternate male **Ruff** among a mixed shorebird flock at the corner of Amana Rd and Hwy. 965! I was only a few miles away and rushed over to spend a good hour photographing this stunning Johnson County lifer.

Another highlight for the spring occurred the very next day near I-380 in North Liberty. I noticed a small group of northbound raptors that contained a hawk I didn't immediately recognize, so I pulled over and started to take pictures. It took a few minutes to realize that this was my state lifer **Swainson's Hawk**. This species is quite scarce in Eastern Iowa so it simply wasn't on my radar. Even more amazing were

two more Swainson's Hawk sightings within the next week – Brandon saw one a few miles north on April 13 and we both saw another one at Swan Lake on April 19.

The second half of April continued to be productive. My long overdue county lifer **Marbled Godwits** made several appearances at various hotspots. **Black-necked Stilts** and **White-faced Ibises** also made multiple appearances at HWA. A nice male **Hooded Warbler** was found by James Huntington at Oakland Cemetery. A pair of **Virginia Rails** was found by Jamie McCoy at HWA. By the end of the month I added 68 new birds to bring my total to 172, and I should note that doing a Johnson County Big Year at this point was still not a serious consideration.

The month of May got off to an amazing start. On May 1, I followed up on an eBird report of a **Loggerhead Shrike** found by Mark Miles at the west end of HWA and scored it – a Johnson County nemesis for years. And just down the road in a farm field was a surprise pickup, **Brewer's Blackbird**, a species I usually don't see in the county. On May 2, several birders were working the Amana Rd. and Hwy. 965 corner at HWA, which had been a consistent shorebird hotspot since the Ruff had been found. Jim Forde mentioned that he had seen a **Western Sandpiper**. James Huntington eventually relocated it, and later in the morning, several of us got close looks at the bird in a small flock that contained all five peeps! An added bonus was a first-of-year **Clay-colored Sparrow** working the willows nearby.

On the evening of May 2, Jason McCurdy sent Brandon a photo of a **Painted Bunting** seen from his yard, and the next morning, Jason graciously allowed a small group of us to come over and try and see the bird from his driveway. The bird made two visits to a neighbor's feeder during the hour we were there, allowing us to get decent looks and documentation photos. This young male Painted Bunting was a first record for Johnson County!

The warbler diversity was lackluster during the first half of May, with a few exceptions – **Cerulean** and **Kentucky Warblers** were at Squire Point, and a **Prothonotary Warbler** found by Linda Rudolph was at HWA. It was the shorebirds that continued to impress with their numbers and diversity in the county. Three **Upland Sandpipers** were seen just west of the Muscatine County line for the Johnson County Spring Count on May 9. Four **Whimbrels** found by James Huntington at HWA on May 11 were enough to get me to ditch work for a couple of hours – a new state bird for me and many others. Also at HWA, good numbers of **Black-bellied Plovers** and **Ruddy Turnstones** were present by mid-month.

It was the third week of May when the migrant passerine diversity really picked up, and I was able to check off the missing warblers such as **Blackpoll**, **Bay-breasted**, **Canada**, and **Mourning**. But it was May 21 that will forever have a special place in my memory. I met James Huntington at Hickory Hill Park early in the morning. About an hour into our walk, Mark Madsen called to say he was hearing a Connecticut Warbler, so we sprinted towards his location in the park. As we headed north from the Oakland Cemetery entrance to enter the south canyon, James and I both stopped in our tracks after we heard a different **Connecticut Warbler** singing in the thick underbrush just off the trail. After an excruciatingly long wait, we finally got a great look at this life bird that had eluded me for 17 years! Seeing this nemesis bird was a turning point, and I decided that maybe a Johnson County Big Year was a good idea after all. The last week of May produced **Least Bittern**, **Black-billed Cuckoo**, and **Red-necked Phalarope**, bringing my total for the year to 247 species. At that point I figured reaching Tom Kent's number of 255 was now highly probable.

June and July gave me a chance to relax a bit, but there were still a few targets to keep me entertained before fall migration kicked into gear. After three tries, on June 3 I finally nailed down **Northern Bobwhite** west of Hills that had been reported by Jayden Bowen a few days earlier. On June 25, I scored

my last guaranteed bird for the year, **Great Egret**, which I inexplicably missed in the spring despite the huge number of hours I spent in the field.

On July 8, I went to Swan Lake to follow up on a juvenile **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** found by Jim Forde that morning. Thankfully the bird was calling from a perch in a tree along the trail to Sand Point or I never would have seen it. On July 18, I added **White-eyed Vireo** at Macbride Nature Recreation Area. It had been found back in June by Jonah Alderson and other staffers conducting breeding bird surveys, but the area had been closed to the public until mid-July due to coronavirus concerns. On July 28, a **Red-shouldered Hawk** was at Babcock Access, and on July 30 **Buff-breasted Sandpipers** were still present near Sand Point after Jamie McCoy reported them the prior evening. These six species for the summer months brought my total to 253.

Wading birds were the story during the first part of August along the main pool of HWA at Amana Road. On August 4, nearly two years after Jim Forde found a juvenile **Roseate Spoonbill** from the DNR headquarters, he found another one from the exact same spot! On August 10, Noah Arthur found a juvenile White Ibis from the same spot, but unfortunately it was never seen again. I did pick up a consolation **Snowy Egret** on August 12, and with that bird I tied Tom Kent's record of 255.

During the third week of August, reports of **Red-breasted Nuthatches** started pouring in across the state, signaling a rather early irruption. So on August 22 I scoured conifer stands at my local patches for this species, and eventually found two of them foraging in the same tree at the south unit of Lake Macbride State Park. So at that point, the new county Big Year was set at 256. It didn't take long to start padding the total, when on August 30 I returned to the south arm of Lake Macbride and scored a female **Black-throated Blue Warbler**. About an hour later, several birders showed up and Jason McCurdy found a male interacting with the female, making this the first time I'd ever seen two Black-throated Blue Warblers on the same day in Iowa!

Scales Pointe at the Coralville Reservoir became the premier hotspot for much of the remainder of the fall season, and gulls were the story for the first three weeks of September. On September 12, Jim Forde and I were scoping different areas when he spotted a juvenile **Sabine's Gull**, my first anywhere in Iowa since 2016. Then on September 14, Wendy VanDeWalle spotted an adult **Lesser Black-backed Gull**, which became the next bird that prompted me to duck out of work. The star of the month was found on September 19 by Jim Forde, a basic adult **Little Gull**. This was my second ABA lifer for the year and over the course of the next couple of weeks, good looks of the bird were had at both Scales Pointe and Sugar Bottom Recreation Area.

Fall sparrows became the focus starting in late September. Both **LeConte's** and **Nelson's Sparrows** showed well at various locations, but the best was found October 3 by Lily Arp at Sugar Bottom – a male **Spotted Towhee**, a species which was having quite an irruption throughout the state. It was relocated by many the next day and it was only my second sighting of this species in Johnson County.

By the middle of October it was back to scanning the reservoirs. On October 17, I was scoping along James Ave. at HWA when I came across a loon that looked spot-on for **Pacific Loon**, but it took off to the south and I wasn't able to obtain any documentation photos. It was extremely windy and I gave up on the idea of getting a better look. Later in the evening when the winds calmed down, Brandon scoped the loon from Amana Rd., so we met at James Ave. to track it down. After a painful walk through cackleburs, we got close enough to obtain some photographs and confirm the identification.



The final week of October was absolutely nuts. The excitement began on October 25 at Scales Pointe with a pair of **Red-necked Grebes** – yet another great find by Jim Forde. The next evening, I made a quick check of Terry Trueblood Recreation Area after work and found a single **Surf Scoter**. The next day, Brandon called me at work to report a probable Black Scoter at Scales Pointe, so yet again I was forced to leave work for an extended lunch break. Several friends met there, and while we were all scoping, James Huntington called out a distant but unmistakable **Western Grebe** towards Sandy Beach. Not long after, the **Black Scoter** was relocated to the south, which was my county lifer number 299! On October 30, I decided to take off early from work to scour the area hotspots. At Waterworks Prairie Park in Iowa City, I heard a finch calling from one of the marshes and it turned out to be a **Common Redpoll**. Later in the afternoon, I got word that three confusing scoters found by Nick Benson at Scales Pointe were all **White-winged Scoters**. What a thrill when they were still present in the evening, as they were county bird 270 for the year and 300 lifetime!

The next two birds I added for the year were courtesy of Jamie McCoy – **Northern Saw-whet Owl** at Hickory Hill Park on November 15, and **Short-eared Owl** at HWA on November 21. Both involved multiple birds that entertained many folks well into December. November 22 provided my twelfth county lifer for 2020, a pair of **White-winged Crossbills** at Kent Park. Then on November 29, Jamie came through again with a **Long-tailed Duck** at Sandy Beach, giving me a total of 274.

Very few reasonable targets were left for December. A Snowy Owl was seen near Solon on December 7, but the report came a day late, and all efforts to relocate it were unsuccessful. I figured that Snow Bunting would be my best chance at a new year bird. On December 13, following a modest snowfall, I scoured rural areas all over the county, but came up empty. A more significant snowfall occurred a few days after Christmas, so I decided to take December 31 off from work and give the bird one final shot. After cruising over 100 miles, I finally spotted a lone **Snow Bunting** among a small group of Horned Larks just outside of Lone Tree, with about an hour of daylight to spare for the year! This was among my most satisfying finds of the year, giving me a grand total of 275 birds for Johnson County.

There is no doubt that many great birds were found in Iowa and throughout the upper Midwest in 2020, as evidenced by reports of many other big year totals at the state and county levels. I think this can be attributed to the state of the world for most of the year. The pandemic forced most birders to spend more hours than usual working their local patches, and this was especially true in Johnson County. I am extremely grateful for the timely reporting of rarities by my birding friends who were mentioned throughout this article, which allowed me to see 20 species that I otherwise would have missed. Diana Pesek, James Huntington, and Brandon Caswell were especially helpful the entire year, with real-time updates of target birds and constant encouragement. They were all planting the seeds of the Big Year way before I committed to going for it. Brandon had quite the phenomenal year himself, scoring 271 birds in Johnson County and 298 in Iowa!

Of course, I am very much indebted to Tom Kent, one of the most recognized names in Iowa birding. We were all saddened to learn of his passing on November 21, 2020 at the age of 86. His contributions to Iowa ornithology spanned decades, and included the founding of the Iowa Records Committee, countless articles for *Iowa Bird Life*, and of course his 1996 publication coauthored by James Dinsmore, *Birds in Iowa*, which is still the gold standard reference book for Iowa birders. We can all do our part to honor Tom Kent's legacy by simply getting out there to bird and report our sightings, perhaps as part of a future run at the next Johnson County Big Year!

## **Gulls of the Mississippi River**

### **Chris Caster**

In lieu of the annual winter field trip I lead to the Quad Cities, for the February meeting I gave a presentation loosely based on the same. We usually make various stops along the Mississippi River to look for birds, beginning below the I-80 bridge and working our way downstream to Credit Island south of Davenport. The best locations for gulls are Lock and Dam 14 from the Illinois side, along the Ben Butterworth Parkway in Moline, Lock and Dam 15 in Davenport, and the Credit Island backwater.

For gull identification, I recommend *The Sibley Guide to Birds*. Whether you are experienced or just starting out, it will be extremely useful. *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds* is also good. Though not a field guide, Kenn Kaufman's *Advanced Birding* contains many useful tips. Those wishing something more on gull identification will want a resource like *Gulls Simplified* by Dunne and Karlson. True larophiles will want *Gulls of the Americas* by Howell and Dunn and *Gulls of Europe, Asia and North America* by Olsen and Larsson. Whatever guide you choose, study the anatomy chart to learn what plumage details are visible on standing versus flying birds.

A scope is useful for patiently scanning through gulls resting on the ice. Binoculars are most useful for birds flying about below spillways or roller dams. I use a 7x binocular which has a wider field of view than 10x and is easier to hold steady.

Gulls' appearances change year-round due to two annual molts and feather wear and fading. Birds can look very fresh in late summer following their pre-basic molt. But depending on the species they may begin molting towards their alternate plumage in the fall. Sometimes they start in again on their next pre-basic molt in the spring before the pre-alternate molt has completed. During the summer when the pre-basic molt is occurring the birds are often missing multiple flight feathers and possess many winter-worn and sun-bleached feathers. While we try to simplify the ways we talk about gull plumage by referring to them as winter vs. summer, or basic vs. alternate, the truth is far more complex. Most birds are molting nearly year-round. Mid-winter is the best time to learn the gulls because the birds gather in mixed flocks where useful comparisons can be made, their feathers are still reasonably fresh, and the age groups are not hard to distinguish.

Most of the gulls that we see in February are either Ring-billed or Herring Gulls. Most of those birds will be adults. Many will be first-year birds. Fewer numbers of second- or third-year birds will be seen. Learn how to identify the adult and first-year Ring-billed and Herring Gulls first. There is a large size difference and these two birds can be used as a gauge to judge sizes of other gulls you might find.

Single Lesser Black-backed Gulls might be seen. In size they are between Herring and Ring-billed, and the adults have a dark gray upperwing and yellow legs. They are quite easy to identify as we have no other species that have those combination of features. The first-year birds are trickier and are most easily confused with first-year Herring Gulls bleached white from the sun. Herring Gulls will have an overall chocolate brown appearance though, whereas Lesser Black-backed will have a whitish rump and undersides. In flight they don't show the inner primary window or the strong contrast between the secondaries and greater wing coverts seen in Herring Gulls. A European species, the first Lesser Black-backed Gull in North America was documented in 1934. Their breeding range includes Iceland and it is believed that our birds came from there. Their numbers have been steadily increasing in recent decades and they are common now in winter all along the East Coast. They have been found breeding in western Greenland and it's possible there are undiscovered nesting sites in Canada.

Often seen on our outing, but more challenging to identify, is “Thayer’s” Iceland Gull. Most of your field guides will illustrate how to identify Thayer’s Gull. This bird was first described in 1915 from specimens collected on an Arctic expedition funded by John Eliot Thayer, a wealthy amateur ornithologist from Boston. It looks very much like a Herring Gull and was considered a subspecies of Herring until research in 1961 by A.H. Macpherson showed that Thayer’s and Herring bred within the same area, without interbreeding. This is considered the hallmark of biological species. Thayer’s Gull is slightly smaller than Herring Gull with a more rounded head and shorter bill giving it a gentler look. Often it has a dark iris, but not always. Adult Herring Gulls always have a pale-yellow iris. Typically, the legs on Thayer’s Gull are a deeper pink coloration. Thayer’s primaries are black with white mirrors, but the black is lacking on the inner webs of these feathers giving the upper wing a striped look. The underside of the primaries is the best way to tell Thayer’s from Herring in flight at a distance, as little black pigment will show on Thayer’s. The first-year Thayer’s looks like a paler version of the Herring Gull. But on a standing bird, the primary and tertial feathers of the Thayer’s contrast far less with the overall coloration than on Herring Gull. And often these feathers will have notable pale edgings that are lacking on Herring Gull.

Occasionally found on the Mississippi River is “Kumlien’s” Iceland Gull, and it can look very similar to Thayer’s Gull. Kumlien’s Gull was first described in 1883, long before Thayer’s Gull, from specimens collected on Baffin Island. Ludwig Kumlien, a Wisconsin-born naturalist on the expedition, thought them to be Glaucous-winged Gulls as their coloration is similar. When these birds were compared with specimens of Glaucous-winged and Iceland Gulls it was obvious they were something new. But their similarity to the pale-winged Iceland Gull was recognized. Soon they were considered a subspecies of the Iceland Gull. But Kumlien’s Gull is also identical to Thayer’s in size and structure. Kumlien’s also can have a dark iris, but this is more variable. Adult primaries have a gray coloration, rather than the black in Thayer’s. Often, they show much less primary pigmentation than Thayer’s and on only the outermost feathers. The standing first-year birds are often very pale and with primaries even lighter than the tertials.

Few people had given much thought to Thayer’s Gull before 1961. My copy of *A Field Guide to the Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson, copyrighted 1947, mentions it only in the subspecies section. Peterson writes, “Usually looks like American Herring Gull but black in primaries sometimes replaced by gray darker than that of *kumlieni*. *Thayeri* presumably can be told from Kumlien’s Gull by white spots or ‘mirrors’ in the dark wing-tips as in American Herring Gull, but as some individuals come so close to *kumlieni*, it is a question exactly what they are.” Peterson illustrated Kumlien’s Gull on his gull plate and noted it as a recognizable race of Iceland Gull. Peterson gave no illustration of Thayer’s Gull.

It was clear that Thayer’s Gull was not a subspecies of Herring Gull. What was not clear was its relationship to Kumlien’s and therefore Iceland Gull. In 1961, Macpherson recommended treating Thayer’s Gull as a subspecies of Iceland Gull. He said the characters shared by *kumlieni* and *thayeri* include preference for cliff-nesting, gregarious breeding habits, and possession of a purplish-red orbital ring. But every good tale needs a villain; enter Neal Smith, not to be confused with the Iowa Congressman Neal Edward Smith for whom our national wildlife refuge in Prairie City is named. Neal Griffin Smith was a doctoral student at Cornell University who spent three years in the early 1960s studying these birds on their breeding grounds on and near Southampton Island north of Hudson Bay, and along the east coast of Baffin Island. Smith said that he had found Thayer’s and Kumlien’s both to be breeding in Home Bay on Baffin Island without interbreeding. Earl Godfrey in 1966 was the first to give Thayer’s Gull full species status in his book *The Birds of Canada*, based on personal communications with Smith. A study by Smith was featured on the cover and in a major article of the October 1967 issue of *Scientific American*. Very soon however, some ornithologists took issue with Smith’s research and conclusions. Some

speculated that his claims were fraudulent. Numerous researchers in the years to come could not replicate his work, and even found evidence directly to the contrary.

The American Ornithologists' Union in 1973 gave Thayer's Gull full species status despite the deep reservations many had regarding Smith's work. As a result, articles were written, and field guides updated to show how to properly identify Thayer's Gull. Soon birders were finding this previously mysterious gull everywhere. As more information continued to be added to the Thayer's database, it became clear that the differences between *thayeri* and *kumlieni* were completely bridged by individual variation. In 1986 Godfrey revised his *The Birds of Canada* to treat Thayer's Gull as a subspecies of the Iceland Gull. And before long it seemed quite apparent to most that any attempts to separate Thayer's from Kumlien's required drawing some very fine and arbitrary lines. In 1991, the British Ornithologists' Union treated Thayer's Gull as a subspecies of Iceland Gull. That same year Richard Snell and Earl Godfrey presented at the AOU meeting in Montreal on a study they performed of 317 specimens collected throughout the breeding range from Bank's Island in the Northwest Territories east to Greenland. They reported, "Although east-west clinal increases in degree of mantle melanism, primary feather melanism, primary pattern score and bill size are significant, there is substantial overlap in all characters among geographic regions. There is no evidence that any of the three subspecies are morphologically discrete." Inexplicably the AOU in 1998 continued to say that Thayer's Gull "is now generally regarded as a distinct species." In 2016 the AOU merged with the Cooper Ornithologists' Society to form the American Ornithologists' Society. In 2017 the AOS finally removed Thayer's Gull from its checklist.

More traditional taxonomists like Earl Godfrey find value in referring to populations of Iceland Gull as subspecies. Thus, the Iceland Gull, *Larus glaucooides*, is divided into the nominate form *L. g. glaucooides*, the intermediate Kumlien's form *L. g. kumlieni*, and the Thayer's form *L. g. thayeri*. "New school" taxonomists like Richard Snell treat Thayer's as part of the Iceland Gull complex, but do not give it subspecies ranking because its clinal characters vary geographically at different rates and in different directions.

As a birder who has invested some effort into learning how to identify these birds, the conclusion is somewhat disappointing. Thayer's Gull occurs regularly in Iowa, but I looked at many gulls before I built confidence in my ability to "make that call." Iceland Gull was a bird that occurs in Iowa much less often, and it was a while yet before I was convinced that I had my first Kumlien's Gull. I recall one of our trips when I found an adult bird at Credit Island with so little pigment in the primaries I wondered if possibly it was of the nominate form, a "true" Iceland Gull. That was a really exciting find. In the end, it was determined that if it was the nominate form, it couldn't have any pigment in the primaries—none. Oh well. But it was worth the effort.

It feels strange now to call the more prevalent *thayeri* an Iceland Gull given how notable that bird had always been. When I see a report of Iceland Gull, I'm always left wondering what they really saw. It would be nice to have a set of criteria such that I could make a determination of every gull I found on my field trips. Then I would be able to exclaim, "See, look! That bird has pigmentation on the tip of its fifth primary. That is definitely a Kumlien's Gull." But I understand that such distinctions aren't particularly meaningful given what we now know, unless you are just an obsessive lister. The gulls are a fairly recent group evolutionarily. For that reason, there are many forms similar in appearance and forms that regularly hybridize. The hybrids are fertile and readily backcross to their parental types. Often these hybrids have a "fitness" that holds up to selection pressures as well or better than their parental types. The resulting population is often best described as a hybrid swarm. So, we are just going to have to accept our limitations and enjoy the gulls as they are. Remember they are beautiful. Now get out there and make them fun!

## **October Madness Birding Challenge**

### **Gerald Denning**

As described in Chris Edwards' report in the previous newsletter, in spring 2020 the club sponsored a very successful birding challenge modeled on the traditional NCAA basketball tournaments. In fall 2020, the coronavirus pandemic was still ongoing and continued to greatly limit the club's usual series of birding outings. It was decided to hold a similar challenge in which the search would be on for birds during part of the fall migratory season. With his work at the Johnson County Auditor's Office, Chris was going to be busy with the upcoming presidential election, so I agreed to be the reporter for the event. Eight individuals or teams signed up and were assigned brackets. Each week between Thursday and Sunday, participants sought out birds and then reported the number of species for their best day. There was one main bracket and one consolation bracket, and at the end of three weeks, a champion and a consolation bracket winner were named.

Round 1 took place on October 1 to 4 in generally good weather. Much like the spring competition, this round coincided with quite a lot of migratory action. This was particularly true for sparrows. LeConte's and Nelson's Sparrows were reported at Sugar Bottom Recreation Area and several other locations, and several participants recorded those two species which are often difficult to observe. This included the team of Torin and Danelle Waters, for whom both those sparrows were life birds. They also found two Red-shouldered Hawks at Lake Macbride. The Waters team included their one-month-old daughter Lenora. Several birders noted Lenora may well have established the record for the "record first early" birder for the Iowa City Bird Club.

In other action, Terri Macey spotted a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Franklin's Gulls, both firsts for her, and enjoyed the crowd of Great Egrets at the 200th St. pond and a cheerful flock of White-throated Sparrows. Probably the big find on the first weekend was a Spotted Towhee at Sugar Bottom, with several birders including Linda Quinn and yours truly being able to chalk up that one as a life bird. Karen Disbrow traveled to the Burlington area and came away with 64 species from a number of interesting locations. Her finds included a Merlin, a Peregrine Falcon and Green-winged Teal. During the four-day competition window Karen also located Wilson's Snipes at the Gun Club ponds. Mark Brown topped out the first round with 87 species.

Round 2 saw yet more sparrow action. An area at Sugar Bottom from the boat launch area and extending north again yielded LeConte's and Nelson's Sparrows that several birders were able to get good looks at. Lincoln's Sparrow, Swamp Sparrow, Savannah Sparrow, and Song Sparrow were also present at that location and other areas around Lake Macbride and Hawkeye Wildlife Area (HWA). Fox Sparrow also put in regular appearances. Purple Finches had been noted going into the competition and were seen by several competitors.

Some warblers lingered, with Mark and Deb Rolfes noting Palm, Orange-crowned, and Yellow-rumped at HWA. The Waters team found six Cackling Geese at a pond in North Liberty. As it happened, on October 8 I was trying to add more birds at HWA and kept encountering Linda Quinn. She was pitted against Mark Brown. She had an intense glint in her eye which made it clear that she was gunning for an upset. But alas it was not to be, as Mark chalked up 72 birds to Linda's 63 in their bracket and Mark moved on to the next round.

*October Madness Birding Challenge-continued*

Round 3 took place over some windy days from October 15 to 18. I had always had little luck getting good looks at Rusty Blackbirds. But thanks to the fact that I signed up for the competition, I was at Terry Trueblood Recreation Area early on the 17th and got great looks and photos of a flock of at least a dozen of these birds. They were feeding intensely on the mudflats near the cattails. I will now always internalize that they are called rusty because they are often not black. But the major development on the 17th was when Mark Brown located a distant Pacific Loon just west of the James Avenue parking lot at HWA. Mark got assistance from Brandon Caswell that evening when the two of them made an epic march through acres of cockleburrs to confirm the identification.

Earlier in the four-day third round, Sharon Somers had punished herself by pushing through the day with great intensity. Her strategy was to “bird till you drop”. It was so bad that as the sun set, she probably saw an American Bittern at the Gun Club Ponds, but she was so exhausted that she could not be sure. She reached the respectable total of 62 birds, easily crushing her opponent, me, with my paltry 41. Despite spending much time dedicated to the Pacific Loon, Mark registered 65 and won the third and final round. The final results were Mark Brown as champion, and Sharon Somers as consolation bracket winner.

The spirited but always friendly competition of events like March and October Madness has been enjoyable. The competitive edge pushes one along and you find and study birds that otherwise you would not have seen. The club will make the decision, but with any luck by next year, either spring or fall, an event like this may again take place. Taking away the factor of an ongoing pandemic would just add to the enjoyment, as I am sure we can all agree.

## Field Trip and Meeting Reports

**September 24, Meeting.** Thirty-one people attended our first meeting held virtually using Zoom. Doug Harr, President of Iowa Audubon and retired DNR wildlife biologist, gave his latest presentation, “Saving Prairies Can Save Grassland Birds”. Doug created this new program last winter at the request of the Iowa Prairie Network for their winter prairie seminar in Ames. The focus of their meeting was on birds, butterflies, and creatures related to Iowa’s prairies.

The presentation was designed to offer information primarily to plant specialists about what species of grassland birds use Iowa’s variety of shortgrass, midgrass, tallgrass, brushy, and savanna prairies. In presenting it to ICBC and other bird organizations, the program is now intended to describe what different types of prairies that grassland birds prefer to use most. Doug also discussed how North America’s grassland birds have suffered a 53% population decline since 1970, the largest decrease of all avian groups, and how we must restore and protect prairies to attempt to stabilize lives and numbers of our grassland birds.

During the business portion of the meeting, Treasurer Larry Mahoney reported that our bank account balance is \$1,992, with no recent expenditures due to the reduction in events and publications.

Rick Hollis made two recent presentations to community organizations – the Senior Center Garden Club and the Morning Rotary Club.

Events Coordinator Karen Disbrow reported on the September Cy-Hawk Challenge, which was modified to allow solo birding. A record number of birders from across the state reported 199 species.

Field Trip Coordinator Linda Quinn noted that although our field trips have been cancelled since

the start of the pandemic, participation in our other offerings – the March Madness Birding Challenge, the Johnson County Spring Migration Count, and the Cy-Hawk Challenge – have been extremely high. Upcoming events include our annual hawk watch (modified for COVID-19), an October tournament patterned on March Madness, and the Christmas Bird Count. Details on all events can be found on our website calendar.

– *Doug Harr & Sandy Eads.*

**September 27, Hawk Watch at Stainbrook Preserve.** Despite abysmal weather for a hawk watch, twelve birders were excited to gather for our club's first group activity since early March. Masked and socially distanced, we spent two hours catching up and enjoying the conversation.

It was a heavily overcast morning, and during the first hour the wind was calm and there was little migratory movement – just three Turkey Vultures and two accipiters were noted. At 10 a.m. the wind shifted to the north, and about 60 Turkey Vultures lifted off their roost near Lake Macbride. During the next hour we spotted a Bald Eagle, two more accipiters, and two Red-tailed Hawks.

With few raptors overhead, we spent time watching for passerines in the shrubs and trees that circled our clearing. Numerous vireos, flycatchers, warblers, and others were spotted. Perhaps the “best” were Philadelphia Vireo and Bay-breasted Warbler. We also noted small flocks of Franklin's Gulls and other species such as Double-crested Cormorant and Blue-winged Teal that seemed to be on the move with the north wind.

At 11 a.m. a light, steady rain began to fall, and we called it quits.

Participants: Connie Aldridge, Elizabeth Aubrey, Phyllis Black, Barry Buschelman, Jerry Denning, Chris Edwards, James Huntington, John McNamara, Linda Quinn, Linda Rudolph, Sharon Somers, David Weiss.

Raptors (5 species, 75 individuals): Turkey Vulture 68, Sharp-shinned Hawk 1, Cooper's Hawk 1, *Accipiter* sp. 1, Bald Eagle 1, Red-tailed Hawk 2.

Other Birds (32 species): Canada Goose, Blue-winged Teal, Mallard, Chimney Swift, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Franklin's Gulls, Ring-billed Gull, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Egret, Eastern Wood-Pewee, Least Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Blue-headed Vireo, Philadelphia Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue Jay, American Crow, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, American Robin, Gray Catbird, Cedar Waxwing, American Goldfinch, Black-and-white Warbler, Tennessee Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Bay-breasted Warbler, Chestnut-sided Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warbler.

– *Chris Edwards*

**October 15, Meeting.** Speakers Karen Viste-Sparkman and Stuart Sparkman presented “Colombia: Birding the Land of the Northern Andes”, about some of the thousands of bird species that inhabit Colombia. Thirty-two people attended via Zoom.

Jerry Denning gave an update on the ongoing October Madness Challenge. A Little Gull and a Spotted Towhee were some of the exciting finds so far. The final weeks are about to begin!

Treasurer Larry Mahoney reminded everyone that if your 2020 dues are paid, you will owe no dues for 2021 because of the pandemic-related reduction in activities.

Details for the upcoming Iowa City Christmas Bird Count were announced. Karen Disbrow asked that if anyone has a speaker they would like to hear or a topic they are interested in to let her know.

– *Sandy Eads.*

**November 19, Meeting.** Former Iowa City Bird Club member Mark Bowman gave an informative presentation on our smallest falcon,

the American Kestrel. Twenty-five people attended via Zoom. Mark discussed his experiences supporting Mike Havlik's kestrel restoration activities in Dallas County. He also talked about the American Kestrel Partnership (AKP), an offshoot of the Peregrine Fund.

Mark asked attendees for support towards establishing and monitoring a few American Kestrel nest boxes in Johnson and Iowa counties, and he received an enthusiastic response. On January 9, Johnson County Naturalist Frances Owen led Sandy and Mark Eads, Kate Kostenbader and Ted Lepic, Everly Eldeen, Ben Rowold, Debbie Bryant, Rob Bradley, and Mark in building seven nest boxes according to an AKP suggested blueprint. Frances had pre-cut wood pieces and purchased all other necessary materials. So far two boxes have been installed and registered, and three others have been delivered to their designated sites. No birds have yet taken occupancy of the two installed boxes. If you are interested in helping with this project, email Mark at [biophilist1@gmail.com](mailto:biophilist1@gmail.com).

Following the presentation, Mark researched the answers to the following questions that were posed to him during the meeting:

Question #1: What overall percentage of kestrels are in the tall grass prairie region?

AKP Staff responded. "We don't know the percentage of the population that uses the tallgrass prairie region at any given time, but we can definitely say that density of kestrels in this region—particularly in central Illinois, but also eastern Iowa and northern Missouri—tends to be higher than in much of the rest of the country. Additionally, the tallgrass prairie is one of the few strongholds in the U.S. where the kestrel population is managing to hold steady. If this question was attempting to suss out how important your area is to American Kestrels, we can assure you that you're residing in very important kestrel country."

Question #2: Are there any problems with pesticides?

According to a thorough review of the literature, pesticide toxicity is not currently considered a major threat to kestrels. Smallwood and Bird state in *Birds of the World* that "Overall, local poisonings undoubtedly occur, but [there is] no evidence of a current widespread contamination threat to kestrels." The AKP staff concur, and state also that neonicotinoids (neonics), which are harmful to bees, other beneficial insects, aquatic invertebrates, and seed-eating birds, have not been shown to be harmful to kestrels.

Interestingly, kestrels can be raised sustainably in captivity, and have been used in the past as a model for other raptors in testing pesticide and environmental pollutant toxicity. Kestrels were used to confirm the egg-thinning effect of DDT upon raptors, and in this regard contributed to the disuse of DDT and the recovery of Peregrine Falcons.

It is possible that a reduction in insect populations consequent to the aggressive use of insecticides in modern farming has had a detrimental effect on kestrels. Studies reveal that insects and other large invertebrates compose the major portion of their diet.

Question#3: What is the best time of year to hang a box?

Per AKP Staff, "During the non-breeding season, between October and January in most of North America."

Question #4: Do kestrel boxes need to be far from Bald Eagle areas?

Per AKP Staff, "A kestrel would be fairly safe around a Bald Eagle, which typically prefer larger and more easily captured prey such as mammals, waterfowl, or fish, but all the same it's likely that a kestrel family wouldn't be too keen on having such a large predator as a next-door neighbor. As a result, we'd recommend keeping any new nest boxes at least a half-mile from the nearest eagle nest to make sure the two raptors' ranges don't overlap."



During the business portion of the meeting, Terri Macey read a message from Mark Bowman honoring Karen Disbrow and Rick Hollis and their involvement in the Introduction to Birding Course that has been influential to Mark and so many other birders.

The bird club now has two spotting scopes available for checkout by members, thanks to donations by Bill Scheible and Mark Bowman. Arrange your check-out by contacting Linda Quinn at quinnhenry@msn.com or 319-330-3328.

Karen Disbrow let us know that animals, including birds, are getting caught in the ear straps of disposable face masks. All we need to do to prevent this is to cut the ear straps before disposing of our masks.

– Sandy Eads

**February 18, Meeting.** Chris Caster provided a very informative presentation, “Gulls on the Mississippi River.” Thirty-five people attended via Zoom. If you missed it, you can view a recording on our website at <https://www.iowacitybirdclub.org/event/bird-club-meeting-11/>. And see page 10 in this newsletter for a companion article.

After the presentation, there was a lively discussion among members about recent bird sightings, which included a Snowy Owl. This led to a discussion of wind turbines and their effects on birds.

– Sandy Eads

The long-awaited ***Iowa Breeding Bird Atlas II*** is now available! Based on field work conducted from 2008 to 2012, the 454-page volume is packed with information about Iowa’s breeding birds. It features a gorgeous wrap-around cover painting by Chris Caster and is available in softcover, hardcover, and as a downloadable PDF. Visit [www.iowabirds.org](http://www.iowabirds.org) to order yours.

Karen Disbrow has Iowa Ornithologists’ Union **Field Checklists** available for \$0.25 each, and copies of the ***The Iowa Yellowbook*** showing seasonal abundance of Iowa birds for \$3.00. To purchase, call or text her at 319-430-0315.

**Iowa City Bird Club Merchandise** is available online from Corporate Casuals. You can purchase shirts, hats, bags, and much more with our club name and logo. Check the Club Info menu on our website.

### IOWA CITY BIRD CLUB MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL FORM

Please send this form with your annual membership dues to Larry Mahoney, 2223 Cae Drive, Iowa City, IA 52246. Annual membership dues per household are \$15 for a print subscription, \$10 for an email subscription, or \$10 for students for a print subscription. Make checks payable to “Eastern Iowa Birdwatch”. Members receive a 10% discount on birdseed and suet at Ace Hardware at 600 N. Dodge Street, Iowa City, and Forever Green Garden Center at 125 Forevergreen Rd., Coralville.

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Amount Enclosed \_\_\_\_\_

Check here for e-mail subscription only (will be emailed via ICBC Google Group).



## Iowa City Bird Club

[www.iowacitybirdclub.org](http://www.iowacitybirdclub.org)

**Annual membership dues** are \$15 per household for a print subscription, \$10 for an email subscription via our Google Group, or \$10 for students for a print subscription, payable by January 1 for the coming year. Check your mailing label or contact Treasurer Larry Mahoney at [ltjmahoney@aol.com](mailto:ltjmahoney@aol.com) for the year you have paid through. Make checks payable to Eastern Iowa Birdwatch and mail to Larry Mahoney, 2223 Cae Drive, Iowa City, IA 52246.

**Visit our web site** at [www.iowacitybirdclub.org](http://www.iowacitybirdclub.org). You may contact Webmaster Mark Graber at [markagraber@gmail.com](mailto:markagraber@gmail.com). Also visit Iowa City Bird Club on Facebook.

**Join our Google Group** to receive email announcements of upcoming meetings, field trips, and other events, and the email version of our newsletter. Email Linda Quinn at [quinnhenry@msn.com](mailto:quinnhenry@msn.com) to sign up.

**For general club information**, contact Rick Hollis at 319-665-3141 or [xiboia@earthlink.net](mailto:xiboia@earthlink.net).

**To lead or suggest a field trip**, contact Field Trip Coordinator Linda Quinn at 319-330-3328 or [quinnhenry@msn.com](mailto:quinnhenry@msn.com).

**Eastern Iowa Birdwatch** is published three times per year, in April, September, and December. Send submissions and comments to Editor Chris Edwards at [credwards@aol.com](mailto:credwards@aol.com). You may also contact Chris at 319-430-4732.

### ***Eastern Iowa Birdwatch***

**Chris Edwards, Editor**  
4490 Daniels Cir. NE  
Solon, IA 52333

