



North Country Notes

The Newsletter of the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society
Marquette and Alger Counties, Michigan

December 2013

Winter Birding in the UP

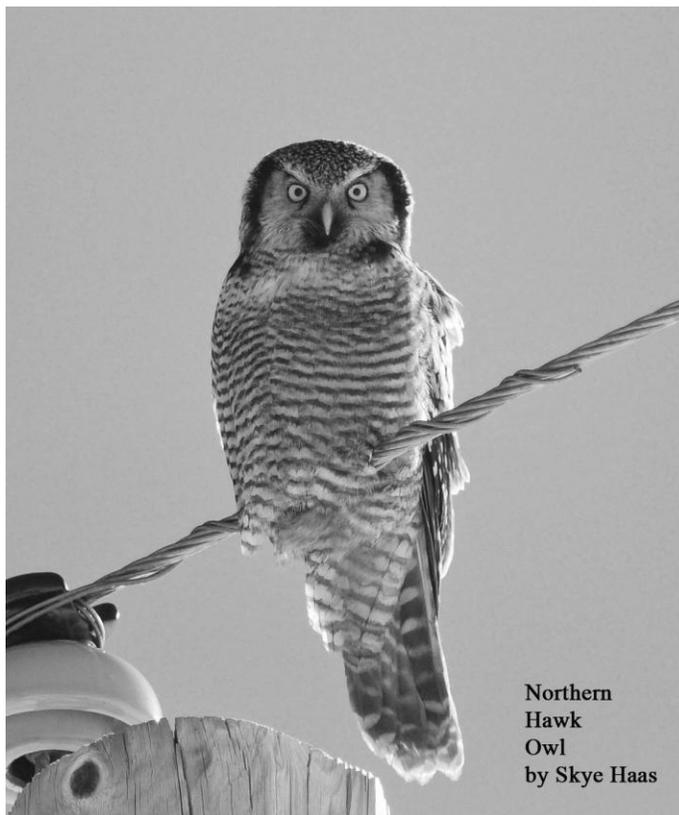
by Gary Palmer

Winter is again upon us, and with it an overhaul of the suite of birds one may encounter. Though the dazzling hawks, understated thrushes, and vibrant warblers that we enjoyed all summer have departed for warmer climes, a spectacular avifauna still awaits the intrepid birder who dares brave the cold of a UP winter. One of the most exciting aspects of winter birding is its unpredictability. Truly unexpected vagrant birds sometimes show up in the winter, and some western species show a clear pattern of winter vagrancy. Unlike our spring migrants, whose northward journeys are tightly linked with warming temperatures and lengthening days, our winter visitors don't stick to such a rigid schedule. Many are irruptive or nomadic wanderers, only visiting whenever a combination of poorly-understood factors conspire to send them here.

Snowy Owls are one of the most spectacular and well-known irruptive migrants that we are fortunate to encounter in most UP winters. They are typically believed to have a cyclical four or five year pattern of irruptive invasions. This invasion pattern is tied to population cycles of the lemmings they feed on in

the summer sending them well south of their Arctic tundra breeding grounds. Much to everyone's surprise, they seem to be invading again this year, only two years after the last major irruption! Already this winter several have been spotted throughout the UP. At a location downstate, seven individuals were spotted at once. They've even been spotted this month as far south as Bermuda! Even in non-invasion years it's often possible to find a Snowy somewhere in the UP. The most reliable methods to spot one include: scanning coastlines and especially breakwalls around dawn and dusk or scouring the farm fields in areas like Rudyard in the eastern UP.

Other owls may also visit the area in the winter – just last year Great Gray, Northern Hawk, and Boreal Owls were found in impressive numbers throughout the Great Lakes. Owls certainly aren't the only cold-weather avian visitors we're privileged to here. Northern Shrikes and Rough-legged Hawks are two additional predatory species which winter here, coming from far northern breeding grounds much like the owls.



Northern
Hawk
Owl
by Skye Haas

Finches also regularly wander here in the winter, many species of the boreal forest being rather nomadic followers of Spruce and Pine cone crops. Both Red and White-winged Crossbills are particularly known for their dependence on cones, as can be seen by their unique crossed bills along with their ability to breed at any time throughout the year whenever



Hoary Redpoll
Photo by Skye Haas

enough seeds can be found. Pine Siskins, American Goldfinches, Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, and Common and Hoary Redpolls also winter here, occasionally in impressively large numbers.

The winter of 2012-13 was great for finches, but the highlight of the season was, surprisingly, a gull! Early more-or-less expected vagrants including Townsend's Solitaire and Varied Thrush kicked off the winter along with huge, possibly unprecedented numbers of Hoary Redpolls. Expected winter species of gulls on the waterfront such as Iceland, Thayer's, Glaucous, and Great Black-backed were also seen in higher-than-expected numbers. As March proceeded, and as a memorable winter of birding drew to a close, on March 15th Beth Olson photographed Michigan's third record of a Slaty-backed Gull at Marquette's Picnic Rocks. This species normally resides on the Pacific Coast in Asia, so it was a real treat for one to be found in Marquette, and dozens of birders were able to see this individual, because it stayed for over three weeks! Hopefully the winter of 2013-14 will prove to be another great one for birding in the UP!

LWAS 2013 Annual Members Meeting

by Jeff Knoop

The LWAS annual meeting was held on November 13 at the Peter White Public Library. Approximately 40 members and guests were in attendance.

Several amendments to the existing by-laws were adopted by the Board and general membership including an amendment that lifts the cap on the total number of Executive Committee members. This was previously limited to 7-9 members. This change will accommodate additional interested Club members who wish to serve. This necessitated a modification of the Quorum section to a simple majority of the Executive Committee, rather than a fixed number (previously five members). In addition, long term member Sue Holtzman has agreed to join the Committee as our new treasurer. Sue's background and experience in bookkeeping will be beneficial. Thanks, Sue for becoming our tenth Committee member!

While enjoying homemade goodies, we looked at beautiful photos by newsletter editor Beth Olson, members Mark and Joanie Hubinger, and pilot Tony Williams, who provided excellent aerial photographs of some of the best scenery the UP has to offer.

Thanks to all the members and guests who attended the annual meeting.

Salmonellosis: A Timely Reminder

by Jude Holloway

The time of the year has returned again when our fine feathered friends are starting to return to our homes in larger numbers hoping to find our offerings of food and water. Full feeders and water baths are all well and good, but are they also safe? All too often we hear of sightings of sick or dead birds throughout the winter. Some of this can be prevented. Where numbers of birds congregate Salmonellosis can often be the culprit. An infected bird can appear lethargic, thin, fluffed out or have swollen eyes. But not all infected birds show symptoms. Keeping the area around the bottom of the feeders cleaned of droppings along with cleaning out the water in birdbaths is probably the most important in keeping our feeding stations safe. A mild solution of bleach water (usually 10X1) can also prevent the feeders themselves from hosting unwanted threats. Some types of salmonella can be transmitted to humans so it is important to use good hygiene when handling these cleanings. Enjoying the company of birds through the winter months is such a treat. Let's remember to feed them safely.

Stalking the Wild Spruce Grouse- Current Research

by Laurel Hill

Spruce grouse (*Falci pennis canadensis*) were once abundant in Michigan, but are now scarce (Amman 1963). Spruce grouse, also called “fool hen” by hunters because of its unique tameness, are listed as a “species of concern” in Michigan and threatened in Wisconsin (MIDNR 2009, WIDNR 2011). Spruce grouse are also considered “species of greatest conservation need” in Minnesota, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec (Williamson et al. 2008).

In Michigan, typical spruce grouse habitat consists of upland jack pine and low-lying spruce (*Picea spp.*) near bogs, generally interspersed with ericaceous shrub cover. Throughout its range in Michigan, spruce grouse are found in conifer-dominated forests. In addition to its specific habitat preference, the spruce grouse is at the southern margin of its range in Michigan making it vulnerable to global climate change. Increasing temperatures may lead to the loss of valuable lowland spruce habitat in the Upper Peninsula. Even though the effects of global warming are likely, there has been little to no effort to measure the impacts on spruce grouse.



Studies of a local population of spruce grouse began on the Yellow Dog Plains in 1965. Robinson's (1980) work addressed the life history of spruce grouse including habitat requirements, breeding behavior, physiological questions, and mortality factors. The book, *Fool Hen*, chronicles Robinson's painstaking seminal research on a local population of spruce grouse (*Falci pennis canadensis*) on the Yellow Dog Plains. The spruce grouse population there has not been investigated since the 1980's and Robinson's data are

Taken during the summer field season in 2013 during observations of a spruce grouse family. Three curious chicks (two in picture) approached me with a cautious mother close behind.

available for comparison making follow-up research a unique and exciting opportunity.

The goal of my research is to address the principal threat to spruce grouse--habitat degradation. I am investigating the effects of forest connectivity, structure and human alterations as measured by indices of habitat use by spruce grouse on the Yellow Dog Plains.

Portions of this study are also being conducted within the land holdings of the Huron Mountain Club. In 1938, Aldo Leopold (one of the founding biologists of wildlife management) reported that spruce grouse are rapidly disappearing from the lake states and that the Club may serve as a potential refuge. Spruce grouse were listed as rare in the Club in 1938, and grouse signs suggest that they are still rare there today.

Large-scale changes in human land-use has the potential to change forest composition away from the preferred habitats of spruce grouse and influence their abundance and distribution. This study seeks to investigate the current spruce grouse population and its habitat use on the Yellow Dog Plains in relation to current and cumulative habitat changes.

This project began in the summer of 2013 and field work will continue through summer of 2014, with project conclusion planned for late 2014. This research is funded in part by the Huron Mountain Wildlife Foundation and the Excellence in Education program awarded by Northern Michigan University.

Laurel Hill and Pat Brown

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Wisconsin.

Christmas Bird Counts in the Central U.P.

The Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) takes place annually from December 14 – January 5 and is the longest-running wildlife census in the country. The count of 2013-2014 will be the 114th year for the project. Join with other birders to collect important information that is used to assess the health of the nation's bird populations. For trends shown by CBC data, see Audubon's "State of the Birds" report at <http://birds.audubon.org/state-birds>.

There is no longer a fee to participate in the CBC. To offset the loss of income, *American Birds* is no longer printed and mailed to participants, and instead the Audubon Society will have an online summary of the CBC results.

Below is information on several UP Christmas Bird Counts –*Although you will be in a car for much of the time, you will also be outdoors. So, remember to dress for the weather! Beginning birders are welcome and will be paired with more experienced birders.*

Marquette – December 14 (Saturday) – compiler is Melinda Stamp at mstamp@mstamp.net or 906-869-2489. Meet at 8:00 a.m. in the parking lot at Mattson Lower Harbor Park. No advanced notice is necessary. Feeder forms are available by pre-registering with Melinda. The count circle covers a 7.5-

mile radius centered on Old City Hall at 4th and Washington St. A post-count pot luck will be held at 6:00 p.m. at the home of Bruce Ventura and Tina Hall (140 Timber Lane, Marquette).

AuTrain – December 15 (Sunday) –compiler is Scott Hickman at suboscine@hotmail.com or 906-892-8603. If possible, please use the email address, since count information is distributed by email.

Advanced notice of at least 2 days will help in coordinating the count-circle coverage.

Baraga - December 16 (Monday) - compiler is Joe Kaplan.

Contact Joe Kaplan at commoncoast@gmail.com for details

Peshekee Grade – December 17 (Tuesday) – compiler is Gary Palmer. Contact Gary at palmerjg@gmail.com for details.

Cedarville (Mackinaw County – Les Cheneaux Area) – December 20 (Friday) –compiler is Tina Hall at chall@tnc.org, phone: (days) 225-0399 ext.4012, (evenings) 225-0139. Contact Tina for more information.

UPCOMING LWA PROGRAMS

Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society meetings are held in the Community Room of Peter White Library on the 2nd Wednesday of the month. Programs begin at 7:00 p.m. and end around 8:30.

December – no program (See the schedule of Christmas Bird Counts for birding opportunities)

January 8, 2014 –“Acadia Birding Festival, Mt. Desert Island, Maine”

Presenters: Clyde and Debbie Hecox

Clyde and Debbie will share pictures and stories from their June 2013 visit to the “Acadia Birding Festival.” Roger Tory Peterson called Mt. Desert Island the “warbler capital of the world,” but it is also home to Boreal species such as the Black-backed woodpecker and Boreal Chickadee, as well as significant marsh and water birds include American Woodcock, Wilson's Snipe, Pied-billed Grebe, American Bittern, and Sora. Finally, boating and kayak trips provide views of Puffins, Razorbills, and other pelagic birds. Information: 226-7110

February 12, 2014 – “*Green Fire*” – a film on the life of environmentalist Aldo Leopold

Presented by the U.P. Land Conservancy and the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society

Green Fire is the first full-length documentary film ever made about legendary environmentalist Aldo Leopold. The film highlights Leopold’s extraordinary career and traces how he shaped and influenced the modern environmental movement. Light refreshments will be served, and the film is approximately one hour in length.

Information: 906-869-4791 or 226-6749

March 12, 2014 – “Moose and Plants on Isle Royale: Drivers of Change on an Island Wilderness”

Presenter: Mike Rotter, graduate student in the Biology Department at NMU

Isle Royale is famous for the relationship of its wolves and moose. However, the role of vegetation on the island has received considerably less attention. Despite the monumental impacts that future vegetation composition will have on all aspects of life for Isle Royale’s biota, long-term impacts on future moose browsing are not well known. This talk will discuss the past, present, and future of moose-and-vegetation on Isle Royale and the ecological consequences of this interaction.

Information: 226-6749

April 9, 2014: TBD

May 2014: There will be no program in May this year, but several opportunities for birding will be available.

Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society Membership Form for 2013-2014

Dues support the newsletter, programs, & local birding activities. Donations are tax-deductible.

Name (or names) _____

Address _____

City, State and Zip _____

Phone _____ e-mail _____

(E-mail addresses are not given to other groups or commercial entities)

Membership fees (please check one)

_____ Regular (Individual and Family) Annual - \$15.00 _____ Student - \$5.00

How would you like to receive your newsletter? (check one) _____ e-mail or _____ post.

Additional donations:

\$ _____ General Expenses & Bird seed for feeders at Presque Isle Park

\$ _____ Research Grant to fund birding research in the Upper Peninsula

Mail this form, along with your check (payable to LWAS) to:

Ann Joyal, 346 W. Crescent St., Marquette, MI 49855 (ajoyal@nmu.edu or 906-226-6749)

c/o Beth Olson
5 Arrowhead Dr.
Marquette, MI 49855

