

North Country Notes

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



December 2016

The Sea Stacks

Hazy Memories from a Summer Day on the Washington Coast by Nathan Martineau

Sometime before the dawn of July 27th, 2016, a thick fog began to roll over Shi Shi Beach ahead of a cool eastward breeze. That day, the sun rose opposite the Pacific Ocean as always, but never quite broke through the haze. By late morning as I walked along the water's edge, a soft light filtered down through the millions of water droplets, turning everything bright white and leaving its source's location obscured.



The scene.

The world was a vision in gray and white, save the vaguely green forms of trees towering above the far side of the sand: all that was now visible of the forest from which I had just descended. The water reflected a shimmery silver and blended with the fog not far offshore, where everything was white. My footsteps and the crashing of waves kept time and, like clockwork, Northwestern Crows gave their slightly nasal calls every few minutes. Olympic Gulls (that ubiquitous hybrid of the Pacific Northwest) flew into sight every so often, only to vanish again moments later. California Gulls were

there, too, and a few flocks of Western Sandpipers scurried about on the sand.

I could feel the ground moving beneath my feet, but the fog hid any clues of how far I'd already gone or how far I had yet to go. Eventually, I heard a sound that told me I was nearing my destination: the call of a Black Oystercatcher shattering the dreamlike, silent whiteness between two bouts of crow calls. I couldn't see them just yet, but if I kept walking, I knew a cluster of tall black rocks would soon loom out of the fog.

And so they did, along with 10 oystercatchers—bright orange-red bills piercing through the fog—and flocks of Pigeon Guillemots in the water beneath them. I had reached the sea stacks, and as I'd hoped, there were birds everywhere.

All along the main reason for making the eight-mile hike to this seabird nesting colony was to find a Tufted Puffin, so I immediately set about scanning the rocks and water with my scope. I scanned through hundreds of Pigeon Guillemots, trying to see something different among their white wing patches and slender, black bodies. It took no longer than 10 minutes to find what I was looking for: a stunning, mostly black bird sporting a white face, a huge orange bill, and its namesake yellow ear tufts, floating on the water beneath the tallest of the sea stacks. I continued to scan the water, and found 12 more puffins along with hundreds of other seabirds. There were many dozens of Rhinoceros Auklets scattered amongst the omnipresent guillemots, their peculiar orange bills adorned with an upward-facing horn at their base, and two each of Cassin's Auklets and Marbled Murrelets on the water as well. There was probably more to see on the water, but suddenly a loud, whistling chorus of calling oystercatchers prompted me to look up from my



Tufted Puffin 15 miles up the coast later that evening.

scope as a flock of nearly 40 landed nearby, half-shrouded in fog. I looked around some more, and saw a near shore group of Harlequin Ducks that I hadn't seen while looking farther out. They were mostly females, but the males were stunning in their blue, orange, and white plumage as they navigated their way through the maze of rocks and shallow water.

When I'd gotten my fill of oystercatchers and Harlequins, I returned to my scope to make one last scan. I saw nothing different until I was nearly finished, when my scope landed on a long, brown, furry form

that was unmistakably a sea otter. Even better, I soon saw a smaller one close-by!

For a long time, I watched these beautiful animals, which have only recently made a comeback in the Pacific Northwest, as they bobbed up and down in the waves. The adult occasionally dove and resurfaced with something to eat. The young one, I imagine, was looking on.

I could have watched the otters forever, but eventually I needed to leave. Oystercatchers continued to call as I, merely a brief visitor to their fog-enshrouded world, packed up my things and began my walk back through the dimming white light.



One of several male Harlequin Ducks.

LWAS Plans Weekend Field Trip to Sax-Zim Bog, Minnesota

A field trip is being planned for February 24-26, 2017 to view Sax-Zim Bog's unique collection of owls and other great boreal species. Accommodations are being arranged in Duluth for the nights of Friday and Saturday, February 24-25, and carpooling can be arranged. If you are interested, please contact Beth Olson at tolson@chartermi.net or at 906-360-4366.

Sax-Zim Bog is located about 40 miles northwest of Duluth, and is a well-known wintering area for the Snowy Owl, Boreal Owl, Northern Hawk Owl, and the sought-after Great Gray Owl. Other great birds include Boreal Chickadees, Gray Jays, Northern Shrikes, Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Grosbeaks, Black-backed Woodpeckers, American Three-toed Woodpeckers, Common and Hoary Redpolls, Bohemian Waxwings, and both White-winged and Red Crossbills. This will be our second field trip to Sax-Zim, and members who attended the first outing viewed an amazing number of owls and boreal species. Although the Great Gray Owl eluded us both days, we hope for better luck this trip!



Documenting Reoriented Warbler Migration in the Keweenaw Peninsula

by Zach G. Gayk

For the past five years I have been fascinated with the migration of warblers down the coast of the Keweenaw Peninsula in spring and fall. My first observation of this phenomenon was on the 21st of May 2014, when an especially late spring delayed the movement of birds north. On the 21st, the first favorable winds gave way to heavy fog and rain overnight, causing a very concentrated migration of warblers at Bete Grise—over 1,000 flew directly over me in slightly less than three hours. I simply stood in one spot and counted as birds flew over the low ridge directly inland from the Bete Grise lakeshore in a steady stream. An even bigger migration occurred on the 25th of May 2014, when I estimated that approximately 4,000 individuals flew down the coast at Bete Grise.

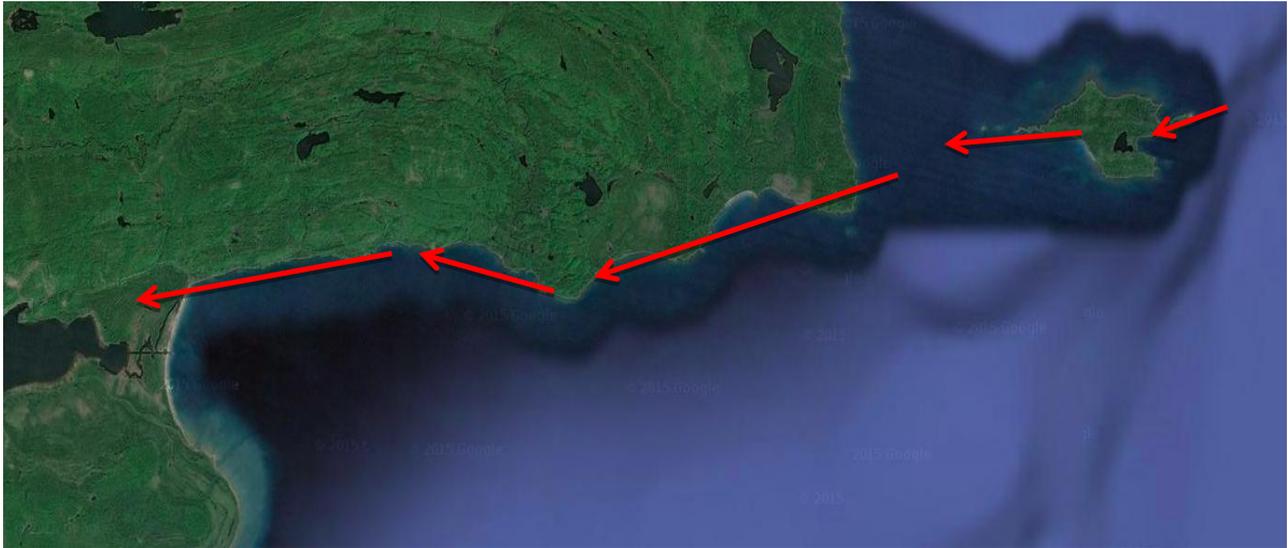
After observing these huge flights of warblers I continued to watch every spring at Bete Grise Preserve when I had the time. Here's what I've learned so far: The north portion of this preserve appears to be an important site in concentrating migratory flocks of warblers (*Parulidae*) moving west down the south shore of the Keweenaw Peninsula. This occurs because the east-west orientation of the Keweenaw Peninsula shoreline terminates at Bete Grise. Warblers normally migrate at night and long-distance diurnal movements are rare. These daytime flights appear to be a reoriented migration of birds caught over Lake Superior east of the Keweenaw at dawn, toward the interior of the Keweenaw (see map).

However, a number of questions remained that I could not answer with only data from opportunistic counts so, this year I set out to do two longer season surveys of westward warbler flights along the Keweenaw Peninsula. This Spring, I set out to Manitou Island where the warbler flights

originate—on a survey sponsored by Copper Country Audubon. Joe Yougman, Drew Meyer and I counted on 5 days from the 18th-22 of May at the narrow west tip of the island and were rewarded with over 5,044 warblers of 22 species, most of which passed on a single movement of 3,122 birds on the 21st of May. After counting all of these birds flying west toward the Keweenaw mainland, we were very happy but nursing sore necks!

My second survey based at Bete Grise North covered approximately a month this fall from 22 August through 19 September; it was sponsored by the Keweenaw Community Forest Company and Copper Country Audubon. I am still tallying the final numbers but in 16 days with morning flights Skye Haas and I counted 2,355 birds of 22 species. The largest season flight during the survey occurred on 30 August with between 800-1000 warblers. Although this season total is lower than I expected, there is some evidence that recent tropical storms and unseasonably nice weather made for a later than expected migration. On the 20th of September, the day after my official survey ended, I only got out for a short amount of time, but hundreds of Palm Warblers, Yellow-rumped Warblers, and Swainson's Thrushes were on the ground and the air was laden with calls of hundreds more. I estimate that approximately 3,000-5,000 passed this day, comprising the largest single day total of the season. Migration was much in evidence on the 21st of September as well, when I was able to get a count of 1,000 birds.

I am now planning to analyze warbler movements in conjunction with Lake Superior radar to determine exactly why birds fly down the Keweenaw Peninsula.



Satellite image of Manitou Island and Southern coast of Keweenaw Peninsula to Bete Grise.

NOTE: Zach will be talking about his research on warbler migration in a presentation for LWAS on the evening of March 8, 2017 at 7:00 at Peter White Library.

LWAS Funds Effort to Educate the Public about Predation of Birds by Domestic Cats

Why keep cats indoors? According to the American Bird Conservancy, “[outdoor cats kill approximately 2.4 billion birds every year in the United States](#). Although this number may seem unbelievable, it represents the combined impact of tens of millions of outdoor cats. Each outdoor cat plays a part. Predation by domestic cats is the number-one direct, human-caused threat to birds in the United States and Canada. ([2014 State of the Birds report](#).)”

To help educate the public, the American Bird Conservancy has produced an informational pamphlet called “Cats, Birds and You.” The LWAS executive board voted to purchase \$100 worth of these pamphlets, and UPAWS (Upper Peninsula Animal Welfare Shelter) has agreed to distribute them with every cat-adoption. We hope that this helps keep both birds and cats safer – since an indoor cat has more than twice the life-expectancy of an outdoor cat. Win,win!

Peshekee Grade Report from LWAS Outing November 12,2016

by Gary Palmer

On the Peshekee Grade, even the slow days are special times. Working westward toward the Grade from Marquette, as Lake Superior fades away in the rearview mirror, a breathtaking wilderness replaces the relative hustle and bustle you’re leaving behind. Before long you’d hardly guess the UP’s largest city lay just a few miles downhill. The landscape quickly becomes dominated by a vast boreal forest with sprawling conifers packed in tight, everywhere from the spongy spruce bogs to rocky cliffs. By the

time you hit Champion you start to feel a sense of pure primeval wonder – this is more or less how these lands have appeared since the last glaciers receded many millennia ago. This short journey affords a taste of what the first Anishinaabe, French fur traders, hirsute lumbermen, and enterprising mine workers saw here so many years ago – rich, dense wilderness waiting to be explored, as far as you can see in any direction.

As we turned onto the Peshekee Grade for this year's annual Laughing Whitefish Audubon field trip, the calm air, chilled in the previous night's frost, was just beginning to stir. One thing about the Grade is you have to take it slow – the road is so rough it's best driven no quicker than 25 miles an hour. Even in mid-winter I prefer to lazily cruise along the Peshekee Grade with windows wide open, ready to brake for the faintest *tseep*. The boreal habitat is so extensive that nomadic finches or a foraging flock of Chickadees, Nuthatches, Downies, Kinglets, Creepers, and who knows what else could be found with nearly equal likelihood anywhere for miles and miles.

We continued through serenely silent wilderness. Vistas dominated by the rocky river and its conifer-laden riparian corridor rolled past without so much as a Chickadee, the noisy glue that coheres a winter flock and announces their presence. We reached South Arfelin Lake Road without a tick on our checklist, here making the decision to park the cars and walk a stretch of this often-reliable road. It was cooler than I was ready for, after the unseasonably warm fall which had still been lingering. I pulled on my hat, zipped my jacket, and led the group of four other birders at a relaxed pace down the road, listening for any sounds of life.

Tap. Tap tap tap. Tap.

A woodpecker? Or just a branch, blowing in the wind?

Tap tap. Tap tap tap.

A woodpecker. But was it a Downy? A Hairy? Or perhaps a Black-backed?

Backtracking to triangulate the source, the tapping continued. Not far, though not quite within sight. Back-and-forth a few times, and still no sign of movement, though the bird continued to peck eagerly. The strength and rhythm of the sound caught my ear – too strong for a Downy, but too soon to rule out Hairy; a better quarry seemed increasingly possible. I took a few steps in off the road, then a few more, treading softly to avoid disturbing the bird.

There! A glimpse of something, in a spruce a dozen meters away. Then I saw it – the woodpecker, his back a slick, glossy, solid, dark black. A golden crown patch.

“It *is* a Black-backed!” I call, just loud enough for the other birders steadfastly waiting at the roadside to hear. And as they so often do, the Black-backed

coolly continued his tapping, entirely indifferent to their approach as four more sets of footsteps crunched gingerly toward him. We watched in awe as this sleek male flaked back more bark, searching for an arthropod snack. Wrong as it seems to walk away from such a spectacle, after several minutes the Black-backed showed no signs of stopping the show put on for the audience he blithely ignored, so we slipped away, back to the road and toward the cars.

Ka-pow! Ka-pow! Ka-pow!

Evening Grosbeaks! A flyover flock of at least eight bombed by, finding no reason to land as they sailed just above the treetops.

Tseet. Tseedle-tseet.

Golden-crowned Kinglet! An astonishing little bird – somehow able to survive the deep freeze of the Michigamme Highland's downright frigid winters despite weighing a mere quarter-ounce.

The sun climbed, finally cresting the treetops, and we birded on, snaking our way roughly northward up the Grade. The McCormick Wilderness beckoned. A 17,000 acre parcel with most human activities prohibited, this tract lay at the heart of any birder's day on the Peshekee.

Approaching the footbridge over the Peshekee River which begins the trail, a blur of a bird swooped in deftly through a narrow opening between trees. Ever the opportunist, it was a Gray Jay greeting us, eager for our offerings of trail mix and muffins.

Birds remained infrequent as we hiked a little ways toward White Deer Lake and back out, but the enchanting boreal forest has such a distracting allure that the paucity of avian detections bothered no one.

Still not ready to be done, we left the McCormick and pointed north, rather than south and homeward. A formerly reliable Gray Jay spot a couple miles farther up produced our first Red-breasted Nuthatches for the day, but little else, and corvids were notably absent.

The sun beamed and the air had lost its dawn edge as noon crept closer, and we pressed on. Past the county line, through the rock cut, we were now farther than I had travelled along the Grade in years. We reached Four Beers Corner, the last landmark I know before I begin losing my way along the dwindling logging roads.

Croak, croak! Croak!

A Common Raven, our first of the day, called out while he soared lazily, high above our heads here at the northernmost point of our journey. We completed the trip with a scant eleven species recorded in a little over four hours, but it was a day

even my inner lister couldn't complain about. A day on the Peshekee is always such a treat that It's easy leading a tour around these parts, even when the birds don't cooperate.

Evening Grosbeaks
Photo by Skye Haas



Golden-crowned Kinglet
Photo by Beth Olson

Christmas Bird Count Dates

The National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) takes place annually from December 14 – January 5 and has been in existence for 117 years, making it the longest-running wildlife census in the country. 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 the Audubon's "State of the Birds" report at <http://birds.audubon.org/state-birds>.

ALL LEVELS ARE WELCOME: Beginning birders will be paired with more experienced observers. This is a great way to learn more about the birds in your area. DRESS WARMLY!

Christmas Bird Counts in the local area:

- **December 17, 2016 (Saturday) - Marquette –**
The 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 in Marquette.
No advanced registration 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 & Washington St.*
- **December 18, 2016 (Sunday) - AuTrain (NOTE – Scott has a new email address)**
The compiler is Scott Hickman at (new email) suboscine@gmail.com or 906-892-8603.
Please use the email address for communication since count information is distributed by email. Please let Scott know at least 4 days in advance if you want to participate so that count circle coverage can be properly coordinated and communicated to all participants.
- **December 20, 2016 (Tuesday) – Peshekee Grade**
The compiler is Katie Koch (katie_koch22@yahoo.com).
Please contact Katie by email if you are interested in participating. She will need at least 8 people in order to conduct the count.
- **December 21, 2016 (Wednesday) - Cedarville, Mackinac Co. (Les Cheneaux Area)**
The compiler is Tina Hall at chall@tnc.org, phone: (days) 906-225-0399 ext.4012, (evenings) 906-225-0139.
Meet at 8:00 a.m. at Ang-Gio's Restaurant in Cederville.
- **TBD - Gwinn –**
The compiler is Brian Johnson at baidaj@yahoo.com or 231-557-4011. Contact Brian for meeting place and time.

Evening Programs for Winter and Spring 2017

Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society meetings are held in the Community Room of Peter White Library, beginning at 7:00 p.m. and ending around 8:30. For information call 226-6749.

January 11, 2017 (Wednesday) – “South Africa to Victoria Falls, via Botswana: A Thousand Mile Safari”

Presenter: Jeff Knoop

Join Jeff as he travels through the game preserves of South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe to the edge of Victoria Falls.

February 8, 2017 (Wednesday) – TBD

Birding or wildlife film - to be announced

March 8, 2017 (Wednesday) – “Documenting Warbler Migration in the Keweenaw Peninsula”

Presenter: Zach Gayk

Zach will present the results from spring and fall surveys of warbler migrations in the Bete Grise area of the Keweenaw. In these surveys, he and fellow observers identified 22 species of warblers, sometimes passing through in movements of 2000 – 3000 birds. *(See the accompanying article in this month's newsletter)*

April 12, 2017 (Wednesday) “Tips on Identifying Warblers”

Presenter: Nate Martineau

Learn some of the fine-points of identifying our many spring warblers

Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society Membership Form

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

Your name (or gift-recipient's name): _____

Street: _____

City, State and Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

Address _____

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

Annual Membership fees (please check one)

Gift membership - \$15 Regular membership - \$15 OR Student - \$5.00

How would you like to receive your newsletter? (check one) e-mail or postal service

Additional donations:

\$ _____ General Expenses for club projects

\$ _____ Research/Conservation Grant to fund birding research/conservation in the UP

FOR GIFT MEMBERSHIPS please supply your name and the recipient will be notified of your gift: DONOR NAME: _____

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

