



# North Country Notes

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

March 2013

Greetings from the chair.

Well it's been a delightful winter. We finally got some good old-fashioned UP style snow, and we've been graced with several species of boreal forest birds, namely finches and owls. Many of you have hosted flocks of Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls at your feeders. Furthermore, it has been a standout year for Hoary Redpolls. There are times that as one looks at their field guide, you are left wanting to just ignore this rare visitor as a theoretical ID exercise in frustration. But as a number of these frosty beauties come into our feeders allowing a closer look at the field marks of this semi-cryptic species, you began to feel more confident in telling what is a pale Common Redpoll and what a bona-fide Hoary Redpoll actually looks like! A true treat of living in the North Woods! Also notable has been all the crossbills coming into people's feeders. Both White-winged and Red Crossbills are far more prone to ranging over hundreds of miles to find their preferred food source, conifer cones. Only rarely does one come to a feeder, but this winter cone crops must be too poor to fully support crossbills and many of you have been pleasantly surprised to look out your window to see these specialized nomads eating seeds off the feeders. But even as winter draws to a close and we start pining for some signs of spring, it's hard to forget that there was another group of northern irruptives that made it into the Superior basin this year. Simply put, the owling was fantastic this year! Between the Duluth and Sault Ste. Marie, many birders got a chance to see some seldom-encountered species of northern owls. Both Snowy and Northern Hawk Owls provided several chances for people to see them, but even more exciting have been the Great Gray Owls and Boreal Owls reported. These species only move south out of Canada when the vole populations in the north crash; a cycle that can

take several years to repeat. But conditions must be right this year as nearly unprecedented amounts of Boreal Owls turned up along the Superior shorelines north of Duluth. Scattered reports have started to come in from Wisconsin and the UP in the last few weeks as well- surely there are many more individuals of this secretive species tucked away in tangles and dense conifer groves just waiting to be found. But I think the bird that really captures our hearts is a Great Gray Owl. Larger than life, and at times ridiculously tame, some lucky birders have made the treks to the Soo recently to observe these magnificent beasts.



Photogenic Great Gray Owl (photo by Beth Olson)

I've always been partial to Great Gray Owls ever since I encountered my first one in an April snowstorm along the road to Whitefish Point. Since then, I have had several impressionable (daresay magical?) experiences with this grey ghost of the northern boglands. They have this delightful combination of profound yet somewhat comical looks and mannerisms that has endeared this species to me. Despite their large size, they are not the voracious predator that a Great Horned Owl is. A Great Horned Owl is more physically robust with more mass and muscle frequently taking large prey. However, the Great Gray Owl is a hunter of voles. Their large, half-domed heads help triangulate their prey's whereabouts. Also helpful as they hunt, are their long-legs with strong muscles to help punch through the snow crust as they drop down on the unsuspecting rodent. These adaptations

help it survive the harsh boreal winter, where the pleasantness of the UP in February is as about as far south as this species will typically range. Of course, an excellent spot to see an owl in migration is at Whitefish Point. A trip there in April may yield a chance to see a Boreal or a Great Gray Owl, as well as other the more expect species of regular owl migrants like Northern Saw-Whet or a Long-eared Owl. Even as satisfying as this winter has been for birds, I find myself starting to anticipate migration. Any day now, there will be that first real warm front from the deep south and with it, riding the winds north will be the first Bald Eagles, American Robins, Red-tailed Hawks, Red-winged Blackbirds and my favorite harbinger of spring, Ring-billed Gulls. And with that, I hope to see you in the field soon!  
~ Skye Haas

## **Groups Collaborate in Further Land Protection Efforts along the Spine of the Keweenaw Peninsula: Brockway Mountain Project**

**By Dana Richter, President Copper County Audubon, and Jeff Knoop, Upper Peninsula Director of Land Protection, The Nature Conservancy of Michigan**

The threat to Brockway Mountain, one of North America's greatest hawk migration corridors, a state-recognized Important Bird Area and the location of some of Michigan's most dramatic and picturesque vistas, is over and the summit has been saved from development.

The acquisition of the summit of Brockway Mountain and surrounding 320 acres by Eagle Harbor Township in Keweenaw County is almost complete and the actual "closing" of the acquisition is scheduled for February 14, 2013 in Houghton, Michigan. The summit had been privately owned and the owners had for years provided unrestricted use of the summit. Anyone who has seen the breathtaking view of Lake Superior on a clear blue day from the top of Brockway Mountain knows that everyone should have this experience.

For the past two years Copper Country Audubon and Laughing Whitefish Audubon here in Marquette have conducted the Keweenaw Raptor Survey to formally document this important natural phenomenon. Last year from mid-March to mid-June over 10,000 raptors representing a dozen or so species crossed over Brockway Mountain. Preliminary reports indicate that this year's numbers

are coming in even higher.



A bidseye view of the peak of Brockway Mntn.  
Photo by [Edward A. Kisiel](#)

Brockway Mountain is also one of the best scenic views in the Upper Peninsula, sought by every summer traveler to the Keweenaw. Spectacular Brockway Mountain Drive provides access directly to the peak. In addition, the area provides high elevation habitat for a variety of endangered plant species including the Keweenaw Rock Rose, a plant species endemic to Brockway Mountain. But few people know that Brockway Mountain is private property and that it is currently up for sale.

In 2011, a coalition of partners joined forces and worked with Eagle Harbor Township and the

landowner to save Brockway Mountain for public enjoyment forever. In a successful two-year fundraising effort, Copper Country Audubon, the Michigan Chapter of The Nature Conservancy, Houghton Keweenaw Conservation District and the Keweenaw Land Trust were able to raise the necessary funds to acquire the privately-owned parcel.

Through the leadership of Eagle Harbor Township, a grant in the amount of \$498,000 was secured through the Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund Program. Generous donations from many local and state Audubon members, private foundations and others contributed the mandatory 25% cash match, approximately \$180,000, in order to receive the Trust Fund monies and complete the acquisition. It is important to note that no tax money was used for this purchase. The DNR Trust Fund's money comes from oil and natural gas leases and royalties on state lands. By voter approval of Proposal B in 1984, these proceeds were designated for recreation lands for the people of Michigan.

Furthermore, the summit will now be part of the Keweenaw Coastal Wildlife Corridor (KCWC), which extends from Eagle Harbor to Copper Harbor near the tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula. The KCWC stretches for 16 miles and protects roughly 3,500 acres of some of Michigan's most pristine coastline and scenic beauty. The corridor includes parts of Brockway Mountain, and the entirety of the nearby Mount Lookout; areas that are already owned by conservation organizations, including the Michigan Nature Association's James H. Klipfel Memorial Nature Sanctuary just east of the summit, and Michigan Audubon's Lake Bailey Wildlife Sanctuary, the Brockway Mountain Drive Wildlife Sanctuary just a short distance to the west and The Nature Conservancy's Helmut and Candice Stern Nature Preserve at Mount Look Out.

Special thanks go out to The Michigan Department of Natural Resource, Eagle Harbor Township and the more than 200 individual donors that contributed towards of protection of this outstanding natural area.

## **LWAS/NOPAS take a February tour to the Sax-Zim Bog**

by Gary Palmer

Early signs suggested this year would be great for viewing owls and other winter specialties – Whitefish Point owl banders caught numerous Boreal Owls; experts predicted large irruptions of finches; there was good reason to expect an echo from last winter's Snowy Owl explosion; and Great Gray and Hawk Owls kept popping up throughout the Midwest. Hoping to view some remarkable rarities and add more ticks to our life lists, the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society and NMU's Northern Parulas teamed up for a trip to a Midwest destination so renowned for its winter birding that it had been featured in the movie *The Big Year* – Minnesota's Sax-Zim Bog! Located just northwest of Duluth, Sax-Zim is a mecca for birders, and it provided



Greg Cleary (photo by Ann Joyal)

an excellent opportunity to reconnect with our former chairman, Greg Cleary, who just last summer moved to the area. At only six hours drive from Marquette, Sax-Zim offered the opportunity for a great weekend full of boreal birds, frigid temperatures, good friends, and most importantly to some, Indian food!

Our first morning in Minnesota began with a search for Great Gray Owl at dawn, while facing truly frigid temperatures – when we got out of our cars to trek down a snowy trail where a Great Gray had recently been spotted, the temperature was a bone-chilling 24 below zero! After only a few minutes out of the cars everybody's binoculars had focus knobs frozen in place, digital cameras were misbehaving, and many bushy beards were covered in frost condensed from our exhaled breaths. Despite our bravery in the face of adverse weather, we managed to miss Great Gray by a matter of moments for the first of three times during the weekend. Once the sun began climbing towards its zenith and it became clear this crepuscular bird wasn't likely to be seen soon, we moved along for a few loops around the bog.

Thanks to the Friends of Sax-Zim Bog, a collective of birders whose impressive efforts have assured the continued appeal of the area as a birding destination, we had a great experience with some boreal birds at a feeding station within the bog. Here we witnessed a spectacle which I had heard rumors of but remained skeptical until viewed with my own eyes – Boreal Chickadees at a feeder! Among numerous Black-capped Chickadees, Common and Hoary Redpolls, and Nuthatches, the infamously reclusive Boreal Chickadees were also visiting a log out in the open to gorge themselves on peanut butter.



Boreal Chickadee at Sax-Zim Bog



Boreal Owl in Duluth, MN

(photos by Beth Olson)

The real highlight of the trip, however, was an astounding four Boreal Owls! An unprecedented invasion of these birds to the Duluth area had been underway for several days, and birders kept finding more around town. The first Boreal Owl we encountered was a previously unknown individual, spotted by Beth Olson a mile away from the Boreal we had been chasing. This spectacular owl barely seemed to notice our presence as he patiently hunted in a drainage ditch on a suburban roadside, eventually capturing and consuming a vole as a group of awed birders looked on. Shortly afterward we found a Northern Hawk Owl perched atop a telephone pole aside a busy road, and two more Boreal Owls near the Lake Superior shore in Duluth.



Happy group of Sax-Zim birders (photo by Mark Hubinger)

Boreal Owl and a roosting Saw-whet Owl in the nearby town of Two Harbors. Finishing up with a second Hawk Owl in Poplar, Wisconsin, Super Owl Sunday ended in an overwhelming victory for this group of birders!

The final day of our trip, the Northern Parulas were determined to beat our owl numbers from the day before. Coincidentally, most of the world was preparing to later that day watch one of the NOPAs' favorite pro football teams (the Baltimore Ravens!) play in the Super Bowl. So we declared the day Super Owl Sunday! The day began with another miss of Great Gray, but soon afterward we again nailed the Hawk Owl in Duluth, followed by yet another

## **LWAS Fieldtrip and Picnic to Peninsula Point** **Sunday May 19**

Peninsula Point Lighthouse at the tip of the Stonington Peninsula is one of the best locations in the UP to witness spring migration in all its feathered glory! This field trip will be an all-day affair, though we strongly suggest arriving at dawn or shortly after as migrants fly to shore off of Green Bay. There will be a mid-day cookout in the picnic area - a chance to meet and mingle with other birders. Plan to bring your own food and beverages.

Hundreds of neo-tropical songbirds like warblers, tanagers, orioles, grosbeaks, vireos, buntings and thrushes are found each year along with shorter-distance migrants like sparrows, jays, woodpeckers, chickadees and finches. Some days the marshy beach can be covered in shorebirds, with uncommon migrants like Whimbrel, Marbled Godwit, Red Knot and Piping Plover seen annually.

**Travel Instructions:** From Highway 2, 2.8 miles east of Rapid River, take the exit towards Stonington and travel south on County Road 513. Follow CR 513 for 17.7 miles to the tip of the peninsula, where you will find the Peninsula Point Lighthouse. The last mile of the journey, which is a narrow, winding, dirt road, is not recommended for recreational vehicles or travel trailers.

**Information:** Contact Beth Olson (phone: 906-360-4336 or email [tolson@chartermi.net](mailto:tolson@chartermi.net)) or Skye Haas (phone: 906-869-6165 or email [theowlranch@gmail.com](mailto:theowlranch@gmail.com))

### **LWAS Programs**

Programs are held in the Community Room of Peter White Library on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday of the month, unless there is a scheduling conflict with the library. Programs begin at 7:00 p.m. and end around 8:30.

#### **March 13, 2013** – “Potpourri of Recent Keweenaw Bird Research”

Presenter: Joe Youngman

Information: 226-6749

Joe will discuss several research projects conducted in the Copper Country during 2012. Some projects monitored migration over the Keweenaw, including the 3-year Keweenaw Raptor Survey on Brockway Mountain, and ongoing observations of spring and fall migration over Manitou Island. Other research projects examined the nesting habits of Black-backed Woodpeckers and documented nesting of a Peregrine Falcon in the Keweenaw.

#### **April 10, 2013** – “Helpful Hints for Identifying Upper Peninsula Birds”

Presenter: Skye Haas

Information: 226-6749

Sharpen your bird-identification skills with Skye Haas, as he shares tips on identifying confusing Upper Peninsula species and gives advice on avoiding common identification pitfalls.

#### **May 22, 2013** – “Birds and Lemurs of Madagascar” **(4<sup>TH</sup> WEDNESDAY)**

Presenter: Jeff Knoop

Information: 226-6749

After a recent trip to Madagascar, Jeff Knoop will discuss the many rare and endemic bird and lemur species seen on this exciting trip that included visiting 6 National Parks on the island. He will also discuss conservation efforts being undertaken to save the rich biodiversity of Madagascar.

## Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society Membership Form for 2012-2013

*Your dues support the newsletter, program costs, & 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

Additional donation \$ \_\_\_\_\_ (total) You may designate how this contribution is to be used:

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Bird seed for feeders at Presque Isle Park

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Research Grant to fund birding research in the Upper Peninsula  
(Matching funds provided up to \$500 of the amount raised)

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ General club expenses

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

*Ann Joyal, 346 W. Crescent St., Marquette, MI 49855*      ([ajoyal@nmu.edu](mailto:ajoyal@nmu.edu) 906-226-6749)

**Check the mailing label on this newsletter to see when your membership expires.** Dues are paid for a one year period. If you are currently "paid – up," consider giving this membership form to someone you know who might be interested in joining Laughing Whitefish Audubon.

c/o Beth Olson  
5 Arrowhead Dr.  
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