

# North Country Notes

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



March 2016

## A New Season at Whitefish Point

By Skye Haas

Spring 2016 begins an exciting new chapter for Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. Late last fall, the existing non-profit organization disbanded its board of directors and transferred assets and the operation back to Michigan Audubon. I say back to Michigan Audubon as the organization in 1976 had established a committee to organize the collection of hawk and owl banding and other studies being conducted at Whitefish, and by the spring of 1979 the formal creation of the bird observatory kicked off Whitefish's first hawk count in addition to created a standardized method for owl banding. A few years later the program expanded to include a spring waterbird count, which grew again by conducting a fall waterbird count starting in 1989. Throughout this time, Whitefish Point was run as first an affiliate of Michigan Audubon, before becoming an independent non-profit for the last two decades. However running these programs became unwieldy for a volunteer-based board of directors and a mutual decision between the two groups was made to have the observatory return to Michigan Audubon who have a full time director and staff that can better support and expand programs for Whitefish Point Bird Observatory.

It should be noted that while there were many people instrumental in the reorganization of Whitefish Point, that our own LWAS member, NMU's Dr. Alec Lindsay as chairman of the board of directors for Michigan Audubon has done an

excellent job leading the transition of organization helping to bridge the gap between not only WPBO & MAS, but steering the Audubon ship in this interim period between the departure of former MAS director Jonathan Lutz to recently hired director Heather Good.

Already we can see the some of the benefits of this transfer of the organization as Whitefish Point is going to be running with a full complement of field staff for the first spring in several years! And it is a team of talented veterans of field research and for the most part even from Whitefish Point. Chris Neri and Nova Mckently have been living and banding owls for over a decade now at Whitefish. They have expanded owl banding program with a fascinating summer banding results of a large dispersal of juvenal Northern Saw-whet Owls at Whitefish; a previously undocumented phenomenon not recorded here or elsewhere. A newbie to Whitefish Point, but an experienced field counter all the same is Ted Keyel; this season's hawk counter. Ted recently finished his Masters program studying mercury levels in raptors, and has previously counted hawks in Duluth, New Jersey and at the Florida Keys Hawk Count where on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015 he set a single day world record of tallying in 1,506 Peregrine Falcons! Another LWAS member, this year's waterbird counter is Louie Dombroski. Louie is certainly well known in the UP as an excellent birder having found some very exciting birds that many of us

have enjoyed. He has worked as a guide in southeast Arizona, waterbird breeding work in northern Alaska, and who was the counter for Whitefish Point's first fall waterbird count. Finally I will be serving as the Field Ornithologist, working as a swing counter as well as conducting outreach programs with visiting birders to Whitefish Point. It will be a return to Whitefish for me, as I was a waterbird counter here in the early 2000s.

In addition to the count program, there will be several events and programs for visitors to participate in. In the first few hours of owl banding, visitors can gather at the banding lab behind the WPBO gift shop, the Owl's Roost for a look at the owls when the banders release the birds having collecting data. New this year, will be bird walks every Saturday and Sunday mornings beginning in late April. In the month of May, each Saturday birders can attend an ID workshop geared to learning how to identify certain groups of birds like hawks, sparrows, waterbirds and warblers. Of course, the spring's signature event is the 28<sup>th</sup> annual Spring Fling, held this year from Friday April 29<sup>th</sup>- Sunday May 1<sup>st</sup>. The keynote speaker at this year's banquet is the very talented author of the Peterson Guide to Seawatching, Cameron Cox. A friend and former co-worker of mine, Cameron is one

of the most knowledgeable birders in the country whose book on sea-watching has finally put into text the skills, secrets and tips that experienced waterbird counters use to identify migrating loons, ducks and terns over water at a distance. It should be a very informative talk! And if having a waterbird expert wasn't enough, hawk counter guru and author of Hawks at Every Angle, Jerry Liguori will be giving morning hawk ID workshops that are part indoor program and part field-based both Saturday and Sunday mornings. These are two experts that in concert will fill anyone's head full of useful knowledge about identifying birds. Other speakers include Joe Kaplan and Elliot Nelson, and there will be several organized birding tours to look for migrants and boreal specialties. The more the merrier so please consider attending the Spring Fling- you can register by going to [www.michiganaudubon.org](http://www.michiganaudubon.org).

Come visit Whitefish Point! It's an early spring this year and I'm hopeful it will be a birdy season. Already as I write this, the first migrants are riding into the UP and past Whitefish Point on warm south winds. The best time of the year is about to began and what better place to go birding then Whitefish Point? Just remember to dress warmly...

## **Marquette Christmas Bird Count Records a Rare Species for Michigan**

The work of Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society members has brought several rare species to the attention of the birding community recently, and in December, 2015 the Michigan Audubon Society featured the Yellow-breasted Chat that was reported on our Christmas Bird Count.

The following article is reprinted with permission from the Michigan Audubon Society's *Rare Species Spotlight: Yellow-breasted Chat (12/30/2015)*

*"This month, we're highlighting a rare visitor to Marquette, Michigan: a Yellow-breasted Chat. Although the Yellow-breasted Chat spends summers in parts of the southern Lower Peninsula it is rarely seen; one as far north as Marquette during the month of December is extremely rare! Read further for the sighting details, and to learn more about the Yellow-breasted Chat.*

The Sighting:

*Documented on 12/19 during the Marquette Christmas Bird Count (CBC), this Yellow-breasted Chat (pictured here) was seen by multiple participants of the 2015/2016 Marquette CBC. According to the homeowners, the Yellow-breasted Chat was spotted for three weeks prior, visiting bird feeders in the vicinity of Island Beach Road near Presque Isle Park. The bird was documented by multiple birders for the next week.*

*We wish our chat story had a happy ending. Alas, that doesn't appear to be the case. On December 27th, Elliot Nelson reported seeing a Merlin fly in and grab a brownish thrush-sized bird feeding on the ground under the feeders that the chat had been frequenting. When the raptor took off, Nelson spotted a bright yellow breast on the prey bird. Although Nelson couldn't be certain that the bird was the chat, he suspects that it was. There have been no additional reports of the bird since then.*



*This is the second time this year that a rarity in Marquette became lunch for a Merlin. Earlier this year a Common Ground Dove was the innocent prey. It's tough to be a bird!"*

Photo by Beth Olson

**Flight in the Fog: a Reflection on the Migration Movement of 2  
September 2015**

by Nathan Martineau

Five Tennessee Warblers and a Northern Waterthrush left Canada's north shore together soon after sunset last night, just hours after the winds had turned toward the south for the first time in eight days. The songbirds flew confidently despite their tiny size, gaining altitude and speed in the strong tailwind. After a few hours, though, they encountered a rainstorm coming out of the south—a remnant of last week's warm front. Forced to lose altitude and fly against a headwind, they began to lose strength. After a few more hours they struggled their way through the storm. The wind died down as they continued south, and eventually disappeared. Wingtips skimming the water now, they had become too tired to regain altitude.

After another hour of this, their surroundings slowly turned from pure black to pure white: a dense layer of fog had settled on the lake for miles around. They searched in vain for the sight of land which first light should have brought, but only saw each other and their reflections on the glass-like surface of the water. Hope for their survival, it seemed, was fading...

But suddenly, a large, smooth stone object loomed up in front of them. The six exhausted warblers mustered much of their remaining energy to bank upwards and westwards, then flew above the long, lifeless stretch of the Presque Isle breakwall. After what seemed an eternity to their fatigue-weakened minds, they saw a most welcome sight: land, and more importantly, foliage. The Tennessee Warblers landed in the first shrub they saw; the waterthrush was even more impatient and alighted on a partially-submerged tree limb just offshore. They were the first of what was to become a steady stream of migrants flying in along the breakwall that morning.

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Photo by Nathan Martineau

The night before, I had watched Marquette and Duluth go berserk on the radar. Looking at a few weather maps I discovered that weather conditions that night would be conducive to fallout conditions, and elected to make the pre-dawn bike ride from NMU campus to Presque Isle. So at first light I found myself standing at the base of that breakwall, watching the spectacular phenomenon of hundreds of warblers, thrushes, and other migrants pouring in off the breakwall.

The morning started off with those six birds just after first light, and the activity quickly began to pick up after that. Standing on the breakwall perhaps twenty feet from shore, I watched hundreds of migrants pass me over the next couple of hours. Dozens of Swainson's Thrushes flew by, filling the air with their loud, hollow flight calls. An occasional burst of forceful chip notes would indicate that another flock of Tennessees was flying in. Blackpoll Warblers continually announced their arrival with barely audible, high-pitched *seet* notes. Over a dozen Common Yellowthroats flew in at once, landing in the invasive knapweed at the base of the breakwall, followed shortly by a beautiful Bay-breasted Warbler. Meanwhile, a couple of Nashville Warblers hunkered down between some rocks on the beach. The ground and trees and everything between crawled with migrants; I had hardly ever seen so much bird activity in such a small area.

I also got to work on a skill I've had little opportunity to practice: identifying small passerines in flight. While a male Black-throated Blue Warbler, two lime-green Chestnut-sided Warblers, and half a dozen Black-and-white Warblers were easy enough to identify, I soon learned to recognize some more challenging birds. Nashville Warblers began to become more frequent as the morning progressed, with their pale eye rings, yellow underparts, and white undertail coverts. I also began to pick out flocks of Tennessee Warblers before I heard them: mostly greenish-yellow birds, sometimes with grayer heads, with pale "eyebrows" and bright white undertail coverts. Even the Blackpolls, in their dull fall plumage, began to stand out because of the striations on their flanks and breasts, and especially their two bright white wing bars.

Feeling slightly overwhelmed, I eventually looked down at my watch for the first time in over three hours. It was nearly 10:45, so there were just 45 minutes before I had to bike back for my first class of the day. I decided I would check the Black Rocks and then return to campus. Many of the birds I had seen at the breakwall were also dropping in over the Black Rocks, with a few extra treats. The first was a Blackburnian Warbler foraging at eye level in a lakeside cedar. Next was a Canada Warbler at the edge of a puddle, not far from a thrush which turned out to be my first Gray-cheeked of the fall. I encountered another first of season bird just as I was fixing to head back to campus: a Philadelphia Vireo, which turned out to be the *only* one I saw this fall. While admiring it, I heard a Red Crossbill fly over.

On that note, I finally decided to leave. As I biked past the breakwall, the fog was still rolling in off the lake. Warblers and thrushes, although slightly sparser, were still flying in. I wanted to stay and see every new bird. Time was ticking away, though; I had things to do and places to be. I was incredibly lucky, I decided, just to have witnessed what I did. So I continued on my way.

## **Update on Chocolay Bayou Nature Preserve**

by Jeff Knoop

In the December 2015 edition of our Chapter Newsletter LWAS members were introduced to a land acquisition project to protect over 14 acres of significant habitat in the Bayou or “backwater” area of the Chocolay River not far from its confluence with Lake Superior in Chocolay Township. Fundraising for the project has made significant strides over the past several months including a grant of \$102,000 through the Fish and Wildlife Service’s, North American Wetland Conservation Act Program. In addition, LWAS Chapter Board Members voted to help out in this effort by making a \$1,000 contribution towards a goal \$175,000 to save and manage this important natural area. To date over 80% of the necessary funds have been raised towards making the new preserve a reality. The lands will be acquired and managed by the Upper Peninsula Land Conservancy.

The Bayou area contains a diverse mix of habitats ranging from mesic, upland northern hardwood forest dominated by a mix of red oak, white pine and yellow birch to wetland habitat with tamarack and northern white cedar and even wetter swales with alder thickets and sedge meadows. This

mosaic of habitat types provides sanctuary for a large variety of both migrating and resident bird species. Migratory water fowl use the open water portions of the Bayou while warblers and other species of song birds use the surrounding wetlands and upland hardwood forest.

Lying next to the Iron Ore Heritage Trail/North Country Trail, the Bayou area will be minimally developed for passive recreational purposes including a trail system with access to the water front portion of the Bayou for fishing, kayaking and canoeing activities and other recreational pursuits. Users of the preserve will be about to slip a kayak into the open waters of the Bayou and paddle upstream, to a takeout point at US M28, or downstream a few thousand feet to the river’s confluence at Lake Superior!

The project has a diverse array of partners including: Upper Peninsula Land Conservancy, Upper Peninsula Environmental Coalition, US Fish and Wildlife Services, Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, The Nature Conservancy and Chocolay Township to name a few. Through the \$1,000 LWAS gift for the Bayou, you

too have supported this special project and the protection of important habitat it affords! Additional funding is still needed (especially for the stewardship portion of the project) and additional contributions can be sent to: Upper Peninsula Land Conservancy

109 W Baraga Ave, Marquette, MI 49855  
Phone: (906) 225-8067  
Or visit their website at [www.uplandconservancy.org](http://www.uplandconservancy.org) for further details about the Bayou Project

## **PIPING PLOVER HELP!**

We are looking for people to come and help with plovers in Grand Marais. The habitat in Grand Marais is perfect for piping plovers-wide beaches, the right size of rocks on the beach, and the high dune grass behind the beach but the land is mostly privately owned so the beaches cannot be fenced off.

We need to protect the plover nests and the plover chicks. The eggs hatch in about 28 days after incubation begins and after the chicks hatch it takes from 28 to 35 days for them to fledge. We watch the chicks from sunrise to sunset to protect them from dogs, ATVs, crows, gulls, merlins, etc.. We have to interact with people on the beach.

The first plover nest usually hatch about June 10<sup>th</sup> and all the nests are usually fledged by the end of July. This is usually the time we need volunteers. We usually have 3 to 4 nests in Grand Marais.

Bill and I have a guest cabin we use for volunteers. If you can come one day or one week we would love it. The cabin has a queen bed and a day bed, a complete bathroom, and a kitchen. We are in Grand Marais from early May to mid-October.

Kathy Davis  
906-228-4197 Marquette  
906-494-2400 Grand Marais  
[kdavismqt@aol.com](mailto:kdavismqt@aol.com)

## **Changes to the LWAS Executive Board**

Several changes were made to the leadership of the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Executive Board at our meeting on February 9, 2016. Skye Haas, who has served as our Chair since September 2012, asked to step down from the position due to his frequent travels and lengthy job assignments out of the area. Our Vice-Chair, Jeff Knoop, agreed to assume the position of Chair, and Amanda O'Neill offered to assume the Vice-Chair position. Skye will remain an active member of the board and is looking forward to attending as many meetings as possible.

Additionally, Jason Schnorr was accepted as a new addition to our Executive Board, bringing the total number of board members to 11. Jason grew up in a small farming town in northern Illinois, surrounded by miles of corn. His love of nature drew him to Northern Michigan University, where he graduated in 2011 with a degree in Environmental Conservation and a minor in Biology. He got hooked on birds after taking Dr. Lindsay's Field Ornithology class. Jason now works for the Upper Peninsula Resource Conservation and Development Council as a Regional Project Manager on the UP Phragmites Project. He covers Menominee County and the western Upper Peninsula, working to eradicate phragmites and restore coastal wetlands on the shores of

Lake Michigan. Jason suffers from wanderlust and enjoys getting outdoors and exploring the wonders of the Upper Peninsula. We are pleased to welcome Jason to the Board.

The LWAS Board now consists of the following members: Jeff Knoop (chair), Amanda O’Neill (vice-chair), Ann Joyal (secretary and treasurer), Beth Olson (newsletter), Skye Haas, Jude Holloway, Nathan Martineau, Alec Olivier, Gary Palmer, Jason Schnorr, Bruce Ventura.

## **Sunday, May 22 Field Trip: Peninsula Point - Spring Migration and Picnic!**

Peninsula Point Lighthouse at the tip of the Stonington Peninsula is one of the best locations in the UP to witness spring migration. This year, LWAS will host a birders’ picnic on Sunday, May 22nd. This will be an all-day affair, though we strongly suggest arriving at dawn or shortly after as migrants fly off Green Bay.

Time: All day (arrive early for best viewing)

Carpooling: Please make your own arrangements for rides.

Picnic: mid-day cookout in the picnic area – bring your own food and beverages

Driving Instructions: From US Highway 2 proceed 2.8 miles east from 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.

Information: Contact Beth Olson (phone: 906-360-4336 or email [tolson@chartermi.net](mailto:tolson@chartermi.net))

Hundreds of neo-tropical songbirds like warblers, tanagers, orioles, grosbeaks, vireos, buntings and thrushes are readily 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 are seen annually. White Pelicans are a near daily sight in May. Some of the more notable species that have been seen in recent years include Hudsonian Godwit, Western Kingbird, Connecticut, Worm-eating and Hooded Warblers, Dickcissel, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Summer Tanager and Orchard Oriole.

## **Evening Programs for Spring 2016**

Evening programs for the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society are held in the Community Room of Peter White Public Library. Programs begin at 7:00 p.m. and end about 8:30 p.m.

- **April 13, 2016 (Wednesday) – “Michigan Kirtland’s Warbler Program: Update on Delisting a Conservation-reliant Species”**

Presenter: Christie Deloria-Sheffield, US Fish and Wildlife Service

Over the last decade the federally endangered Kirtland’s Warbler has reached and surpassed the recovery goal of 1,000 pairs indicating that the species is no longer in danger of extinction. Surely this is one of Michigan’s finest conservation success stories. But, how do you take a species that needs on-going management off the Endangered Species List? Hear what the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and partners are doing to secure the future for Kirtland’s Warbler and reach the ultimate goal of the Endangered Species Act – delisting.

- **NO EVENING PROGRAMS FROM MAY – AUGUST**

**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](mailto:ajoyal@nmu.edu) or 906-226-6749)

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

