

# North Country Notes

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



March 2018

## MIGRATORY BIRD ACT UNDER THREAT

By Jeff Knoop

This year, our nation celebrates the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). Passed in 1918, the law is credited with saving many bird species from further decline and possible extinction, such as the wood duck, sandhill crane, snowy Egret, neotropical migrants and many others. The law implements the visionary treaty signed with Canada in 1918 to protect migratory birds shared by our countries, as well as similar treaties signed later with Mexico, Japan, and Russia.

The existing MBTA law is critical in conserving nearly all of our nation's native birds. The MBTA protects more than 1,000 species, most of which are not covered by other laws, while also allowing for the regulation of hunting. The treaty and legislation aimed to protect a variety of birds that provide value to the country, including waterfowl and wading birds that were gravely overhunted in the early 20th century.

The MBTA has effectively protected birds in the decades since its passage, and is still needed now as much as ever. While our country has made great progress in conserving birds, hundreds of species remain at serious risk and many are facing long-term declines. The 2016 State of the Birds report found that one-third of our nation's bird species are of high conservation concern, and at risk of extinction without urgent conservation action. Birds face numerous modern-day threats. Impacts can often be avoided or minimized with basic precautions and best

management practices, such as covering oil waste pits, flagging transmission lines, and following wind energy guidelines. MBTA protections have incentivized proactive conservation to help bird populations and limited the need for further protections under the Endangered Species Act.

The MBTA is now under serious threat. In December, the Trump administration issued a controversial legal opinion providing an interpretation that the law does not apply to the incidental or accidental deaths of migratory birds, reversing decades of precedent. The opinion means that the administration will not hold industries accountable for preventable bird deaths. In Congress, H.R. 4239 – the “SECURE American Energy Act” – would change the law to cement this interpretation and permanently end the government's ability to address major sources of bird mortality from industrial activities. This change would represent the most significant roll back of the MBTA in its 100-year history. It would dramatically reduce the incentive for industries to implement best practices that save birds and would limit their accountability. Critics fear that these industries might now end the bird-friendly practices that save large numbers of birds.

Moreover, the new Energy Act would gut funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This fund is capitalized by proceeds from off-shore oil and gas leases. This program has protected millions of acres of public conservation land, namely national parks, US Forest Service lands and

state and local parks. These funds would now be directed to the oil and gas industry for further off-shore exploration and startup costs for new drilling.

As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the law and the incredible gains we have made to help protect our nation's birdlife, I urge you to oppose any effort that would gut the

- Senator Gary Peters: 857 W. Washington St. Marquette MI 49855 (202-224-6221)
- Senator Debbie Stabenow: 1901 W. Ridge Suite 7 Marquette, MI 49855 (202-224-4822)
- Representative Jack Bergman: 1500 W. Washington St. Marquette MI 49855 (202-225-4735).

MBTA and turn back the clock decades on bird conservation. The Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society has endorsed a letter sent to Congress on behalf of the American Bird Conservancy. Please join in by contacting our three congressional Representatives, the birds will thank you!

### **Saturday, May 19: Field Trip to Peninsula Point -Spring Migration and Picnic!**



By Ann Joyal



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 an all-day birding event on Saturday, May 19.

Time: All day (arriving around dawn will give you the best views)

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: 906-360-4366 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. On a good day, a birder can easily tally over 100 species including over 20 species of warblers. Some highlights from past field trips include both Summer and Western Tanagers, Hooded Warblers, Connecticut Warblers, Rose Breasted Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings, egrets, swans, terns, yellowlegs, and hundreds of Whimbrels. Join us for some of the spring's best birding. *A bonus of this gathering is that there will be plenty of expert birders available to help with spotting and bird-identification.*

### **Reminder: LWAS Dues Will Expire Yearly on September 30**

In order to facilitate record keeping for the treasurer, the LWAS Executive Board voted last year to change our fiscal year to extend from October 1 to September 30 of the following year. All dues will now expire on September 30, 2018. Your revised due date is published on your address label for your reference. There is a membership-renewal / application form included with this newsletter. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the treasurer, Ann Joyal, at [ajoyal@nmu.edu](mailto:ajoyal@nmu.edu)

## Birding in south Texas – February 13th through 21st

By Bruce Ventura

Six Laughing Whitefish Audubon members spent seven full days birding on the southern Gulf coast and lower Rio Grande area of Texas in mid-February. The group from Marquette and Alger Counties was joined by five others from three provinces of Canada and an individual from New Jersey. The group was most ably lead by Skye Haas, with assistance from another excellent leader and ornithologist, Adam Kent from Gainesville, Florida. Eagle-Eye Tours, of British Columbia, was the tour company that organized the trip. Following are a few of the many highlights of this trip along with a few comments on things we saw that made an impression.



The first day of birding was north of Corpus Christi, on the Gulf coast. Our introduction to sub-tropical birding started in a county park north of Corpus Christi, where we had great views of Green Jays, White Ibis, Vermilion Flycatchers, Inca Doves, Olive Sparrows, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers (think Red-bellied Woodpecker with a golden forehead),



American Avocet, and many others, a total by my count of 49 species in the park.

Not bad for February!

We then went a little further north to the town of Refugio, where we spent the early afternoon stalking Green Kingfishers and a reported Golden-crowned Warbler in the town park. Success with the kingfisher, no luck with the warbler, but an enjoyable afternoon anyway. Then on to Goose Island State Park, where we had our first looks at seabirds and the Gulf of Mexico. Pelicans, Osprey, gulls and terns, egrets and herons were plentiful. But the highlight of this location was fairly close views of a group of five Sandhill Cranes and three Whooping Cranes feeding at a private residence that had a large feeder set up in the yard. The Whoopers were awe-inspiring, brilliant white against the trees and the much smaller



Sandhills (which are no small birds, themselves!). The Whoopers were not acting as bullies, but they did make sure the Sandhills stayed out on the edges of the feeding area. Then on to dinner at a restaurant on the harbor.....great seafood was consumed by all.

The second morning of the tour was spent on a tour boat that allowed us to slowly bird our way along miles of the Intracoastal Waterway in the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge consists of many thousands of acres of low islands, mud flats, and coastal lowlands. It was foggy early on the tour, but cleared later, allowing great viewing of hundreds of birds. It is home to a multitude of shorebirds; we observed

sanderling, turnstones, yellow-legs, sandpipers, curlew, dunlin, and dowitchers. Gulls and terns were also seen, including Laughing, Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, Herring gulls and Caspian, Royal, and Forster's terns plus Black Skimmer. Eight species of familiar ducks were wintering at Aransas also. Once again, a special highlight of this part of the tour was observing Whooping Cranes feeding on their preferred food, crabs in shallow waters and mud-flats on one of the islands. As best that we could see from the boat, 37 Whoopers were observed. Combined with the three seen the night before, our group got to see approximately 10% of the world's population of Whooping Cranes, a somewhat sobering thought, given that their refuge can be in the direct path of hurricanes, and is also threatened by rising sea levels and diminished fresh water flows from the mainland. The afternoon was spent working our way southward through Rockport, Texas. This area was hit extremely hard by hurricane Harvey in late summer 2017. There was much evidence of this damage in many areas. At one point along a divided four lane highway just north of Rockport, the median between the lanes was piled high with storm damaged debris – trees, houses, appliances, boats, everything and anything that had been damaged. This pile extended for nearly a mile along the highway.....half a year after the hurricane, they are still dealing with a lot of cleanup.



Day three was spent traveling to South Padre Island, where we spent the afternoon at a wonderful nature center. I tallied 42 species

at the center, others may have had even more. Highlights included watching not one, not two, but three different Clapper Rails at close range as they went about their business on the mud flats and through the reeds.

This was a good opportunity to sort out shorebirds and waterfowl too. We were able to set up scopes at various places along the nature center's extensive boardwalk and study egrets, herons, curlew, pelicans, spoonbills, skimmers, sandpipers, gulls, and gallinules. The town of South Padre Island surprised me; I pictured a quiet, small community...wrong! It is a bustling city of high-rise apartments and tourist shops, complete with traffic jams even before "spring break" happens. Glad we were there ahead of the crowds.

Then on to Brownsville. A highlight of the evening here was a visit to Oliveira city park in Brownsville for parrots (Red-crowned, Red-lored, White-fronted, and Yellow-headed; the Red-crowned is "countable" in the ABA North America list). It was surprising and satisfying to see many people using the park in the evening...ball games going on, Frisbees flying, picnics being eaten, and lots of birders with binoculars and scopes. The parrot show was amazing...flashy, noisy, and frenetic. It ended briefly when a Cooper's hawk made a pass through the assembled parrots, but they soon re-gathered in roost trees in the park and surrounding neighborhood.

Days four, five, and seven were spent in the lower Rio Grande valley, where on day four we made stops at the old Port Isabel Road near Brownsville (especially for Aplomado Falcon). We spent a warm morning at Sabal Palm Sanctuary, at nearly the southernmost part of Texas, where we tallied more than thirty species in habitat that was a mix of deciduous thickets, Sabal Palm forest, and small ponds known locally as resacas. Highlights included both Altamira and

Hooded Orioles, Mottled Ducks, White-tipped Doves, and Plain Chachalacas.



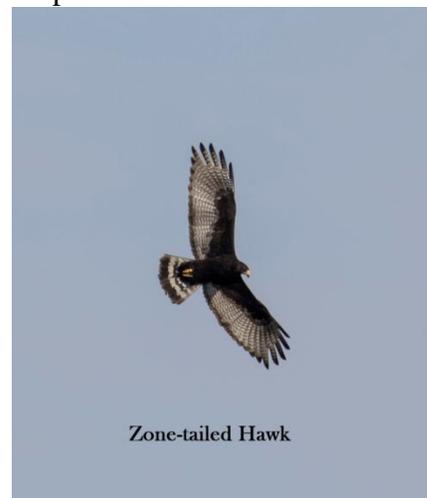
On day five, we visited Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge south of McAllen, Texas. Here we observed about forty species of birds during a several hour walk thru a small part of the refuge. The refuge has a variety of habitats, including deciduous woodlands, open prairies, and fresh-water ponds. The bird list for the day reflects these varied habitats.

The same day, we also visited Estero Llano Grande State Park, southeast of Weslaco, Texas. We were able to observe multiple Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-herons nearly side-by-side at one pond in the park. The highlight for most of us, though, was to get to see two Common Pauraque sleeping beneath some small trees in a brushy area. It took a lot of careful observation and pointing and explaining and pointing some more before everyone in the group was able to pick out the very cryptically camouflaged birds in the branches and twigs where they slept.



On the way back to McAllen, just outside the State Park, we also found a dozen Green Parakeets in a tree at a church parking lot. Great views of them in the late afternoon sun, which made their green nearly iridescent.

Day six, we traveled about an hour and a half northwest from McAllen, into the eastern Chihuahuan desert, but still along the Rio Grande. The first stop was at the little town of Salineño, where we spent the morning scanning the trees, reeds, and sky along the river, hoping to find the ever elusive Seedeater and Brown Jay. Neither was found; the Brown Jay has not been seen in the US for a number of years. However, we did see forty other species here, including three Zone-tailed hawks, a rare bird that mimics Turkey Vultures in appearance as well as in flight. They fly with the non predatory vultures so as not to attract the notice of prey. A useful adaptation.



Then westward another half hour to Falcon State Park, located at a lake created by Falcon Dam on the Rio Grande. 95 degrees in the shade here, with a stiff breeze blowing, but it was a “dry heat”. No-one complained of the heat; we enjoyed watching a road-runner while we ate our picnic lunches. A highlight here was observing a covey of Bobwhites as we sat

beneath an awning at one of the park camper's sites (at their invitation....very friendly folks)



Skye had heard that there was a Rock Wren reported to be at the park; we were able to find this somewhat out-of-place wren and enjoyed good views of it hopping about on the rocks near the lakeshore.

To conclude the travelogue, we also visited three other birding hot-spots. We were at Bentsen State Park twice, where Couch's Kingbirds put on good displays for us. At Anzalduas County Park, both Say's Phoebe and Black Phoebe were observed along with

Note: most photos accompanying this article were taken by Beth Olson.

a near relative Vermilion Flycatcher. This park has an interesting twist of geography, in that the US side of the river is *south* of the Mexican park on the other side of the water. And on the final morning of the tour, we visited Quinta Maztalan sanctuary, in McAllen. A rare vagrant from Mexico, Blue Bunting had been reported there the previous few days. We staked out a feeding station along with about twenty other birders, for several hours. Finally, someone spotted the bunting beneath some brush. It was not very cooperative (by our standards, anyway) but most of our group did get to see the bird well enough to identify it.....a "lifer" for many.

In closing, this was a great experience for all of us. Skye and Adam did a wonderful job of making everything interesting, and involving everyone in what was happening. And did I mention the dinners? Skye and Adam, through a number of their contacts, found some amazing restaurants for our dinners!

## **Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society's Research Grant**

by Ann Joyal

The Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society's Board of Trustees is pleased to announce the award of the 2018 Research Grant to NMU Biology graduate student Connor Gable, for his research project titled "Do Fungal Communities in Trees Influence Black-capped Chickadee Nest Site Selection?"

Connor is a first-year biology graduate student at Northern Michigan University. He received his Bachelor of Science degree from Kutztown University of Pennsylvania in 2016, majoring in organismal biology/ecology with a minor in German communication and culture. Connor is from York, Pennsylvania and in his free time enjoys birding and practicing German.

Connor's Master's thesis research will be focused on Black-capped Chickadees and how wood decay fungi might influence chickadee nest-site selection. Connor will search for and monitor chickadee nests in Marquette during the 2018 breeding season. Once chicks fledge from nests, Connor will take wood samples from nest cavities and from nearby similar trees that do not have excavations. Using DNA barcoding, the species of fungi in the wood samples of nest cavities will be identified and compared to samples from trees without cavities. Connor will also record physical measurements of trees, including wood hardness, nest cavity height and aspect, and tree species, to determine if other variables are related to nest-site selection.

## Upcoming Laughing Whitefish Audubon Programs

Laughing Whitefish Audubon meetings and programs are held in the Community Room of Peter White Public Library in Marquette at 7:00 p.m. We usually meet on the second Wednesday of the month, although the date may occasionally vary due to scheduling conflicts with the library. For information, contact Ann Joyal at [ajoyal@nmu.edu](mailto:ajoyal@nmu.edu) or at 226-6749.

- **March 13, 2018 (TUESDAY)** *“Demystifying Sparrow ID”*  
PRESENTER: Nate Martineau  
This presentation on sparrow identification is aimed at helping people prepare for the sparrow migration that starts in April. Hopefully it will help people to realize that the challenge of sparrow ID isn't as daunting or insurmountable as it may seem at first.
- **April 11, 2018 (Wednesday)**, *“The JP Chickadee Project: Big Data from Little Local Birds.”*  
PRESENTER: Dr. Alec Lindsay, NMU Biology Department  
Alec and his troupe of undergraduate and graduate students have been working on a new project in the Marquette area. They have been placing color bands on chickadees (and nuthatches), including bands with small RFID chips. In this talk he and some of his students will tell us about what they are finding with their work, what other questions they might try to answer, and how students and the community can get involved.

### Fall 2018

- **September 12, 2018 (Wednesday)** *“Investigating the function of warbler flight-calls in the Great Lakes Region.”*  
PRESENTER: Zach Gayk  
Zach is a PhD student at the University of Windsor and received the 2017 Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society's Research Grant to help fund his research. He will share some of his research-findings on warbler flight-calls at this presentation.
- **October 10, 2018 (Wednesday)** *“Travels with Max and Gizmo: In Search of the U.P.”*  
PRESENTER: Steve Lindberg  
In a tongue in cheek photo homage to John Steinbeck's “Travels with Charley in Search of America,” Steve will present photos selected from his “photo-a-day” on Facebook – a sampling of the flora, fauna, landscapes and whimsy found in his backyard.
- **November 14, 2018 (Wednesday)** *“Annual Membership Meeting”*  
The program will begin with a SHORT business meeting and an opportunity to meet Board members and to ask questions. The remainder of the evening will be a social event with refreshments and a viewing of bird and nature-oriented photographs taken by our members. Please bring your photos on a CD, DVD, or small jump-drive. A computer & digital projector will be available. All photos are welcome and we look forward to seeing the wonderful pictures our members provide.

**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: \_\_\_\_\_

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Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

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*(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

