



North Country Notes

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

October 2012

Greetings from the chair!

Well, it has been an interesting year for Laughing Whitefish Audubon. Our group has experienced several major changes of late, most notably the departure of two board members, Zach Gayk, and LWAS chairperson Greg Cleary. These two talented birders joined the board in 2005 when a group of LWAS members re-formed the board of directors. The board gelled quite nicely under the pragmatic leadership of Greg Cleary and over the last seven years grew into a more robust and active organization. We conducted research; led field trips to places like Presque Isle Park, the Peshekee Grade, Brockway Mountain and held the very popular Peninsula Point Birder's Picnic. We continued to host monthly membership programs and even waded into dealings that affected bird conservation and environmental issues such as development of Whitefish Point that would have destroyed bird habitat and the misapplied mitigation work at the Presque Isle Bogwalk. Greg and Zach were both instrumental in making LWAS the great organization it is today, and I am going to miss working with both of them on the LWAS board. But I don't want anyone to be concerned. We still have a great group of people volunteering their time and energy to the LWAS. Gary Palmer has just joined the team, and current members Cindy Lynn, Laurel Hill, Bruce Ventura, Jude Holloway, Beth Olson and Ann Joyal all are continuing to serve on the board. I remain grateful for their very valuable contributions and inspiration! I'm really proud to be a part of Laughing Whitefish Audubon. It's a terrific group, that I believe, offers important educational opportunities for the public to connect with birds and nature. The LWAS board remains committed to providing these events and opportunities to our membership. It is because of our effort on the

Keweenaw Raptor Survey that we were presented an award for "Outstanding Chapter" this summer by the Michigan Audubon Society. What a fitting tribute to all the hard work and long hours that both Greg Cleary and Zach Gayk put into making the Keweenaw Raptor Survey a successful project. There are plans to display the award at MooseWood Nature Center at Presque Isle Park.

While on the topic of Keweenaw Raptor Survey, the LWAS with our partners Copper Country Audubon and Michigan Audubon completed this ambitious project earlier this year. It comprised of a year of pre-planning and three years of field work. As it turned out, this final count season yielded the most impressive count of birds out of the three years. A very impressive total of 19,907 raptors were counted migrating past Brockway Mountain from March 15 through June 15, 2012, exceeding all previous counts ever conducted at Brockway by more than 5,000 birds! The combined three year count exceeded 42,000 migrant raptors. An excellent total, supporting Brockway's designation as a nationally recognized Important Bird Area for its spring raptor flights. I say raptors as opposed to hawks, for as some users of the valued Cornell University program eBird have noticed, falcons are no longer placed with the hawks, eagles and kites. Recent genetic work has actually discovered that falcons, with their diurnal predatory habits, hooked flesh-tearing bills and strong taloned feet are actually sister taxa of the parrot family! These physical similarities to hawks are actually examples of convergent evolution rather than successful evolutionary adaptations passed along from closely related species.

So what's next for Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society? With KRS finally finished, more time is free for us to begin new projects.

I have begun creating a website for Laughing Whitefish Audubon and am very excited about it. It should debut in time for the Christmas Bird Count season. This web portal will hopefully serve as a valuable location to find out the latest events and activities of LWAS.

Another new project we're exploring is the sponsorship of a small grants program to college students for research in ornithology and bird conservation. The board is very enthusiastic about the prospects of being able to offer this opportunity to students.

Finally, we are planning this winter, to have an adventure outside of our local stomping grounds! LWAS along with the NMU birding club are planning on a joint weekend trip in February to the Sax Zim Bog north of Duluth Minnesota. This area is one of the best spots in the country for winter birding in the north. What makes the Sax Zim so special? Numbers of irruptive northern owls can be found here most winters. Even in years

when there is nary a report of a Great Gray Owl or a Hawk Owl from the Soo, there are often multiple individuals on territory in the Sax Zim. Already there are rumblings from Ontario of the potential of an irruption year as both Great Gray and Boreal Owl sightings have become more common in recent weeks. Details on this exciting weekend can be found in the Field Trips section in this issue of the North Country Notes.

So there you have it. It may be a period of transition for LWAS, but I truly believe our best times are yet ahead of us. We have a great club full of vibrant volunteers, exciting events planned, and a commitment to a strong conservation ethos that will continue to connect birds and people for the benefit of all. I hope to see you at a LWAS event or out in the field birding sometime soon. Ok, that's enough rambling for now, it's time to get outside and go look at some birds.....

~Skye Haas

Welcoming Gary Palmer

By L. Hill



The Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society would like to introduce the newest member of the board. Gary Palmer is no stranger to the birding community. He is an active member of LWAS; attending general programs as well as participating in board meetings. He is also a valued, founding member of the NMU birding club (the Northern Parula birding Club or NOPAS), devoted graduate student and environmental ally.

Gary has been president of the NOPAs, a student group of highly motivated bird fanatics, for the last year. During his time as president the NOPAS have become more integrated with the LWAS and birding community. The NOPAS recently experienced their grandest adventure yet; traveling to Texas to experience spring migration (See next article).

In addition to planning trips with the NOPAs, Gary has also started a smaller sub-group of the club that meet twice a month to discuss journal articles on recent ornithological research.

Gary is a graduate student at NMU researching under Dr. Alec Lindsay's advisement. Using NEXRAD weather radar to monitor bird migration in the Upper Great Lakes, Gary will specifically be looking at the timing of migration to see whether it has changed between 1996 and 2012. In addition, estimates will be derived of the volume of migrants to determine whether any broad-scale population trends may be apparent.

We are excited to welcome Gary; he will make a great addition to our executive board!

NOPA's Bird Texas during Spring Break

By Gary Palmer

At the start of our second year as a student organization at Northern Michigan University, the Northern Parulas Birding Club decided it was time to expand our horizons and add some tropical species to our life lists! The destination was a simple decision for us to make, since Skye had visited the Lower Rio Grande Valley a few years previously and had the most amazing stories and photographs from his adventure to quickly sell us on it. Plus we would be able to meet up with LWAS members Mark and Joanie Hubinger, who would again be spending the winter at Santa Anna National Wildlife Refuge located on the Rio Grande. To further sweeten the deal, once expert birder and fellow LWAS member Louie Dombroski caught wind of the trip he was eager to come along, giving us two de-facto tour guides and plenty of insider knowledge on where to find the best birds and Mexican restaurants.

So as fall crept into winter and we braced for months of biting U.P. cold, we had a tropical respite to look forward to. We spent hours researching Texas parks, calculating costs, and planning our path, and by the time Christmas rolled around, visions of Whooping Cranes danced in our heads. As winter went on, Skye produced a series of photo quizzes to help us prepare for the epic journey and the exotic new species we sought. I spent almost as much time 'studying' for spring break each week as most of my classes!

Excitement continued to build until finally, on the night before spring break officially began, ten anxious birders settled into two rented vans in Marquette and set off on a 30-hour drive to find tropical birds without having to leave the country. A short 17 hours into our journey we had a planned detour to the Ouachita National Forest in Arkansas. Here we sought the endangered Red-cockaded Woodpecker, a species which has been managed extensively in recent years and consequently a pair was quite easy to locate just before dusk at their well-marked and heavily protected nest cavity.

The following morning, after driving all night through the gigantic state of Texas, we arrived at the Gulf of Mexico in Lamar at last. Here we were greeted at sunrise by Crested Caracaras (a stunningly beautiful falcon that behaves more like a vulture), Inca and Eurasian Collared Doves, Loggerhead Shrikes, Cave Swallows, Black-crested Titmice, Boat-tailed Grackles, and one of the true highlights of the trip – Whooping Cranes! We found four of these surprisingly large, stark white cranes casually munching on corn in a field near the coast. In a few more stops along the mid-Texas coast we tallied quite a few spectacular waterbirds and waders that were lifers for everyone except Louie and Skye, such as Forster's Tern, Royal Tern, Neotropic Cormorant, Reddish Egret, Little Blue Heron, Black Skimmer, Long-billed Curlew, American Avocet, and my personal favorite of the bunch, Roseate Spoonbill, with their vaguely prehistoric appearance and sharp pink plumes.



Forster's Tern



Reddish Egret



Whooping Cranes

Photos by Gary Palmer

From here we drove further south down US-77, which to our delight lived up to its nickname of “Hawk Highway.” Harris’s Hawk, a subtly beautiful red and brown bird known for its tendency to hunt in family groups, was abundant, along with numerous Red-tailed Hawk, Crested Caracara, Black Vulture, White-tailed Hawk, and more. This brought our band of birders to a spring break destination just beginning to fill up with college kids – South Padre Island. It was well worth battling the burgeoning crowds to walk the boardwalk at the South Padre Island Birding and Nature Center, where we were treated to a wonderful show put on by a Reddish Egret dancing and fishing right in front of our faces! The boardwalk also provided views of Snowy, Great, and Cattle Egrets, a Black Skimmer skimming for his supper, and a heard-only Clapper Rail, plus amazing looks at familiar but secretive U.P. species American Bittern and Sora.

The following night we slept under the stars on the beach at Boca Chica. After an unsuccessful search for the reintroduced Aplomado Falcon, our trip changed course, and we headed up the Rio Grande away from the Gulf coast to the sprawling metropolis of McAllen that covered much of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, where we settled in for four nights at Bentsen State Park. Here we really hit our stride and were able to devote all of our waking hours to birding. The next few days contained an unbelievable flurry of exotic birds, urban crowds, and the best Mexican food ever as we scoured the remnant patches of habitat for ultra-rarities and Mexican vagrants. But in order to hear the full tale and see the stunning photographs, you’ll have to read the next installment of the LWAS newsletter and attend the February, 2013 LWAS monthly program where I will present Texas: A Northern Parulas Adventure!

FIELD TRIPS:

Saturday, November 10 Peshekee Grade Field Trip (North of Michigamme)

Meet at 7:00 AM at the parking lot on the corner of Spring and Fourth Streets.

Information: contact Skye Haas at TheOwlRanch@gmail.com

For this field trip, it may be a good idea to bring a lunch. Bird species on this trip may include Boreal Chickadee, Gray Jay and possibly some of the species from Canada: White-winged or Red Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, Redpoll and Pine Siskin. In past years there have been other surprises on this outing such as Black-backed Woodpecker, Evening Grosbeak even a Northern Cardinal. All are welcome.

Friday, February 1—Sunday February 3 Sax Zim Bog/Duluth, MN Weekend Field Trip

With the Northern Parulas (NMU Birding Club)

- **THIS IS A REGISTRATION EVENT- contact Skye Haas at theowlranch@gmail.com**

This will be a new and exciting adventure for LWAS and the NOPAs! We will head to northern Minnesota for the second weekend of February for some of the most dynamic winter birding to be had at this time of year. The Sax Zim Bog is located about 45 minutes north of Duluth, MN and is host to a number of specialty boreal and arctic species that are either winter visitors or permanent residents of this region of high-grade forested bog habitat. In addition to birding the boglands and farm-country of the Sax Zim, we will also likely do some birding in Duluth looking for waterbirds and raptors. While some of the expected species can be seen here in the UP, the Sax Zim is renowned for being one of the premier locations to observe GREAT GRAY and NORTHERN HAWK OWLS in the US and are our main target species. But the fun doesn’t stop there! Other species that are regularly seen in the Sax Zim Bog include SPRUCE and SHARP-TAILED GROUSE, ROUGH-LEGGED HAWK, SNOWY and BOREAL OWLS, BLACK-BACKED and AMERICAN THREE-TOED WOODPECKERS, GRAY JAY, BLACK-BILLED MAGPIE, BOREAL CHICKADEE, BOHEMIAN WAXWING, and the winter finches including PINE GROSBEAKS, HOARY REDPOLLS, and both species of CROSSBILLS. And in Duluth, birds like HARLEQUIN DUCK, GYRFALCON and arctic gulls like GLAUCOUS, ICELAND and THAYER’S GULLS are all possibilities. Recent winters have even been host to such rarities as BARROW’S GOLDENEYE, WESTERN GREBE, SLATY-BACKED GULL and VARIED THRUSH.

To participate-

This is a registration only trip. We will meet in Duluth at our motels on the evening of Friday the 1st. Once the final numbers of participants are registered, plans to car-pool can be made. We will bird all day Saturday at the Sax Zim and again on Sunday morning. On our way back to Michigan, we will bird Duluth. To maximize our time in the

field, bring enough food and other supplies to get through the day and we can go out for dinner in the evening. Cost associated with this trip will include room rental, gas for vehicles and food/supplies. A more detailed itinerary as well as information on room rental will be available as a list of participants is created. If you are interested, please email me at theowlranch@gmail.com and I will send out regular updates as the planning of this adventure progresses. Hope you can make it!

PROGRAMS: Meetings are held in the Community Room of Peter White Library on the 2nd 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. Programs are held monthly from September through May, with the exception of December.

November 14, 2012 – Annual Membership Meeting

Social meeting. Bring pictures of wildlife and scenery, on discs or jump-drives, to share with members (computer & projector will be provided). Snacks are welcome. Members will vote on any business matters, including the election/approval of Board members. Information: 226-6749

December 2012 – No program is scheduled for December

January 9, 2013 – “Costa Rica – Natural History and Culture”

Presenter: Ann Joyal

Ann will discuss her recent trip to Costa Rica, where she visited wildlife preserves, organic farms and handcraft enterprises. Ann will share photos of the spectacular birds, wildlife, and the varied Costa Rican landscapes including volcanic highlands, costal lowlands, tropical rainforest and tropical dry forest. Information: 226-6749

February 13, 2013 – “NOPA Trip to Texas”

Presenter: Gary Palmer

Texas: A Northern Parulas Adventure! The NOPAs spent spring break 2012 in southern Texas on an unforgettable journey that covered over 5,000 miles and allowed many of us add well over 100 new species to our life lists. Join Gary Palmer, president of the Northern Parulas Birding Club from Northern Michigan University as he tells the tale of ten birders driving across the country in search of tropical birds. Courtesy of Gary and several other photographers in the Club you'll be treated to a colorful photo tour full of exotic birds and other wildlife found at the southern extreme of the United States.

PIPING PLOVERS FROM KATHY DAVIS' PERSPECTIVE



photo by Skye Haas

The species, Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*), has three populations. The Great Plains and the Great Lakes populations are listed as one subspecies and the eastern population which nests along the Atlantic coast as another subspecies. The Atlantic and Great Plains populations are listed under the Endangered

Species Act as threatened and the Great Lakes population is endangered. The Great Lakes population has been listed as endangered federally since 1986.

When plovers were first listed, there were an estimated 18 nesting pairs on the Great Lakes. The population has risen slowly and in 2009 it

increased to 71 pairs. But there has been a decline in population since then and there were 60 pairs in 2010, 55 pairs in 2011, and 58 pairs in 2012. The site with the most plover nests now is Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore on Lake Michigan. Plovers are also nesting on the Apostle Islands in Wisconsin, on the east shore of Lake Huron in Ontario, Canada, as well as along Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, and the south shore of Lake Superior. At one time they nested all along the shores of the Great Lakes.

Plovers nest on sandy beaches with some rock (cobble). They need wide enough beaches to prevent wave destruction of their nests. Beach grass on the dunes behind the shore help provide protection and feeding sites for the plovers and their chicks. Larger logs provide cover for the birds and chicks from wind and rain and also help camouflage them. Smaller driftwood is also useful for camouflage and provides a food source in the insects that gather there as well.

Human interference and habitat destruction are the biggest reasons for the decline of the plover population. People want to build their houses along the beach, run their dogs along the beach, ride their ATVs on the beach, collect and burn driftwood along the beach, fly kites along the beach (the kites mimic predators and can keep the birds off their nests), etc. We have reports of ATVs, horses, and dogs all destroying nests and chicks. All of these things contribute to the failure of nesting, feeding and chick rearing.

Another contribution to the decline in plover populations in recent years has been an increase in predator populations. The main predators in Grand Marais and Gulliver are merlins, crows, and immature herring gulls. Other known predators are foxes, mink, great-blue herons, skunks, hawks, feral cats, and house cats.

Nature can also be harsh on the plovers. Botulism has contributed to their loss along Lake Michigan and there have also been plovers killed by hail. In cold weather chicks can die if they are not brooded by the parents. They do not thermoregulate (maintain a constant body temperature) until they are 10 to 14 days old.

The Upper Peninsula Land Conservancy has been the subcontractor of Lake Superior State University to protect plovers in Gulliver

and Grand Marais for 8 years. This funding is through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The funding provides a paid employee for 40 hours a week at both sites to protect plovers, provides signage, nest protection materials, mileage for employees, housing for employees, etc. Lake State also supervises plover protection at Whitefish Point, Vermillion, and Port Inland. They also survey Point Aux Chenes, Brevort and Escanaba/Indian Point. We have not had nesting plovers at these sites in at least 2 years.

Now about plover monitoring in Grand Marais: I have been working with plovers for several years. Our friend, Evelyn Wood, has helped with plovers for over 30 years. She began the work when a group from the University of Minnesota came to Grand Marais and were trying to find nesting areas and determine plover populations in the 1980s. Then she worked with Tom Allen from Lake Superior State. I call myself Evelyn's assistant. Evelyn has a business of her own to run and some health issues that do not allow her to walk up and down the beach so I have been helping her for over 20 years.

In late April and early May the nesting plovers arrive in the Great Lakes from their winter grounds in coastal South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida. The volunteers and employees search the beaches for mating and nesting plovers. When we find a pair of plovers we back off and view the plovers and note where the nest might be. Usually we find some "scrapes" in the cobble. These are preparations for the nest site. We keep searching by walking carefully, so as not to crush any eggs. We usually find the nest when there are one or two eggs present in mid May to early June. In Grand Marais most of the nesting habitat is on private property so we have to contact the property owners to get permission to erect fencing around the nest. We try to fence the area at least 100 feet in diameter. We erect 8 fence posts. Four of these posts have signs that say "CLOSED AREA". The sign explains there is an endangered species nesting here and "KEEP OUT". We string two layers of twine from post to post to define the area. When there are 3 to 4 eggs (plovers usually lay 4 eggs) we erect a "cage" over the nest so predators cannot get to the eggs. The cage is composed of wire mesh (2

inches by 4 inches) that the adults can walk through on the sides and the top of the cage is covered in a more protective nylon mesh (the type that people use to protect fruit trees from birds).

When the eggs are being incubated we check the nest twice a day and try to observe an exchange to indicate that both parents are attending the nest. The adults take turns feeding and sitting on the eggs. Sometimes one adult is predated and the other adult has to leave the eggs to feed. When this happens the eggs are taken to the University of Michigan Biological Station in Pellston where there is a captive rearing facility. They check the eggs to see if they are viable, incubate the eggs, feed the chicks and then release them into plover habitat when they are fledged. Captive reared chicks are not as successful in survival as naturally raised chicks but with so few birds this is still a productive process.

The chicks hatch approximately 28 days after the last egg is laid. Then the real work begins. This year all of our chicks hatched on June 11, 12, and 13. In Grand Marais plovers nest on the outer beach and on the Bay. This year we covered the beach from 5:30 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. at both sites. This means we cover both sites 16 hours a day or 32 hours total. We did this for five weeks after hatching. The average time of initial fledging is about 28 days. This year we had three nests in Grand Marais and hatched 10 chicks. Two eggs did not completely develop. We had 7 chicks that fledged. This was great compared to last year

when we fledged 3 chicks from 4 nests. One of the nests last year was a re-nest. The pair that re-nested did this after their first chicks were eaten by crows before the chicks were 24 hours old. This happened at 5:45 a.m.

In the Corps of Engineers report about building the breakwater in Grand Marais it states that building the breakwater will destroy plover habitat because of increased vegetation inside the breakwater. The Corps of Engineers and U.S. Fish and Wildlife required the township to provide plover employees to monitor the one nest inside the Bay during incubation and 4 hours after the chicks hatched during breakwater construction. This helped us greatly with monitoring. The township monitors worked from 5:30 a.m. to 7:30 a.m. and from 7:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Many people in Grand Marais thought that the township breakwater fund should not have to pay plover monitors.

In Grand Marais we had over 40 volunteers come and help us with the plovers. Most of the volunteers came from Marquette. We provide housing and training for the volunteers. Volunteers try to keep track of the chicks to protect them from predators and human intervention. Some people came for one day or 2 to 3 days and a few people came for 6 to 10 days. The people who spent the most time were Clyde and Debbie Hecox and Cindy Lynne! We also had Laurel Hill and her mother come for a weekend to monitor plovers. Jeff Knoop is another long time volunteer. They are all members of Laughing Whitefish Audubon. Thanks to all those who have helped!

Member Donations Help Support LWAS Activities

The Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society has 84 members who supported the organization during the past year with dues and extra financial contributions. From September 2011 through August 2012, dues totaled \$850 and were used to pay monthly program expenses, fund the newsletter, and help with club activities.

Members also donated an additional \$665, allowing the club to continue several community-based projects. Bird feeders at Presque Isle were stocked throughout the year at a cost of \$393, and we supported the Keweenaw Raptor Survey with a donation of \$550. Both of these activities were only possible because of the generosity of our members.

We would like to thank the following people who made extra donations to LWAS in the past year: Robert Bolton, Pat Burke & Fred Rydholm, Elizabeth Carpenter, Lou & Priscilla Chappell, Loren & Mary Clifford, Bill & Kathy Davis, Bryon & Amy Ennis, Deb Laurie & Scott Hickman, Sue & Bob Holtzman, Mark & Joanie Hubinger, Bill Hurst, Jim & Margaret Jajich, Bill Joswiak, Ann & Fred Joyal, Keith Kepler, Kate Teeter & Alec Lindsay, Jeff Knoop & Cindy Lynne, Fred & Judi Mouser, Beth & Tom Olson, David & Susan Payant, Lew & Kathy Peters, Alexis Raney, Danita Rask, Ann Richardson, Michael Ryan, Clare Magee Sauer, Joan & Martin Steindler, Bruce Ventura & Tina Hall, Carole & Cliff Wooten.

Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society Membership Form for 2012

Your dues support local birding activities, bird feeding, and program costs

Name (or names) _____

Address _____

City, State and Zip _____

Phone _____ e-mail _____

(E-mail addresses are used to provide you with updates and newsletters; your address is 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 to support bird feeding at the Audubon supported feeding station at MooseWood Nature Center on Presque Isle \$ _____

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

Ann Joyal

346 W. Crescent St.

Marquette, MI 49855

Phone 226-6749

For you who are already members, check your mailing label on this newsletter to see when you last paid your membership dues. 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.
Marquette, MI 49855

