

North Country Notes



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

October 2015

NOTES FROM AN ISLE ROYALE VISIT

By Jeffrey D. Knoop

After the last ice age came to an end roughly 10,000 years ago, the distribution of flora and fauna around our globe began a dramatic transformation triggering great plant and animal relocations and migrations across our warming planet. This period brought dramatic change to all five Great Lakes that, combined, now hold 21% of Earth's freshwater. In the glacial foot print, Lake Superior was left as the largest freshwater lake on the globe (by area) and its primary island, Isle Royale, is renowned as being the "largest Island in the largest freshwater Lake on the planet".

Having lived in the UP for nearly 15 years I, in the fall of this year, at long last had the opportunity to a first time visit and see what Isle Royale had to offer. I entered the park from the west at Windigo; an old copper mining foot hold that has the distinction as being one of the shortest copper mining plays in history, about a year or two. Windigo now hosts a visitor center, a small concessioner run grocery/souvenir store and a place to take an after-the-trip shower. The area also has a nice campground with a dozen shelters and two cabins for the less hardy.

My first goal was to head up through the "Windigo Mountain" section of the park via Greenstone Trail to Island Mine Camp, the only camp out of 36 island camps not on an inland lake or Lake Superior.

What this area lacks in views and the fact of not being located on a lake is made up for by the grandeur of the areas old growth yellow birch/sugar maple/red oak forests. This northern hardwood association boasts on average trees 3-

4 feet in diameter and, on occasion, immense, emergent white pines 5+ feet in diameter and towering some 50 feet above the hardwood canopy. The border of a small stream near the camp site harbors several of these colossal pines. My best guess aerial extent of the hardwood area is about 15,000 acres. This old growth forest area is easy to access for the Greenstone Trail passes through 4 miles of the old growth timber stand.

Isle Royale has an intriguing fire history that has played a role in shaping the island's plant communities. Information on pre-settlement fire history is limited. However, sediment cores taken from several Isle Royale lakes by researchers found layers of charcoal indicating periodic fires in the post-glacial, pre-settlement history of the Island as well as in the post-settlement era.

In July 1936 Isle Royale was impacted by a series of both human (presumed) and lightning ignited fires. That year roughly a quarter of the southwestern and central portion of the island burned (30,000 acres). One of the fires began at a logging camp near Siskiwit Bay on the southwest side of the island where spruce, fir and white pine were being removed. After these fires the island was acquired by the NPS and no further logging was undertaken. Scattered, small lightning ignited fires still occur infrequently on a "let burn" basis under NPS policy.

An interesting take on the island is that certain mammals never made the migration there including black bears, raccoons, porcupines and deer being most notable. The northern lynx was early on extirpated from the island. Researchers

believe that lynx was the primary predator, during pre-settlement times.

Today, the well-known predator/prey relationship is between wolf and moose. Ironically, the prey is winning the battle with a mere 3 remaining wolves and a seemingly exploding moose population with an ensuing browse line. How moose got to the island is still a debated mystery. Certain cultural evidence indicates that they may have been introduced early on for recreational hunting or maybe they are simply good swimmers.

Geologically, the island was born roughly 1.2 billion years ago when lava flows across the southern extent of the Canadian Shield deposited deep, successive layers of basalt, an [extrusive igneous volcanic](#) rock. Later, the center of the Superior Basin subsided. This raised and tilted the layers of rocks on Isle Royale, the Keweenaw Peninsula as well as the “outer rim” of what is now Lake Superior. Eons of erosion have created ridges and valleys giving the island a distinctive landscape scale “washboard” appearance. Today, the numerous, upended layers of erosion resistant basalt has created steep parallel ridges that hikers struggle over every summer.

My last day of the 7 day solo hike was spent climbing Feldtmann Ridge and a final night stay at Feldtmann Lake. During the hike off the open ridge towards the lake I was treated to a flurry of migrating broad-winged hawks and a pair of merlin scolding my presence.

The final 5 days of the trip were spent with an enthusiastic group of botanists, some beginners and some, like me, amateur botanists looking to spend some time in the field with other folks interested in plants and natural history in general. The class was conducted by an exceptional botanist, Janet Marr, who teaches annual botany classes on Isle Royale. We had several adventurous days including hiking the Huginnin loop trail, hiking up the ridge towards Grace Creek and going to the first over look along Minong Trail, the latter being one of the roughest trails on the island. This was the first trip that Janet has led to the west end at Windigo. She has been leading trips to Rock Harbor since 2008. If you are interested in joining one of Janet’s classes she can be reached at: jkmarr@mtu.edu.

Executive Board Changes: Laurel Hill Leaves & Alec Olivier Joins

By Ann Joyal

After four years of service on the LWAS Executive Board, Laurel Hill has left us to take a position with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Minneapolis. Laurel joined the board as an undergraduate in NMU’s Biology department and continued through the completion of her Master’s degree earlier this year. Laurel was the first recipient of the LWAS Upper Peninsula Avian Research Award, and the money helped finance the field-research for her master’s thesis “*Changes in the Population and Habitat of Spruce Grouse on the Yellow Dog Plains.*” Laurel was a very active member of LWAS: presenting programs, writing newsletter articles, helping protect Piping Plover nests in Grand Marais, and working with other nature-education organizations such as the Moosewood Nature Center. Laurel moved to Minneapolis on September 11 and assures us that she cannot see a single corn stalk from her home! We are grateful for the many contributions Laurel made to the board and to the club. We will miss her, but wish her the very best in her new position.

When Laurel attended September’s Executive Board meeting, she brought along Alec Olivier who agreed to fill Laurel’s position. Alec is a freshman in high school and has been seriously birding for about 4 years, although he has been watching feeder birds and going to Whitefish Point for his entire life. Alec maintains his own website at 21stcenturybirder.com, which offers a fantastic photo gallery, advice on gear and backyard bird-feeding, a blog, and other birding information. Alec’s knowledge, contacts, and willingness to help will make him a great board member, and we look forward to working with him.

We'd Love to Have You on the LWAS Executive Board!

By Ann Joyal

The LWAS Executive Board, and certainly the club, would benefit from having a few new members sitting around our table. Would you like to help determine the direction of the club, plan LWAS programs and field trips, or suggest special projects that we might support? There is no upper limit to the number of Executive Board members, although the bylaws require a lower limit of seven members. Officers are Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary and Treasurer, and these positions are filled by members of the Board who volunteer for a year at a time. There is also a newsletter editor. The Board meets 4 times a year in the evenings and meetings last for a maximum of two hours. Birding expertise is not required for Board membership, and our birding skills vary greatly. Interest in the organization, enthusiasm and willingness to share ideas are more important.

Peninsula Point Bird Survey

By Gary Palmer

The Peninsula Point Bird Survey (PPBS) completed its third season of data collection earlier this year, tallying over 112,000 birds from 230 species since spring of 2013! The project was conceived by Skye Haas and myself in late 2012, after years of marveling at this phenomenal yet poorly understood migration hotspot conveniently located on public land close to home. By April 2013 grant funding had been obtained, count protocols written, and data collection commenced. Funding has been provided by the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society each year of the project, including the 2015 Upper Peninsula Avian Research Grant. Additional support has come from the Michigan Audubon Society and a 2013 grant from the Community Foundation of the Upper Peninsula.

Peninsula Point (PP), at the tip of the Stonington Peninsula in Delta County, is known to local birders as one of the premier locations in the Great Lakes to view migrants each spring. The area has received formal recognition under BirdLife International's Important Bird Areas (IBA) program, with seven IBAs located within Delta County. The area's significance is also reflected in the US Fish and Wildlife Service's 2008 Birds of Conservation Concern report; of 23 species on the list for the region, 21 have been recorded on the Stonington.

In 2013, over 30 days of surveying a total of 34,506 birds from 208 species were tallied, giving our inaugural season the highest diversity of the three. The 2013 season also saw the two most unexpected vagrants of the project, coming

just nine days apart. On May 17th Ryne and Jenny Rutherford found the second state record of Brewer's Sparrow, a western species in the genus *Spizella*. Then on May 26th, Chris Vogel located a Wilson's Plover with a flock of the closely related Semipalmated Plover on the mudflats, just the third time one has been seen in Michigan.

The 2014 season was spectacular as well, yielding 46,886 birds from 194 species, giving this year the highest number of individuals counted by far. These numbers were buoyed by incredible migratory exoduses on two nights. On the evening of May 23rd, 8,254 Long-tailed Ducks were recorded flying past PP, a total ranking among the largest concentrations of these ducks ever recorded in the Great Lakes. Remarkably this is not the highest total recorded in recent years at PP -- a major impetus to develop this study was a stunning flight of over 64,000 Long-taileds on May 19, 2011!

May 25th, 2014 was one of the most remarkable days of birding I have witnessed, and many LWAS members took part as well, as it coincided with the club's annual PP picnic. Early in the day a Hooded Warbler made an appearance, around the sixth time this species has been observed in the UP. Later that day a Prothonotary Warbler was found just four miles up the road, another warbler only previously found in the UP a handful of times, including a November 2012 record at PP. In the evening of the 25th a dazzling female Red-necked Phalarope in full breeding plumage zipped past the point while we watched the most impressive birds of the day. Over a few

hours a total of 1,103 Whimbrel flew by, an incredible count for this species of conservation concern! As with the Long-tailed Ducks, an impressive flight of this species helped spur the development of PPBS, after over 800 Whimbrel were counted migrating past PP in May 2012.

The rarest species of the 2014 season in terms of the number of state records was represented by two individuals discovered on separate days. On May 15th I found a male Western Tanager as I finished the daily transect count. Two days later he was still present and was joined by a female! Remarkably this wasn't this species' first record at PP; in May 2011 a male gave a great performance for the annual PP picnic, just days after a different individual was seen across Little Bay de Noc in Gladstone.

In spring of 2015 the survey tallied 31,144 birds from 192 species, the lowest totals of the three years. This can be partially explained by the shockingly low numbers of sparrows, with far fewer individuals of nearly every species than either of the previous two years. However, one of the rarest birds found during the 2015 survey happened to be a sparrow, albeit one introduced from Europe and belonging to a different family from our native sparrows. A Eurasian Tree Sparrow was seen sitting in a hawthorn in the rain when we arrived for the morning census on May 10th, adding to the growing number of UP records. Another of the less expected species of 2015 was a Lark Sparrow found on May 25th.

Arguably the most exciting birds of the third season were a pair of Little Gulls which sped past the point with a large flock of Bonaparte's Gulls early in the season, the Little Gulls being a new species for the project. In addition to impressive Bonaparte's Gull numbers -- nearly double the total from the previous two years combined -- was the first PPBS record of Forster's and Black Tern. Black Terns were long anticipated but very rarely seen at PP, despite one of their largest colonies in the state just miles away at Ogontz Bay. Strangely, the first PP records of two species which are quite common elsewhere, Rock Pigeon and American Coot, were also recorded in 2015. The final highlight of the spring came on May 17th, when a Prairie Warbler was spotted, another warbler with a single-digit number of prior UP records.

Overall the PPBS has been a resounding success. We have collected a wealth of information showing what an essential area PP is for many different birds during their migratory journey. We have also documented a number of vagrants along with some noteworthy totals and interesting behaviors of more expected species. And it has been an incredible amount of fun, with far too many highlights to include this short article. The 2016 season is currently in the planning stages, and I can't wait to see what it has in store!

The annual Membership Meeting on Wednesday, November 11 is a great time to learn more about the club and meet Board members (and there will be great refreshments and excellent photos, too).

In 2003 I attended my first LWAS meeting, hoping to learn a bit about local birds. I was surprised to learn that this was a reorganizational meeting of members who were trying to sustain the club. Scott Hickman took notes and volunteered to do the September program, Greg Cleary offered to do summer bird-walks around Presque Isle Park. I volunteered to email the meeting notes to other members. The organization limped along for over a year with no Executive Board and no officers. However the membership grew and the club developed contacts with other birders, Audubon chapters, and the Michigan Audubon. It became a place to meet friends and share information. In 2005 we reorganized with an official Executive Board, programs became stronger, and membership increased. It has been my pleasure to see LWAS grow to almost 70 active members and watch the organization become involved with a number of regional birding initiatives. You are invited to participate in the further evolution of the club by joining the board.

Current Board members are Skye Haas, Jude Holloway, Ann Joyal, Jeff Knoop, Alec Olivier, Beth Olson, Gary Palmer and Bruce Ventura. Please consider joining us.

November Field Trip – Boreal Habitat of the Peshekee Grade

Our 2015 field-trip season wraps up with a traditional November trip to the Peshekee Grade for a look at some hard-to-find Boreal species, including Gray Jays and Boreal Chickadees. Birds may include Canadian species such as White-winged or Red Crossbill, Pine Grosbeak, Redpoll and Pine Siskin. In past years there have been surprises including, Spruce Grouse, Black-backed Woodpecker, Evening Grosbeak and even a Northern Cardinal.

Saturday, November 14, 2015: PESHEKKEE GRADE (north of Michigamme)

Carpool: Meet in the parking lot at 4th and Spring Streets in Marquette

Time: 7:30 a.m.

For information: call Gary Palmer at 906-360-2556 or palmerjg@gmail.com

Trip leader: Gary Palmer

All are welcome. Dress warmly and bring binoculars, food and water. For this field trip, it may be a good idea to pack a lunch.

For the latest list of field trips and programs, check our webpage at <http://laughingwhitefishaudubon.org/>

GREAT LAKES PIPING PLOVER 2015 SURVEY RESULTS BREAK RECORD FOR TOTAL NESTING PAIRS

By Jeff Knoop

As part of a continuing multi-partner recovery program, the 2015 Great Lakes Piping Plover Monitoring Program was conducted throughout the northern Great Lake States where the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) staff and hundreds of volunteers participated in a variety of activities ranging from surveys, nest protection and monitoring, a banding program and habitat protection/enhancement coupled with public education and outreach programs.

Similar annual activities related to the plover recovery program have been ongoing for well over a decade in the Great Lakes and the 2015 survey identified upwards of 73 breeding pairs. This was a record year indicating that the recovery program continues to be an on-going success.

This annual program has been primarily funded through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (a quasi-governmental program with a strong focus on endangered species protection) whereby several seasonal coordinators are hired at known active plover nesting sites to implement a plover monitoring protocol that includes training and engagement of dozens of volunteers.

In 2015, funding was granted to Lake Superior State University to coordinate the annual onsite activities at Grand Marais on Lake Superior and

several areas along Northern Lake Michigan. Over a roughly 2 month period, some 361 volunteer hours were logged in the Grand Marais site alone. These volunteers are extremely important for they do a great deal of nest and bird monitoring, watch for predators and are the “eyes and ears on the beach” for the vulnerable plovers.

The heavily monitored beaches at Grand Marais supported three breeding pairs along with their three nests. In total, 12 eggs were laid, 9 chicks hatched and 5 chicks fledged. Three eggs were taken to a captive-rearing facility where they were determined to be non-viable.

At Grand Marais foxes were the primary predators this year killing one adult directly and indirectly impacted the health of the nest, eggs and the parent’s rearing behavior. Unfortunately, no chicks were reared from this third nest. Other plover threats include dogs, off road vehicles and adverse weather conditions.

Historically, the Great Lakes plover population dropped as low as 17 breeding pairs in the 1980’s. At that time, and under pressure by the Defenders of Wildlife, Piping Plovers became listed as a federally endangered species under the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Since then the Plover’s numbers have been slowly but steadily increasing.

The Great Lakes population of plovers includes nesting sites in Michigan, Wisconsin, New York, Illinois and portions of Canada. Plovers nest only along Great Lakes shorelines with very specific nesting, breeding and foraging habitat conditions. Audubon members and supporters Bill and Kathy Davis of Marquette have been avid plover monitors for as far back as I can remember. They have spent hundreds (possibly thousands) of volunteer hours monitoring plovers, feeding and housing volunteers and working directly with the USFWS. Please consider becoming a plover patrol volunteer and Bill just may treat you to his famous and fabulous whitefish dip, a dish that I consider dying for! Please join us!!
CR Bob Devlin



Thanks to our Members for Their Support

Ann Joyal, Treasurer

In September 2015 the Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society had 68 active members whose dues support activities such as printing and mailing of our quarterly newsletter, and program costs such as room-rental, data-projector rental, and mileage reimbursement for speakers. In several cases, dues also helped fund the rental of films for programs.

Extra expenses or projects: A number of our members made additional donations to help with extra club projects or expenses. This funding allowed LWAS to contribute \$300 to Michigan Audubon in support of Project SNOWstorm, an effort to attach satellite transmitters to Snowy Owls throughout the region from Minnesota to Massachusetts. Daily movements of the birds can be tracked on the project's website, and the data provide researchers with a wealth of information on the owl's daily movements, hunting patterns, prey preferences and many other things.

LWAS Avian Research Grant: The club maintains a separate account for a yearly grant that supports avian research in the Upper Peninsula. This year, we raised \$495 in contributions and made a grant award of \$500 to Gary Palmer. The grant helped fund the third year of the "Peninsula Point Bird Survey," a study to document and record spring migration at the tip of the Garden Peninsula on the northern shore of Lake Michigan. Gary presented some of the results of the survey at this year's September meeting, including photos of some of the more unusual migrants, bird-tallies and a comparison of species-populations over the three years of the study.

Thanks to the following people who made extra contributions from September 2014-August 2015. Without your help our projects would not have been possible:

Libby Blichfeldt, Fred Rydholm and Pat Burke, Misa Cady, Elizabeth, Jean, and Matthew Carpenter, Priscilla Burnham and Lou Chappell, Loren and Mary Clifford, Bill and Kathy Davis, Ginny Foreman, Richard Gray, Dan Hardie, Deb Laurie and Scott Hickman, Jude Holloway, Mark and Joanie Hubinger, Wendy Irish, Bill and Jan Joswiak, Ann Joyal, Heather Kapeller, Keith Kepler, Jerry and Roberta Kolak, Paul Marin and Betsy Little, Jerry and Suzi Maynard, Joanna Mitchell, Beth Olson, Jane Ryan, Thom Skelding, Joan and Martin Steindler, Tina Hall and Bruce Ventura, Cathy and Steve Waller, and Cliff Wooten

Participate in America's Oldest Wildlife Census - the Christmas Bird Count!

The National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count (CBC) takes place annually from December 14 – January 5 and is the longest-running wildlife census in the country. The count has existed for 116 years,

compiling a vast amount of data. 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>.

Beginning birders are welcome and 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 18, 2015 (Friday) - 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.*
- **December 19, 2015 (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. 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. No advanced registration is necessary.*
- **January 3, 2016 (Saturday) - AuTrain** – The compiler is Scott Hickman at suboscine@hotmail.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 would like to participate so that count circle coverage can be properly coordinated and then communicated to all participants.*
- **January 3, 2016 (Saturday) - Gwinn** – The compiler is Brian Johnson at baidaj@yahoo.com or 231-557-4011. Contact Brian for meeting place and time.

Evening Programs November 2015 – February 2016

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. They are usually held on the second Wednesday of the month, unless there is a scheduling conflict. For information call 226-6749.

November 11, 2015: "Annual Membership Meeting"

The program will begin with a SHORT business meeting with an opportunity to meet Board members and to ask questions. This will be a social event where members are invited to bring photographs of birds and other nature-oriented subjects to share the audience. Refreshments will be served and the meeting is open to the public. Please bring your photos on a CD, DVD, or small jump-drive. A computer & digital projector will be provided.

December: NO MEETING consider participating in a Christmas Bird Count

January 13, 2016: "Dinosaurs Among Us!"

Presenter: Alec Lindsay, Biology Department, NMU

Find out what really happened to the dinosaurs. The presentation will be about 50 minutes long, with plenty of time for questions, answers and discussion.

February 10, 2016 – "50 Hikes In Michigan's Upper Peninsula"

Presenter: Thomas Funke

Follow along as Tom hikes the trails of the Upper Peninsula. His pictures and commentary will reveal some of his discoveries along the way. There is a companion book of the same title that will be available for purchase at the presentation.

March 9, 2016 - TBD

April 13, 2016 - "Midwest Bird Monitoring"

Presenter: Katie Koch, Midwest Bird Monitoring Coordinator, US Fish and Wildlife Service. The topic will be the 100-year anniversary of the first international Migratory Bird Treaty (and our neat UP connection to that), the great legacy of bird conservation since then, and setting the stage for the next century of bird conservation. To learn more about the Centennial and planning underway, visit this website:

<http://www.fws.gov/birds/MBTreaty100/>.

NO EVENING PROGRAMS FROM MAY – AUGUST

Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society Membership Form for 2013-2014

Dues support the newsletter, programs, & 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

How would you like to receive your newsletter? (check one) _____ e-mail or _____ post.

Additional donations:

\$ _____ General Expenses for club projects

\$ _____ Research Grant to fund birding research in the Upper Peninsula

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

