

# North Country Notes

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



November 2020

## Birding Helps to Keep Us Healthy (And It's Fun)

by Jeff Towner, Chairman, LWAS

Probably everyone would agree that we modern humans are subjected to a lot of environmental stress. The stressors are too numerous to name, but depending on an individual's circumstances they may include environmental contaminants, including polluted air, water, and soil, poor diet, economic instability, lack of exercise, noise, interpersonal relationships, political instability, a deluge of media, including social media, and disease, including the current COVID-19 pandemic. Some spend considerable time and money looking for ways to reduce their stress load and deal with the physical and mental effects of stress. So, what does birding have to do with this? The answer is "A lot."

The term "biophilia", literally "love of life" may have been coined by the psychologist Erich Fromm, but it was popularized by Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson in his 1984 book *Biophilia*. Wilson proposed that humans have an innate attraction to nature that is genetically predetermined and the result of evolution, and that humans have an urge to affiliate with other forms of life. This thesis posits that people who are best attuned to the living world around them have an adaptive advantage, and that they will have a reproductive advantage over others who are not as well attuned. It is easy to see the correctness of this notion being manifested during the long hunter-gatherer phase of human evolution. People who were best at recognizing when and where edible plants and animals were available, survived and reproduced more successfully than those who were not as good at this.

Birders can recognize the feeling of satisfaction that comes from spending time outdoors observing birds and other wildlife in their natural surroundings, in other words that "urge to affiliate with other forms of life". One doesn't even need to birdwatch to benefit from spending time outdoors. (Although why wouldn't you want to?) A 2018 report published by the University of East Anglia on data gathered in 20 countries revealed that exposure to greenspace reduces the risk of type II diabetes,



Happy Group of Birders braving -28 degree temps. at the Sax-Zim Bog, Minnesota.

cardiovascular disease, premature death, preterm birth, stress, and high blood pressure. There is a greater body of work linking time spent in green spaces to lower risks of these maladies, as well as obesity, asthma, mental health problems and overall mortality, and to greater rates of health, happiness and cognitive development in children. There is even research on the minimum amount of time that is needed to be spent outdoors to show measurable benefits--two to three hours a week.

One of the major environmental stressors is human-generated noise. Those of us who are fortunate enough to live in the Upper Peninsula are not subjected to the high levels of noise as folks who live in the world's big population centers, although we certainly have our share. I live two blocks away from US 41 in Negaunee Township; there are only a few very early morning hours when there is not a constant drone of vehicular traffic. Anyone who has walked down a busy street in a big city knows how ear-splitting the noise of traffic and human chatter can be and how it can affect your mental state. When you combine that with shops that like to blast music onto the street, you have an environment that virtually precludes the ability to think clearly.

This noise pollution has real, measurable impacts on human and animal behavior and health. High and persistent noise levels can lead in humans to high blood pressure, heart disease, heart attacks, stress, and insomnia.

The World Health Organization issued a report in 2011 which concluded that 340 million Western Europeans (roughly equivalent to the U.S. population) lost at least one million years of healthy life each year because of traffic-related noise.

Regarding the effect of high ambient noise levels on birds, one interesting example is described in the January-February 2016 issue of Behavioral Ecology. This study found that male, White-crowned Sparrows in San Francisco who occupied noisier territories produced songs at higher minimum frequencies, but with reduced bandwidth and lower vocal performance. This study concluded that lower vocal performance of birds on territories with high levels of human-generated noise could result in fewer mating opportunities and more challenges in males defending their territories. In other words, noise reduces these male birds' evolutionary fitness.

A recent study conducted by researchers at Queens University Belfast analyzed data from many other studies covering 109 species of animals, including amphibians, reptiles, fish, birds, mammals, arthropods, and mollusks.

They found that most species studied respond to human-generated noise, and that noise pollution can threaten the survival of many species. The readers of this newsletter are also probably aware of the effects that underwater man-made noise has on the ability of whales and other marine mammals to communicate, find food, etc.

Acoustic ecologist Gordon Hempton defines quiet not as the absence of sound, but as the absence of noise from modern life. He has spent 45 years recording the sounds of nature and searching for quiet areas of the Earth. Listen to some of his recordings and you will feel your stress level coming down. You will also experience that stress-reducing effect when you take a hike, a bike ride, or a muscle-powered paddle, with or without binoculars. Our brains are also stimulated when we take in the sights, sounds, and smells of nature, and when we look for and identify birds using our knowledge, the knowledge of an experienced guide, bound bird guides, or a birding ID app. Those activities help to stave off cognitive deterioration, which is a good reason to get outdoors. But I suspect the main reason most of us go birding is because we simply love birds and their natural habitats, and that's reason enough.

## The Savvy Winter Bird Photographer, Part 1

By [Brian Zwiebel](#) |

When winter rolls around, many bird photographers choose to hibernate like a bear or fly south like a bunting. However, with a few precautions and considerations, winter can be an excellent time of



year to photograph birds, even in the northern climates. Over the years, I have made dozens of trips to photograph birds in some pretty extreme

locations, such as the high arctic, northern Michigan and northern Minnesota. In Part 1 of this two-part series, I will share my strategies to prepare yourself and your gear in the best ways for dealing with extreme weather. I will also discuss some field techniques that will help you overcome some winter-specific obstacles. In Part 2, I will share how to create your own backyard bird studio and also suggest a few winter bird photography destinations. Dressing appropriately allowed me to stay out for the last rays of the day, despite the blowing wind and plummeting temperature.

Bird photography is supposed to be fun but being cold is never a good time. Pursuing northern birds at high latitudes in winter presents many challenges, but the potential rewards far outweigh my desire to snuggle under a blanket by the fire. To stay warm, it is of utmost importance to protect your head, hands,

and feet from the elements. When protecting your head, be sure not to neglect your neck, ears, and face. I use a combination of balaclavas, fleece neck gaiters and multiple stocking caps. I hate breathing moist air through a full-face mask, so in extreme cold I need to pull one of the neck gaiters up over my nose from time to time. A scarf can come in handy, as well.

It is difficult to concentrate and maintain focus (pun intended) when being buffeted by strong winds and spray from a slushy Lake Superior.

In extreme cold, protecting your hands might be the biggest challenge. Bulky gloves are warm, but they make it difficult to operate small buttons and dials. The Heat 3 Smart Gloves are hard to beat and are probably overkill in all but the most extreme conditions. I have also found waterproof ski gloves to work quite well. Look for contoured or fitted gloves designed for gripping ski poles because this style allows for greater dexterity. Whatever primary glove you decide on, I strongly recommend a second or even third pair of gloves. Tuck a spare pair into your clothing close to your body. Slipping on a pair of dry, pre-warmed gloves can extend your outing in the event your primary pair gets damp. In addition, many gloves come with a pocket on the back of the hand that works well for holding an activated hand warmer.



Hunkering down in a snow drift blind for a long period of time is a sure-fire way to chill yourself to the core.

For my feet, I have used and recommended New England Over Shoes (NEOS) for many years. The NEOS Navigator 5 has been my go-to cold-weather

boot for years. They have a built-in gaiter for deep snow and slip on and off over tennis shoes in a minute. The optional extra insulating insoles are a huge plus because they further insulate your feet from the frozen ground.

For my core and legs, I will wear up to 5 layers at times. Avoid cotton and, instead, choose synthetic fleece or wool layers, which will keep you warm even if damp. I use thin and snug long underwear (sometimes two layers) next to my body with a heavier but loose polar fleece layer over that. On top, I always use a hooded sweatshirt as the last layer under my parka because the hood provides additional head and neck protection. For bottoms, I pull on a pair of hiking pants over long underwear layers with waterproof rain or ski pant as the final outer layer.

The savvy winter bird photographer can employ a couple of additional tricks. Your hands will thank you if you add insulated or padded tripod leg wraps. If you use a gimbal-style head, a piece of self-adhesive felt affixed to the upright arm can help protect your hands from the cold metal.

In addition, you don't want to forget to protect your expensive gear. Using a Lens Coat Rain Cover will protect your lens when wet snow is falling. And it is a good idea to seal your cold gear in a large trash bag when coming in from the cold. Condensation



will form on the outside of the bag, instead of on your lens. Fully dry all of your gear after any cold and snowy outing.

It took a lengthy hike through deep snow to reach this Long-Eared Owl. Take care to

avoid overheating during strenuous activity. Once you sweat, it will be difficult to stay warm when activity levels decrease.

Additional cold-weather gear concerns are also valid, but we have come a long way from when cameras had to have the lubrication replaced when it would become too thick in extreme cold. Today, my greatest concern is battery depletion. The lithium-ion batteries in our modern cameras are much better than what was available just 10 years ago, but it is still good practice to charge batteries each night and carry a backup battery, preferably in a pocket close to your body to keep it warm. Additionally, frozen sensors can fail to record images properly, especially the pixels closest to the frame edge.

Many choose to avoid the cold by taking images from their warm vehicle. It is, of course, important to remember to shut off the vehicle when taking images, to eliminate engine-induced vibrations that will ruin your photographs. Another consideration is that the warmth of the engine and the interior of the vehicle will cause a great amount of heat shimmer that will degrade your images noticeably. It is best to leave the heat off and keep the inside of your vehicle cold. The warm engine is especially problematic when pointing your lens forward over the side-view mirror. I am also of the belief that distortions inside the lens can play a factor when first heading outside. Image quality appears to improve after the lens has cooled to the ambient outside temperature.

Using a Lens Coat cover protected my lens and camera during this insane photo shoot. Snow was falling so hard I was forced to use manual focus to avoid locking on the large flakes.

A number of technical challenges can catch the unsuspecting photographer off guard. When photographing in heavy snow, the flakes can fool your camera's autofocus system. The continuous focus mode will repeatedly attempt to lock onto falling snow and never land on your subject.

Switching to single shot autofocus will definitely work better, but it might be necessary to go old-school and switch to manual focus.

Manually focusing in the cold and wind will be exceedingly difficult through watering eyes. Watch for the focus indicator light to illuminate in the viewfinder before pressing the shutter.



The above tips have helped me to stay out for hours at a time in temperatures as low as -30 degrees Fahrenheit (-35 Celsius). Of course, in any potentially dangerous conditions, it is best to tell someone where you are going and when you plan to return. Carry a survival blanket, shovel, and extra food and water in your vehicle, and top off your fuel tank often. Most importantly, keep your wits about you when you head out to photograph in a winter wonderland!

## 2020 Christmas Bird Count Dates

(Ann Joyal)

Christmas Bird Counts this year will take on a different format to account for restrictions caused by the COVID-19 virus. Social distancing and masks will be required. Other restrictions may be in place depending on Michigan guidelines.

The following dates are tentative and please contact your compiler closer to the date, to make sure there are no further restrictions.

- **December 19, 2020 (Saturday) - Marquette**

The compiler is Melinda Stamp at [mstamp@mstamp.net](mailto:mstamp@mstamp.net) or 906-869-2489  
*Contact Melinda if you would like to participate.*

- **December 20, 2020 (Sunday) - AuTrain**

The compiler is Scott Hickman at [suboscine@gmail.com](mailto:suboscine@gmail.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 5 days in advance if you want to participate so that count circle coverage can be properly coordinated and communicated to all participants.*

## **Thanks to Members Making Extra Contributions for LWAS Projects and Scholarships**

Ann Joyal

The LWAS membership form has an option to contribute extra money for “Expenses for Club Projects” and for “Research/Conservation Grant.” We would like to thank all members who made the following projects possible during 2019-2020:

- The repair/reconstruction of the northern birding platform at the Presque Isle Bog Walk. The platform and walkway had become unstable and buckled by winter ice. LWAS supplied \$1500 to buy materials, while Superior Watershed Partnership furnished a work crew and contractor Mike Potts supervised the work – replacing both the platform and the buckled sections of the walkway.
- Donations were also used to purchase binoculars and bird-guides for a new “Birdwatching” unit in the Environmental Biology class at Marquette Sr. High School.

Enough money was contributed to the Research/Conservation Grant to donate \$500 each to two graduate students doing birding-related research in the Biology Department at NMU.

- Rachel Weisbeck will use the grant monies to help fund her study of “Rates and Impacts of Blood Pathogen Infections in Black-capped Chickadees.”
- Emily Griffith will use her grant funds to help with her research on “Evaluating Sex Differences in Ultraviolet Coloration of the Long-eared Owl.”

### Thanks to the following members for their generous extra contributions:

*Louise Anderson, Ron Annelin, John Archambeault, Darlene Arseneau, Priscilla Burnham and Lou Chappell, Noren and Mary Clifford, Bill and Kathy Davis, Roy and Jan Del Valle, Bryon and Amy Ennis, Scott Hickman and Deb Laurie, Jude Holloway, Mark and Joanie Hubinger, Bill and Jan Joswiak, Ann Joyal, Keith Kepler, Alec Lindsay and Kate Teeter, Linda Mathews, Jerry and Suzi Maynard, Joanna Mithcell, Fred and Judi Mouser, Beth Olson, Tory and John Parlin, Jane Ryan, Bruce Sarjeant, Clare and Michael Sauer, Thom Skelding, Mary and Don Snitgen, Martin Steindler, John and Carol Stuht, Diane Chielens and Jeff Towner, Mary Turvey, Cathy and Steve Waller, Ruth Zeil.*

If you have an idea for a project that LWAS might help sponsor, please contact our president, Jeff Towner, at [Chielenstowner@msn.com](mailto:Chielenstowner@msn.com) or our secretary, Ann Joyal, at [ajoyal@nmu.edu](mailto:ajoyal@nmu.edu).

**Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society Membership Form**

*Dues support the newsletter, programs, & local birding activities. Donations are tax-deductible.*

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*(E-mail addresses are not given to other groups or commercial entities)*

Annual Membership fees (please check one)

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*How would you like to receive your newsletter?* (check one)     e-mail    or     postal service

Additional donations:

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\$\_\_\_\_\_ 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)

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