

# Minnesota BIRDING

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# Conservation Column: The State of the Birds 2014

by Pam Perry

There have been many times when I stared at the Passenger Pigeon display at the Bell Museum and wondered what it would have been like to see the huge flocks of these birds that once numbered in the billions. I'm sure that I'm not alone. One hundred years ago, in September 1914, the last of this species died and the Passenger Pigeon officially became extinct from the world. How will we prevent other birds from declines and extinction? The recently released "State of the Birds 2014" discusses which habitats and birds in the United States are most at risk and adds a disturbing chapter on common birds that are in steep decline. On a positive note, the report also shows that areas with a strong conservation investment can help bird populations recover. This has been demonstrated in some areas for wetland, grassland, and coastal habitats.

The report is the work of many knowledgeable avian researchers working for a variety of organizations that value the bird life around us. The group, known officially as the North American Bird Conservation Initiative, (NABCI), identified 233 U.S. bird species for the Watch Lists. The lists are in four geographic sections: Hawaii and the U.S. Pacific Islands Territories, Oceanic species, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the continental U.S. including Alaska. Each section has a Red Watch List (extremely high vulnerability) and a Yellow Watch List (vulnerable due to various factors). More than half of all U.S. shorebird species are on



*Blackpoll Warbler photo by Alyssa DeRubeis*

these lists!

Arid land habitats, which encompass desert, chaparral, and sagebrush habitats in the West, have had the steepest population declines. Long term habitat degradation has resulted from unsustainable land use coupled with exotic species invasions and further exasperated by drought.

The islands of Hawaii are showing the greatest potential for extinctions. Ken and I visited Oahu and the Big Island of Hawaii several years ago and we were overwhelmed by the extent of exotic species (both flora and fauna) and the loss of native habitat. Hawaii has 33 species of endemic native birds and all of them are at risk; 23 are listed as federally endangered.

In the continental United States, bird species on this watch list that are found in Minnesota include the American Woodcock, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Wood Thrush, Golden-winged Warbler, Bobolink, Evening Grosbeak, and more. See the report for a full list.

*continued on next page*

The report also states that one of the conservation goals is to keep common species common. We tend to think that birds that are common today will always be common, but that's not necessarily so. There are 33 species of common birds identified in the report that are in steep decline, including the Common Nighthawk, Chimney Swift, Horned Lark, Common Grackle, and Pine Siskin.

What are the causes for these declines? Habitat destruction and fragmentation, along with pollution and degradation of habitats, are right at the top. But other causes include invasive species, cats, window strikes, and cell towers. In Hawaii, avian malaria transmitted by non-native mosquitoes is a great concern along with cats, rats, goats, and mongooses. Climate change is the big unknown with weather extremes leading to droughts in some areas and floods in others.

There are things that we all can do and I know that you've heard them before. Support conservation organizations; we have many great ones in Minnesota and nationally. Plant native plant species on your property and try to maintain wild areas; turf grass and blacktop support few birds. Reduce pesticides and chemical use in and around your home. Last, but not least, keep your cats indoors and make the windows on your house bird safe.

To read a summary or the full State of the Birds 2014 report, go to <http://www.stateofthebirds.org/>

## Common Birds in Steep Decline

Northern Pintail	Horned Lark
American Wigeon	Bank Swallow
Cinnamon Teal	Verdin
Greater Scaup	Varied Thrush
Long-tailed Duck	Snow Bunting
Scaled Quail	Cape May Warbler
Northern Bobwhite	Blackpoll Warbler
Purple Gallinule	Wilson's Warbler
Franklin's Gull	Field Sparrow
Herring Gull	Lark Bunting
Black Tern	Grasshopper Sparrow
Yellow-billed Cuckoo	Eastern Meadowlark
Snowy Owl	Rusty Blackbird
Short-eared Owl	Brewer's Blackbird
Common Nighthawk	Common Grackle
Chimney Swift	Pine Siskin
Loggerhead Shrike	

*Pam Perry is the MOU Conservation Committee Chair. She lives with her husband, Ken, in Brainerd with their terrier and two black horses.*

# Birding in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness

## A Canoe Camping Adventure in Northern Minnesota

- Campfire chats about birds, habitats, behaviors, identification and song
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- Ultralight canoes, deluxe tents and wholesome meals



Dates: Session 1: May 22 - 25, 2015  
Session 2: May 27 - 30, 2015

Fee: \$495 - all inclusive

Contact:

Rob Kesselring: [rob@robkesselring.com](mailto:rob@robkesselring.com)  
(952) 432-8884 [www.robkesselring.com](http://www.robkesselring.com)

OR

Sue Plankis: [splankis@gmail.com](mailto:splankis@gmail.com)  
(952) 201-6062

# Phenology Corner: Invasion!

by Bob Dunlap

Strange little gray and brown beings from a land far from ours are being spotted in new locations daily. They're in the skies overhead. You hear them when you step outside. You can even see them from your kitchen window... oh, the horror! And for some reason, your next door neighbors are feeding them, encouraging them to stay! Has the whole world gone insane?!

Probably not. Actually, most birders welcome their new redpoll overlords. Every few winters, Common Redpolls take part in wide-ranging "irruptions" in territories well south of their arctic and boreal breeding ranges, and this includes Minnesota. These southward movements are due to a lack of abundant spruce and birch seeds, their natural food source. In years when the trees produce a bounty of seeds, the redpolls are virtually absent from Minnesota. But in years when seed crops significantly fail, the birds come south in very large numbers and can be seen throughout the state. We generally see these redpoll irruptions every three or four years, although if you live in the northern half of Minnesota redpolls are annual winter visitors in smaller numbers.

In some years, the invasion begins as early as late October. In others it doesn't commence until after the New Year. Regardless of when it starts, redpoll numbers tend to peak at feeders in January and February. Like our more familiar American Goldfinches, redpolls are most fond of nyger (thistle) seed, but will also feed on black oil sunflower, safflower, and suet. During major irruption years, the birds can easily clean out a feeding station within a day. Some birders I know have spent hundreds of dollars feeding these birds in a single winter!

Be sure to check for Hoary Redpolls among the Commons. Both Hoary and Common redpolls have red foreheads ("polls"), but Hoary Redpolls look paler overall with less streaking on the sides of their breasts and flanks. If you do see a paler, less-streaky redpoll among the flock, look next for a stubby bill, largely unstreaked white rump, and clean white undertail coverts with no black streaks or markings. A bird showing all these traits is likely a Hoary. A male Hoary will often stand out among a flock of more brownish-looking Commons with an overall "frostier" look and a light pinkish breast (compared to the deeper rosy breast of a male Common). A female Hoary, however, is more difficult to separate from a female Common and close scrutiny of the aforementioned field marks is essential for identification.



*Common Redpoll photo by Bob Dunlap*

Most of our other regular finches irrupt as well and, if you're among the luckier observers, you might experience a birdfeeding frenzy consisting of several species. Pine Siskins breed in coniferous forests in northern Minnesota, but irruptions are seen on a nearly biennial basis as birds from Canada forage south. Irruptions of Purple Finches are less predictable, although this species usually can be found throughout Minnesota in small numbers every winter. If you live in northeast and north-central Minnesota, watch for Pine and Evening grosbeaks at sunflower feeders. In recent decades, Evening Grosbeak irruptions in Minnesota have become increasingly seldom, but Pine Grosbeaks irrupt every few years or so. Finally, when spruce and pine cone crops fail to the north, Red and White-winged crossbills can show up in Minnesota in large numbers as well, although this seems to happen less than once per decade for either species. You'll likely see them feeding in pines and spruces rather than at feeders.

So as the redpolls and other finches invade our backyards, city parks, and nature centers (and for some of us, pocketbooks) this winter, we might as well enjoy them. Have no fear, for they probably won't cause widespread destruction and chaos. If they do, they'll likely be gone by early April anyway, which means we'll just need to resist their dominion for a few cold months.

# MOU Calendar

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**January 8**

## **The Science and Compassion of Wildlife Medicine**

Organization: St. Paul Audubon Society

Details: Presenter is Philip M. Jenni, Executive Director, Wildlife Rehabilitation Center. 7 p.m.

Fairview Community Center, Roseville

**January 9**

## **Owl Prowl and Snowshoe Hike**

Organization: Carpenter Nature Center

Details: Kevin Smith and Dwight Smith lead moonlit hike while looking and listening for owls. 7–9 p.m.

Cost: \$6 per person or \$4 for Friends of CNC.

Space is limited; RSVP 651-437-4359

**January 10, 19**

## **February 2: Bird Watching Trek**

Organization: MN Valley National Wildlife Refuge

Details: Winter bird walks led by Craig Mandel, Volunteer Refuge Naturalist. 8–10 a.m., Wilkie Unit

**January 10 & 17**

## **Wintering Golden Eagle Survey**

Organization: MN Dept of Natural Resources, Whitewater State Park

Details: Training on January 10, noon–3 p.m. survey on January 17, 10 a.m. – 12 noon. Hosted by Scott Mehus of the National Eagle Center. This survey is part of a study being done by the National Audubon Society, Minnesota and Wisconsin DNRs, and the National Eagle Center to better understand the golden eagles that winter in southeastern Minnesota and southwestern Wisconsin.

To participate, email Sara at [sara.holger@state.mn.us](mailto:sara.holger@state.mn.us) or call 507-932-3007 ext 226

**January 27**

## **The Latest on Prairie Restoration**

Organization: Zumbro Valley Audubon Society

Details: Presenter is Scott Leddy of Meadowland Restorations. 7:00 p.m.

Quarry Hill Nature Center, Rochester

**February 6**

## **Owl Prowl and Snowshoe Hike**

Organization: Carpenter Nature Center

7:00 – 9:00 pm CNC's Wisconsin campus:

Details: Kevin Smith and Dwight Smith lead a moonlit

hike while listening for owls at the Carpenter Nature Center's Wisconsin Campus. Meet at 300 East Cove Road, Hudson, WI. 7–9 p.m.

Cost: \$6 per person or \$4 for Friends of CNC

Space is limited; RSVP 651-437-4359

**February 12**

## **New Challenges Facing Minnesota's Bats**

Organization: St. Paul Audubon Society

Details: Presenter is Gerda Nordquist. 7 p.m.

Fairview Community Center, Roseville

**February 13–15**

## **Sax-Zim Bog Birding Festival**

Organization: Toivola-Meadowlands Development Board

Details: Special presentations, field trips, and workshops focused on the winter birds of the Sax-Zim Bog. Information and registration at <http://sax-zimbog.com/birding-festival>

**February 24**

## **Grasshopper Sparrows in Decline**

Organization: Zumbro Valley Audubon

Details: Presenter is Lisa Harn, Graduate Research Assistant, U of MN Conservation Biology Program. Quarry Hill Nature Center, Rochester. 7–8 p.m.

**February 28 & March 1**

## **Masters of the Sky**

Organization: Carpenter Nature Center

Details: The World Bird Sanctuary staff from St. Louis, Missouri, present their educational program about birds of prey, our environment, and what we can all do to protect birds and their habitats worldwide. See live hawks, eagles, owls, falcons, and vultures from around the globe.

Program at 11 a.m., 1 p.m., and 3 p.m.

Go to [www.CarpenterNatureCenter.org](http://www.CarpenterNatureCenter.org) for details

Reservations required

**EARLY NOTICE**

**May 14–17, 2015**

## **18th Annual Detroit Lakes Festival of Birds**

Featuring Sparrow Workshop with Doug Buri; presenters Carrol Henderson, Bob Janssen, and Melissa Groo.

Register online at <http://www.VisitDetroitLakes.com>

# Minnesota Birder Bio: Kim Eckert

*Born:* Chicago, IL.

*Currently living:* Duluth, since 1977; mostly in Minnesota since 1964.

*Occupation:* Birding tour guide since 1979 (especially Minnesota Birding Weekend (MBW) trips since 1986, and Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT) trips 1982–2012). I was an English & French teacher (1971–77), bird identification adult education teacher in the 1980s, and former Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory Naturalist (1977–96).

*Serious about birding since:* 1962, which started with an extra-credit project on birds in 10th grade Biology (the only biology class of any kind I ever took). My interest was then reinforced in the 1960s by Bob Russell in the Chicago area and at St. John's University (Bob and I are still close friends).

*Favorite bird or bird family:* As everyone else who has to live here in the winter, I have to like owls and chickadees. Other favorites: corvids (i.e. jays, magpies, crows, and ravens), sparrows, blackbirds (I'm not sure why these 3 groups — maybe because many birders don't like them), and anything with an interesting or unusual song or call notes (I've always liked birding by ear). Conversely, there are some birds I don't particularly enjoy: gulls (there are endless online debates on the identification of hybrids and anomalous plumages), dowitchers (I admit I still struggle with their identification, due to traditionally poor treatment in the field guides), and pigeons (they eat too much at my feeders).

*Favorite places to bird in Minnesota:* Almost anywhere in western Minnesota, especially Blue Mounds State Park where I birded constantly 1973–77, along the Minnesota River, or where there are natural grasslands (e.g. Felton). Also any place where I have seldom if ever birded before. Oddly enough, birding in Duluth and the North Shore does not rank among my favorites. Even though this area produces far more rarities than anywhere else in Minnesota, I seem to have birded Park Point, Stoney Point, Grand Marias, etc. too many times over the years, so that I'll always prefer a change of scenery.

*Favorite place to bird outside of Minnesota:* South Texas in winter (or anywhere else warmer than here). Also Kidder & Stutsman Counties in ND in May–June.

*Birding style (i.e. by yourself, with others, etc):* Almost all of it now with others, especially on MBWs. The only downside of being a birding tour guide is that I have less time and interest in traveling/birding on my own between tours.

*Best advice on how to be a better birder:* 1) Have a sense of humor and enjoy yourself. (I do know some very skilled birders who seem to take birding too seriously and sometimes don't seem to be having much fun, although I'm not sure if this is "better.") On MBWs it's most important that we enjoy what we



*Photo by Jen Vieth*

are doing, regardless of how many birds we are or aren't finding. 2) Bird with other experienced birders as much as possible and learn from them; if you only go out by yourself with a field guide you will make mistakes that may never get corrected. 3) Admit that you make identification mistakes (everyone does!), learn from them, and above all don't get defensive or angry when others question your identification. No one is saying that you are not telling the truth — they are only wondering if you might simply have experienced human error. 4) Learn some songs and call notes, because they are often important in being able to know that something is present in the first place, in then locating that bird, and in some cases being able to identify it. Some birds you see are much easier to identify if they are also heard: e.g., some flycatchers, vireos, wrens, thrushes, and especially sparrows.

*The main attraction or joy of birding for you:* 1) Finding birds for MBW participants and others, unless it's just something for their county lists. Listing species by county is fun, but the status of species on the county level is often limited in significance. 2) Finding a rarity on my own and adding to my "Personally Found" list. Just running out to see a "stake-out" and adding your name to the list of observers adds little or nothing to the record (even though I do it!).

*Interests/hobbies when you're not birding:* Not much, unless you include listing Iowa license plates in Texas (don't ask!) and watching "The Simpsons."

*What new bird you would like to see the most:* Probably a Mew Gull in Minnesota, since it's the least unusual species in the state I haven't seen.

# Of Hummingbirds and Swine Barns

by Erik Collins

When I woke on September 15, 2014, I did not expect that by late afternoon I'd be driving down a country road in southern Minnesota. But early that morning, news of an adult male Rufous Hummingbird, a species of the western and Gulf Coast states, near Le Sueur arrived in my inbox. It would be a tough bird to pass up, given its rarity. After getting the okay from my wife, all I needed to do was teach for seven hours, hope the hummingbird stayed put, and peel out of the parking lot right after the buses. If I could avoid heavy traffic, I would be there by 5:30 p.m.

That seemed a long way off when the bell rang and the kids entered the school. The morning began with an hour of reading, followed by an hour of math. Then we had story time.

I had been reading *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White to the class. You probably know the story. A spider befriends a pig named Wilbur, saving him from slaughter by writing complimentary words about him, such as "Some Pig," on her spider web. The words convince the farmer, Mr. Zuckerman, that he has a special pig and soon people from all over the area come to see Wilbur and the web.

It is a class favorite. And when you've read a book as many times as I've read *Charlotte's Web*, your mind tends to wander while you read. On that day a particular illustration caught my eye. It showed a dozen people crowded around the barn door, all looking at the web. Their faces are not visible, but I could imagine their smiles and excitement. Maybe a few of the people knew each other or maybe not. They were each drawn to the farm by a wonder of nature. It struck me as being very much the same as the scene of a rare bird appearing at a feeder.

As I continued to read I tried to think of other things that bring strangers from far and wide to someone's house. It was a challenge. My only idea was a house decorated with an extraordinary number of Christmas lights. Each December we visit one that is just down the road from our house. We park our car across the street and tune the radio to a special station the homeowners provide so we can watch the lights dance to music.

Anyone could do that as long as they are willing to spend the time and money. But to have a Lazuli Bunting, Western Tanager, or Rufous Hummingbird appear in your backyard? That is like winning the lottery. Thankfully, many of the people who get a rare bird are willing to share the wealth.



Rufous Hummingbird photo by Matt Stratmoen

Story time ended ten minutes later and the rest of the school day went by quickly. When the bell rang I dashed to my truck. An hour later I turned into the driveway of the house where the Rufous Hummingbird had been seen.

Mary and Steve Nesgodas greeted me at the door and we went to the porch to wait for the bird to reappear. Mary said that everyone who had been there had seen it.

As I waited, she told the story of when she first saw the hummingbird. What a thrill that must have been! Another birder arrived and Mary brought us some fresh apple cider. After a few minutes we saw the hummingbird. He zipped to the feeder, only an arm's length away on the other side of the porch screen. What an amazing little guy. He took a few drinks from the feeder and flew away.

Before I left, I signed the guest book. Many people had been there earlier that day. Even more would come in the days and weeks that followed. For almost two months the Nesgodas were gracious hosts for birders, photographers, and, most importantly, the Rufous Hummingbird itself.

The Nesgodas received a Certificate of Appreciation from the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union this past fall, along with the gratitude of dozens and dozens of birders and photographers, including me. That was some bird.

# Savaloja Challenge Match: A Smashing Success

by Alyssa DeRubeis

This year, the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union (MOU) tried something new. The Savaloja Grant Challenge was created as an increased effort to fund the Savaloja Grants. These grants support Minnesota projects that increase our understanding of birds, promote preservation of birds and their natural habitats, or increase public interest in birds, including within racial and ethnic communities currently underrepresented in Minnesota's birding community. The original goal of the challenge was this: Every dollar donated, or received in or memberships, would be matched, up to \$5,000, thanks to a challenge match offered by one of our members. If the challenge is met, the \$10,000 raised would go towards

Savaloja Grants. The time frame for these membership renewals and upgrades as well as donations was *supposed* to be between September and December 7<sup>th</sup>.

On October 26<sup>th</sup>, Elizabeth Bell and Steve Wilson announced that the \$5,000 goal had already been reached. And as of late November, a total of \$6,000 was received in donations and/or new or upgraded memberships, which means that the Savaloja Grants will receive \$12,000! In the beginning, the MOU had no idea what the response would be. However, members and friends of the MOU really came through. Thanks to this generous response, the MOU will be able to support more worthwhile bird projects in Minnesota.

## Thank You, Elizabeth Bell

At its December 5<sup>th</sup> meeting, the MOU Board said "good-bye" to Elizabeth Bell, long-time Membership Secretary, and "hello" to Cindy Smith, incoming Membership Secretary. Elizabeth doesn't know exactly how long she has been on the board, but she has served capably and faithfully in several roles. She and Cindy have been working together to assure a smooth transition and Cindy will use the MOU membership secretary email address for MOU email: [membership@moumn.org](mailto:membership@moumn.org).

Thank you, Elizabeth and welcome, Cindy!

### New MOU Members

JG Bennett, *Duluth MN*

David Holets, *Minneapolis MN*

Deanna Johnson, *Park Rapids MN*

Jeanne LaBore, *Minneapolis MN*

Krista Menzel, *Saint Paul MN*

Aaron & Claudette Moen, *Dassel MN*

Tom & Barb Schmelzer, *Newport MN*

Carol & Timothy Wahl, *Mahtomedi MN*

Margaret Watson, *Minneapolis MN*



*Hairy Woodpecker photo by Earl Orf*



# Minnesota Ornithologists' Union

University of Minnesota  
Bell Museum of Natural History  
10 Church Street SE  
Minneapolis, MN 55455

## The Mission of the M.O.U.

We foster the study and conservation of birds by amateurs and professionals. We promote the conservation of birds and their natural habitats. We support these aims primarily by publishing and sharing information, by serving as a repository for records, by conducting field trips, by awarding grants for research, and by supporting programs that educate members and the public about birds.

### MOU Officers

Roy Zimmerman, *President*  
Bob Bossert, *Vice President*  
Tamara Holmer, *Recording Secretary*  
Cindy Smith, *Membership*  
Mark Lystig, *Treasurer*  
Carl Greiner, *Past President*

### Editors of *Minnesota Birding*:

Diana Rankin and Alyssa DeRubeis

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**Conservation Chair:** conservation@moumn.org  
**Grants:** grants@moumn.org  
**Youth Mentorship:** mentorship@moumn.org  
**Field Trips:** fieldtrips@moumn.org  
**All other MOU functions:** mou@moumn.org

## MOU Membership: New/Renewal

Name \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

County \_\_\_\_\_

### Membership Categories

- Youth (under 18) \$15.00
- Individual \$25.00
- Foreign (including Canada) U.S. \$35.00
- Family \$35.00
- Supporting \$75.00
- Corporate \$100.00
- Life, single \$500.00
- Life, joint \$700.00

Send to: Cindy Smith, MOU Membership Secretary  
19885 Lillehei Avenue  
Hastings MN 55033-9354

### Please make a contribution to the Savaloja Grants

The Savaloja Grants supports research and other projects selected by the MOU for special attention. Your contributions help fund a better future for birds in Minnesota. You can add a contribution to your membership check.

Amount: \$ \_\_\_\_\_