



Meadowlark

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Home for the holidays: Birds to look and listen for in November and December

by *Conor Gearin*

“I can’t see those birds in the tree — the leaves are in the way!” Well, that’s not a problem anymore, is it? What winter takes away also reveals something more. The leaves that interrupted views of a warbler flitting hither and thither have fallen to give us a better look at our winter birds. They’ve returned home for the holidays, back from their summer excursions far north.

A smaller number of species frequent the Omaha metro area compared to the rest of the year, but that doesn’t mean there aren’t special things to see and hear. Topping the list, for me at least, is Harris’s Sparrow. The bird’s name doesn’t do justice to how unique they are. The biggest sparrow found in the U.S., they have a black patch that extends from the top of their heads to their throats, helping frame a massive orange bill that almost seems to belong on a Northern Cardinal, a larger bird. In the winter, Harris’s Sparrows are only found in the central Great Plains, including eastern Nebraska. Their favorite habitats are brushy edges: fencerows, hedges, and shrubby areas on the margins of backyards and fields. They’re not hard to find around Omaha; reliable spots include Heron Haven, Glacier Creek Preserve, Fontenelle Forest, and many other green areas large and small.

As they breed so far north, Harris’s Sparrows are not included in the summer Breeding Bird Survey, making



Harris's Sparrow, photo by Alan Schmierer

the annual Christmas Bird Counts one of the few available measures of their population size. The data suggest a long-term decline in their numbers, and loss of good wintering habitat such as shrubby fencerows is probably a contributing factor. Submitting observations of this species on eBird can help biologists gain a better understanding of how to conserve them. *(continued on page 3)*

Sandhill Cranes in store for November members program

The great migration in Nebraska attracts visitors from around the world to see the breathtaking sight of the Sandhill Cranes. Our November program welcomes Sandra Douglas from The Crane Trust.

Learn the history of the conservation groups that came together to save the Platte River and its vital habitat. One hundred years ago, there were only 20,000 Sandhill Cranes in the wild. Today, there are more than 800,000.

Please join us on November 14 at DJ’s Dugout, 777 N. 114th Street. Social hour begins at 6 p.m. followed by the program at 7. Register for the event at Audubon-Omaha.org.



GREEN CORNER: HOW YOU CAN HELP WILDLIFE AT HOME

Conservation begins at home; each of us can help restore our unique ecosystem.

Thankful but not wasteful

The annual greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. from food waste are equivalent to 30% of the emissions from passenger vehicles. Try not to overshop for festive family gatherings.

You can’t bring them inside

But you can provide food and water for wildlife during the winter months to help them survive. Heated birdbaths and birseed can help birds make it through cold snaps and storms.

ON THE HORIZON

November

FIELD TRIP

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6

What: Saw-whet Owl Banding. With some luck, we'll see an owl during the banding process. Registration limited to 20 people to reduce stress on the birds.

When: 7 p.m.

Where: Hitchcock Nature Center, 27742 Ski Hill Loop, Honey Creek, IA

How: Register at Audubon-Omaha.org

MEMBERS PROGRAM

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14

What: Crane Trust's Sandra

Douglas will share the history of the conservation groups that came together to save the Platte River and its vital habitat.

When: 6 p.m. social, 7 p.m. program

Where: DJ's Dugout meeting room
777 N. 114th Street, Omaha

How: Register at Audubon-Omaha.org

EZ DOES IT URBAN BIRDING

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 16

When: 9-11 a.m.

Where: Towl Park

9310 W. Center Rd., Omaha

How: Register at Audubon-Omaha.org

December

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

SATURDAY: DECEMBER 14

What: Counting birds with Bob Wells

When: TBD - usually 1/2 day

Where: Various locations

How: Send an email to Bob Wells at rcwells@cox.net

Organized annually by the National Audubon Society, this event involves thousands of volunteers across North America who come together to count and document bird species within designated areas. The data collected help researchers monitor the health and status of bird populations, providing valuable insights into the impacts of environmental changes on bird species.

Field notes from the president *by Anne Maguire*



Hello, fellow nature-lovers. I'm Anne Maguire, the recently elected president of ASO. I'm looking forward to a great year of educational programs, birding events, and field trips. I hope to see you at these gatherings.

I got involved in ASO when a friend asked me to be a volunteer for the Student Art Contest. I was amazed by the impact this yearly program has on the kids and their families in our community.

Volunteering allowed me to meet others who were giving their time to help our environment and wild birds, things I care about deeply. They are my kind of people. So I continued volunteering for other things, including our Meadowlark newsletter.

Soon my husband and I were helping with the ASO Bird Seed Sale, the main source of funding for ASO. We deliver bird seed to those who select the home delivery service. We look forward to this opportunity to get out and meet people in the community who are feeding birds.

Volunteering led me to serving on the board of directors. ASO is an all-volunteer organization, including the board of directors. We are serving because we care about our mission: The ASO is dedicated to the active promotion of environmental awareness to our community through education, conservation, and enjoyment of our natural heritage, especially birds.

If you would like to get involved with a great group of people, I encourage you to become a volunteer. Check our website, Audubon-Omaha.org, for upcoming volunteer opportunities!

The eyes have it — your photos

We love to see your bird photos! Please email them to photos@audubonomaha.org



Northern Cardinal, photo by Mary Ellis



Rose-breasted Grosbeak, photo by Jennifer Dobby



White-breasted Nuthatch, photo by Laura Lux

Birds to look and listen for in November and December *(continued from page 1)*



Clockwise, from upper left: Common Merganser, Canvasback, Northern Shoveler and Bufflehead. Photos by USFWS.

As fall deepens and winter creeps closer, “weird duck season” begins. You see, Mallards aren’t the end-all-be-all of ducks in North America. Ducks come in all shapes and sizes, from the tiny Bufflehead to the massive Canvasback. Their bills range from thin and dagger-like (Common Mergansers) to stout and spade-like (Northern Shovelers.) And many of these species move south in the fall after breeding much further north. Thus, many have dubbed late fall “weird duck season.” An impressive diversity of waterfowl appears in the metro area throughout the fall and winter. Visiting your local water body regularly to search for new arrivals will help you get familiar with many different species — their calls, behavior, and what they look like in profile from a distance. With any luck, you’ll be a certified weird duck expert by the spring.

Moving beyond ducks to other waterfowl, check bare cropfields for swirling tornadoes of migratory Snow Geese feeding on waste grain. You

might see several thousand on one drive along I-29. Many people throughout history have identified the honking of a Canada Goose flock overhead as the essential sound of fall. And to be sure, it has its charms. But for me, hearing the more distant bugling of Snow Geese flying under the moon is the signature soundtrack of autumn. I often hear it when I’m taking the trash can to the curb in the evening — maybe you will, too.

Highlights of November & December Birds

WATERBIRDS

- Snow Geese
- Northern Shoveler
- Gadwall
- American Wigeon
- Northern Pintail
- Green-winged Teal
- Canvasback
- Redhead
- Ring-necked Duck
- Lesser Scaup
- Bufflehead
- Common Goldeneye
- Hooded Merganser
- Common Merganser

LANDBIRDS

- Bald Eagle
- Winter Wren
- Pine Siskin
- American Tree Sparrow
- Fox Sparrow
- Harris’s Sparrow
- Rusty Blackbird

WANT TO KNOW WHAT OTHER BIRDERS HAVE SEEN IN OUR AREA?

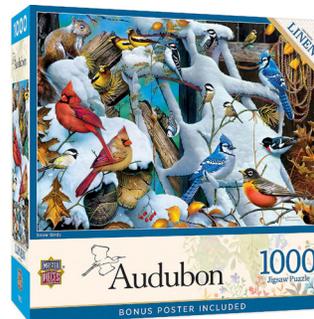
Download the free smart phone app eBird and go to the Explore icon. You can see which species have been spotted and their location. Log in to record your sightings, too.

Birdy holiday gifts for all ages

National Audubon Society partners with Masterpiecesinc.com to develop Audubon-branded products. A portion of the proceeds go to Audubon. Here’s a few that will spark interest in birds for young and old alike.

AUDUBON JIGSAW PUZZLE

features a winter scene with illustrations of favorite avian wonders. Made from recycled paper, this 1000 piece puzzle is perfect for winter days spent inside. \$18.99

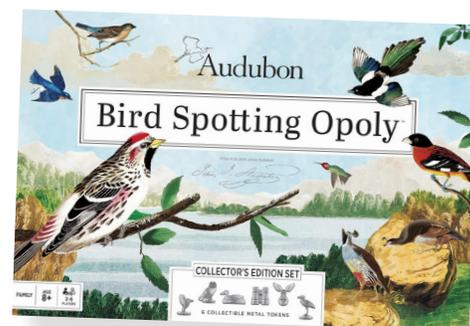


AUDUBON DIY BIRDHOUSE

Home sweet home! This birdhouse kit is easy to assemble and fun to paint. Encourages hand eye coordination, fine motor skills, paint color mixing and creativity, and a love for birds and observing nature. \$16.99



BIRD SPOTTING OPOLY is a nature-themed board game featuring some of the most iconic North American species. Each of the cards comes with unique trivia. Collect the most bird-sightings to win! \$29.99



AltEn Cleanup – A long running series? *by Dan Murphy*

The serial drama of the continuing environmental cleanup of contaminated ethanol byproducts stockpiled at Kansas-based biofuel maker AltEn's former production facility near Mead, Nebraska, begs to be introduced as if it were a streaming series on Netflix or Prime.

PREVIOUSLY ON ...

In 2015, six major seed companies (AgReliant, Bayer, Becks, Corteva Agriscience, Syngenta, and Winfield United) embarked on what they thought would be an efficient, cost-effective way to safely dispose of unused seed that had been treated with pesticides and fungicides. The idea was to produce ethanol from the seeds and market the byproduct — called wet cake — as fertilizer. Although ethanol plants had been safely producing fuel using harvested corn or grains for some time, no one had done so using seeds that were coated with “neonics,” shorthand for neonicotinoids, which kill insects and fungi and are toxic to humans. Due to the perceived revolutionary potential of the project, AltEn soon processed approximately 1 billion pounds of neonic-treated seeds, and then stacked a staggering 115,000 tons of contaminated wet cake at its Mead location.

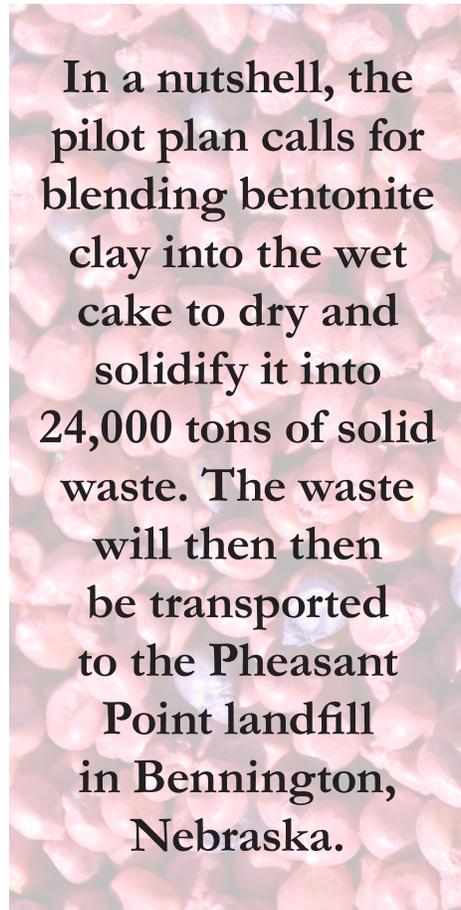
It wasn't long before area residents resented the disgusting reek of the seed piles. People also grew increasingly concerned about potential threats to their groundwater and their health. Seeing the writing on the wall, AltEn closed up shop in Nebraska.

Preliminary medical studies conducted by UNMC's College of Public Health and Creighton University have indicated that, to date, there have been no demonstrated links between negative health conditions and exposure to chemicals from the AltEn plant. Tests have also revealed no contamination in the source of Mead's drinking water.

Experts caution that it is too early to draw final conclusions about AltEn-related health threats, however. “Our conclusion was that people are getting contaminated by what's stored there on the AltEn property,” said Dr. Eleanor Rogan, associate dean for

strategic initiatives in the College of Public Health at UNMC. “And we hope that, with the cleanup, that problem will go away for the people in that area of Saunders County.”

Litigation involving AltEn and its seed company partners is ongoing.



EPISODE 2

The six seed producers coalesced into a coalition called the AltEn Facility Response Group and hired a firm called NewFields to carry out the cleanup. The coalition is covering the entire cost of the cleanup.

In a nutshell, the pilot plan calls for blending bentonite clay into the wet cake to dry and solidify it into 24,000 tons of solid waste. The waste will then be transported to the Pheasant Point landfill in Bennington, Nebraska, which is operated by WM (formerly Waste Management). NewFields and its contractors are responsible for ensuring that the process does not endanger anyone at the facility or along the transportation route.

During the first phase of the cleanup, in

October and November 2023, NewFields delivered 10,208 tons (515 truckloads) of treated wet cake to Pheasant Point. Starting this summer, NewFields began transporting an additional 10,000 tons (about 485 truckloads) of treated wet cake to the disposal site.

Meanwhile, about 13.4 million pounds of treated and discarded seed are being burned at a Covanta “waste-to-energy” facility in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which will generate energy for residential use.

WHAT'S UP NEXT

Transportation of solid waste from Mead to Bennington, which had been suspended during the cold weather months, resumed. Other facets of the NewFields-led cleanup effort have continued unabated, including water treatment, groundwater testing and treated seed removal.

In a preliminary report, NewFields wrote that soil samples contained chemicals from the AltEn waste material, but at concentrations that would make it unlikely for them to reach groundwater in the Todd Valley aquifer, which supplies water to local residents. University of Nebraska researchers also collected samples independently from deep in the soil on farms that used AltEn waste as fertilizer. They found neonicotinoids in low amounts even at 30-40 feet deep. A NewFields representative said that once more of the wet cake has been removed, the firm will collect samples from the consolidated wet cake pile, following guidance from the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy for the sample depths and locations.

After the pilot project concludes, the six seed companies in the AltEn Facility Response Group will work with the team from NewFields to analyze data and determine the safest course of action for removing the remaining wet cake. It's entirely possible that this drama could run for several more seasons. Stay tuned.

Sources for this article include: Lincoln Journal Star, Nebraska Public Media, KOLN, University of Nebraska Medical Center College of Public Health, NewFields.com, and Progressive Farmer, powered by DTN.

Board update

HELP IS HERE Please welcome our new Executive Administrator, Sarah Shepherd. We are thrilled to have this former educator and type-A organizer working with ASO. Sarah will reply to emails and answer phone calls, then send queries along to the board member best suited to answer any questions or comments you might have. Sarah will also be managing volunteers for the Student Art Contest among other events. Her email is sshepherd@audubonomaha.org

LOOKING FOR BIRD(ERS) We need birders to plan and lead field trips near and far. If interested, please contact Amy at acampagna@audubonomaha.org.

Glenn Pollock receives Hagie Award

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation selected “super volunteer” Glenn Pollock to receive the 2024 Lawrence and Eula Hagie Heritage Award. The award is given annually to a person who has demonstrated extraordinary personal service and commitment to improving the quality of Iowa’s natural environment while encouraging others to do the same.

“Glenn epitomizes the spirit of the Hagie Heritage Award,” said Joe Jayjack, external affairs director at INHF. “He has used his time, expertise and passion to care for Iowa’s prairies and to educate others about their importance.”

Glenn grew up in Denison, where many residents were able to recall a time when Iowa still had large, unplowed prairies. Their stories, along with fishing trips in the Loess Hills with his father, sparked Glenn’s interest in conservation. “Protecting Iowa’s natural environment is simply a part of who Glenn is,” said Chad Graeve, a Natural Resource Specialist at Pottawattamie County Conservation. Glenn spent his career working in biomedical engineering, but he spent a lifetime volunteering to protect and restore the natural world.

As one of Pottawattamie County Conservation’s longest-serving volunteers, Glenn has led prairie walks, conducted plant surveys and helped with prescribed burns since 1991. He has been instrumental in the protection of multiple nature preserves, including Hitchcock Nature Center near Honey Creek and Vincent Bluff State Preserve in Council Bluffs, where he has been the Stewardship Coordinator since the late 1990s. He is also active in the Audubon Society of Omaha, which serves southwest Iowa. With ASO, he was instrumental in the acquisition of two remnant prairies in Nebraska he now stewards, often with his own equipment and funds.

Glenn also spearheaded the installation of Motus Wildlife Tracking stations at several parks, including Hitchcock Nature Center, Waubonsie State Park, Willow Lake Recreation Area, and Yellow Smoke Park. He even designed and installed interactive exhibits to engage visitors with real-time tracking data.

Alongside Glenn’s clear dedication to protecting and restoring Iowa’s nature, he shows just as much care and commitment toward mentoring the next generation of stewards. Chad Graeve credits Glenn for serving as an inspiration and actively providing opportunities that led to his career. “Glenn’s work to preserve the delicate, vital beauty of Iowa’s natural resources is creating a brighter future for all of us,” Graeve said.

Glenn was honored as the 2024 Hagie Heritage Award recipient at the Iowa Nature Summit in Des Moines. He was also celebrated at a small reception following a prairie seed harvest at Hitchcock Nature Center in October.

CONGRATULATIONS GLENN FROM AUDUBON SOCIETY OF OMAHA!



RESOURCES & INFO:

HOW TO JOIN/RENEW/UPDATE

Join or renew your membership online at Audubon-Omaha.org and select “Get Involved.” Save paper and avoid confusion. Your membership with National Audubon automatically makes you a member of Audubon Society of Omaha.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS?

Please call National Audubon toll-free at 1-844-428-3826, or send an email to audubon@emailcustomerservice.com

STAY CONNECTED

Join our email list at Audubon-Omaha.org under “Get Involved.”

BEQUESTS & GIFTS

A bequest to Audubon Society of Omaha is a gift to those who will succeed us and secure our natural heritage. Want to honor a loved one and help ASO’s local conservation and education efforts? You can make a donation anytime at audubon-omaha.org OR you can mail your check along with the name and address of the person to be notified to:

Audubon Society of Omaha
P.O. Box 3542, Omaha, NE 68103

DID YOU KNOW?

If you are a member of the National Audubon Society and live in this area you are automatically a member of Audubon Society of Omaha — that’s why you get this newsletter. If you prefer to skip the paper newsletter, you can request the email version on our website by selecting Newsletter dropdown of the Who We Are tab on our home page: Audubon-Omaha.org

TAKE ACTION Big things are happening, so communicate with your elected officials. Go to Audubon-Omaha.org for links to contact info.

INJURED BIRD?

Raptors: Call 866-888-7261 to speak to a Raptor Conservation Alliance volunteer. Non-raptor: Call Nebraska Wildlife Rehab at 402-234-2473.

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Society of Omaha
P.O. Box 3542
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STEWARDSHIP OF THE EARTH AND ITS CREATURES

the Meadowlark

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Birds to look for
Upcoming events
AltEn update
Glenn wins Hagie

Photo by Phil Swanson

The Audubon Society of Omaha is dedicated to the active promotion of environmental awareness to our community through education, conservation, and enjoyment of our natural heritage, especially birds.

CONTACT US AT:

P.O. Box 3542
Omaha, NE 68103-3542
402-445-4138
website: Audubon-Omaha.org
email: audubonomaha@audubonomaha.org



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and Instagram.

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President: Anne Maguire
Past President: Christine Prescott
1st Vice President: Conor Gearin
2nd Vice President: Bennett Amdor
Treasurer: Melissa Sitze
Secretary: Virginia Stauffer

ELECTED DIRECTORS

Amy Campagna
Roger Carroll
Kyle Finley
Betty Fullerton
Steve Geddes
Trevor Pellerite
Katy Simmons
Open vacancy

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DEIB: Bennett Amdor
Education/Field Trips: Amy Campagna
Finance: Melissa Sitze
Fundraising and Bird Seed Sale:
Elizabeth and John Fullerton
Habitat: Steve Geddes
Legislative Affairs: Trevor Pellerite
Marketing and Outreach: Conor Gearin
Membership: Duane & Kathy Schwery
Natural Areas Stewardship:
Kayla Johnson & Glenn Pollock
Nominating: Bennett Amdor
Program: Anne Maguire
Student Art Contest: Virginia Stauffer
ASO Administrator: Sarah Shepherd
Executive Director, Audubon Great Plains:
Kristal Stoner