

# The Meadowlark

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.



*ASO is a Chapter of the National Audubon Society Serving Eastern Nebraska and Western Iowa*

November 2012  
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## November Field Trip

by Justin Rink

The November field trip will be at Forest Lawn Cemetery on Saturday, November 17th at 9am. We will scour the grounds searching for resident species and winter finches. We will meet in the parking lot next to the main office. Be sure to bring warm clothes, a hat, gloves, and optics.

## November General Meeting: The Return of Iowa's Bald Eagles

By Jerry Toll

Being in a blind for hours or days on end reveals a side of nature that cannot be found any other way. Duck hunters know this, and so do nature photographers. At our November 8<sup>th</sup> meeting, we will be fortunate to share that experience (without the discomfort) and witness the outcome with one of Iowa's most gifted wildlife photographers. Ty Smedes will be demonstrating what he has learned about Bald Eagles in Iowa over the course of the last 16 years. These magnificent birds have made a comeback in the past decade in Iowa, congregating in large flocks in winter at the tail-races of dams like Red Rock, Saylorville, and

along the Mississippi River. Millions of people worldwide have followed the rearing of the Bald Eagle young at Decorah, Iowa.

Ty will be sharing his photographic diary of nesting eagles. He will discuss and show research being done with bald eagles, unusual behaviors he has captured on film, and interesting facts on the daily lives of Bald Eagles.



*Ty Smedes*

Ty Smedes' photos and articles have been published in major magazines and books. He has published two books, "Capturing Iowa's Seasons" and "The Return of Iowa's Bald Eagles," which he will bring with him to the meeting along with matted prints of his photographic work. He has taught photography and has led nature photography tours to places like Yellowstone, Brazil, and four time to Africa. Ty is a genial and informative speaker who enjoys sharing his experiences.

Please join us for our general meeting, **Thursday, November 8th, at 7 pm** at the Hanscom Park Methodist Church, 4444 Francis Street (one block south of 45<sup>th</sup> and Center). The program will be followed by a brief business meeting and social hour with cookies. Everyone is welcome to attend and there is no cost.

**Bring your dead batteries of all kinds, print cartridges and no-longer-usable small electronics for recycling to the meeting.**

## Christmas Bird Count 2012

The Omaha Count will be Sat, Dec 15. The Quadrant captains will be announced in the December *Meadowlark*. As usual, a pot luck dinner will be held at the home of Betty Grenon following the count. The Ames, Nebraska, count will be held. Monday, Dec 17. The DeSoto/Boyer Chute Count will be Saturday, Dec. 29 meeting at 8 am. Contact information for the quadrant captains will be announced in the December *Meadowlark*. If you would like to be placed where you are needed most, you may now contact Jerry Toll 402-453-9239 or Steve Van Riper 712-388-4807. The results will be totaled at the Toll house with a potluck and hot soup.

## Irruptions and Invasions

By Justin Rink

The word “irruption” can evoke images of immense mountains spewing magma or hot gasses. While “invasions” can conjure up aliens coming to earth in some old “B” movie. However, that is not what this article is pertaining to. Irruptions (not eruptions) are movements of certain bird species triggered by an environmental impact, whether it is an abundance of food or a lack thereof.



*purple finch by Phil Swanson*

Most years irruptions occur very minimally; other years thousands of birds may head south due to unfavorable conditions. A few common species that regularly irrupt southward include Pine Siskins, Purple Finches, and Red-breasted Nuthatches. At least a few of these three species are observed every year south of their normal breeding range. However, in a year where the cone crop has failed, many of these birds may find themselves heading south in great numbers for a better food source. Some species such as the siskins and nuthatches may fly as far as the Gulf Coast or the southern tip of Texas. Many other species irrupt southward, though not as regularly. These include

many of the northern finches that reside in the boreal and mixed forests of the northern United States and Canada. Some of these are Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, Red and White-winged Crossbills, as well as Common and Hoary Redpolls.

A few of these species such as the Evening Grosbeak have not been observed in significant numbers for years in the East and Midwest. During the mid-to-late 1970s, large flocks of these golden-plumaged birds made their way south during some winters. The birds profited from an outbreak of the spruce budworm on their breeding grounds which created a population boom due to an abundance of food. During these winters, the cone crops failed, providing the perfect recipe for a large-scale invasion as it sent flocks of these hungry finches south. Since then there have been no wide-scale outbreaks of spruce budworm, and consequently no large invasions of Evening Grosbeaks. In fact the population of these large bright finches has actually decreased.

White-winged Crossbills and Pine Grosbeaks were also observed far south of their breeding ranges during this time. During the winter of 1995-96, a few Grosbeaks were observed in the Midwest. However, this was nothing when compared to the 1970s.

A catkin and cone crop failure in the northern boreal forest and on the tundra can send flocks of Common Redpolls seeking food. During these Redpoll invasions, at

least a few of their frosty northern cousins, Hoary Redpolls, are observed within great flocks of Commons. These are usually found much farther north and closer to the Canadian border. Occasionally, small numbers of these hardy fluffy finches are observed well south of that vicinity.



*common redpoll*

Further west, some species of corvids such as Black-billed Magpies and Steller’s Jays may irrupt into more lowland areas after a harsh dry summer, or a season where cone crops in the Rockies have ceased to produce. In the 1920s a large-scale invasion sent magpies all the way to central Iowa! Mountain Chickadees also perform a similar movement, and during these years they can sometimes be seen foraging in dry sagebrush plains. This is a dramatic change from the fir and spruce of the Rockies where they normally reside.

It is not just passerines that irrupt or invade, however. Many of you may recall the Snowy Owl invasion of 2011-2012 in which hundreds of these ghostly raptors were spotted throughout the lower 48, and even in Hawaii. This was a large scale irruption that eclipsed a similar event from the mid-1950s.

*Continued on page 5...*

### 3 Spotlight on Nature: Red-Tailed Hawk by Eric M. Scholar

During the winter when driving down to Lincoln from Omaha or driving out to many other areas, one can't help but notice the large number of hawks seen in the leafless trees along the highway. These are almost always Red-tailed Hawks. Of all our hawks, the Red-tail is probably the most often seen. It has sometimes been called a chicken hawk although it rarely preys on chickens. This broad winged, fan-tailed bird will soar lazily overhead on a windy summer day or is easily spotted as it perches on trees or telephone poles during the fall or winter. This hawk is a large brown-backed hawk with a white chest. The Red-Tailed Hawk is a member of the genus *Buteo*, a group of medium-sized raptors with large bodies and broad wings. Members of this genus are known as *buzzards* in Europe, but *hawks* in North America.

Adult males and females look almost identical except that the female is normally larger (it weighs about 25% more than the male). Red-tails are one of the largest members of the genus *Buteo* in North America, typically weighing from 1.5 to 3.5 pounds and measuring 18 to 26 inches in length, with a wingspan of 43 to 57 in. Upper parts of the adults are dark chocolate brown with lighter-colored feather edges. The white-tipped tail is a rich rusty-red color, crossed by one conspicuous subterminal dark band and several narrower and less distinct bands that fade out toward the base of

the tail. From below individuals vary from nearly white to almost solid brown with a broken band of brownish streaking on the upper breast and lower abdomen. Immature hawks do not acquire the red tail until their second year. Immature birds are like the adults in pattern, but they are whiter underneath and duller brown above. There are fourteen recognized subspecies of the Red-tail, which vary in appearance and range. Plumage may also vary with region of the country they are located in. These color variations are morphs, and are not related to *molt*ing. Some consider the darker Harlan's Hawk subspecies as a separate species.



*red-tailed hawk by Loren Padelford*

The Red-tail has an extensive range which covers much of North America from coast to coast and from Alaska to as far south as Panama and West Indies. It occupies a wide range of habitats and altitudes, including, deserts, grasslands, coniferous and deciduous forests, tropical rain forests agricultural fields and urban areas. It lives throughout the North American continent, except in areas of unbroken forest or the high arctic. It is common in Nebraska year-round., both as a breeding bird and as a winter resident. It is most often seen during fall migration from late

September through early November. It is legally protected in Canada, Mexico and the United States by the [Migratory Bird Treaty Act](#). In flight, this hawk soars with wings often in a slight *dihedral*, flapping as little as possible to conserve energy. Active flight is slow and deliberate, with deep wing beats.

The Red-tail is carnivorous and preys on whatever is available. Its diet is mainly small mammals, but it also includes birds and reptiles. Prey varies with regional and seasonal availability but usually centers on *rodents*, which comprise up to 85% of a hawk's diet. In Nebraska it will prey on everything from grasshoppers to jackrabbits and commonly takes ground squirrels and mice. Some large birds are taken on the ground but only by a carefully calculated surprise attack. Red-tails are not particularly fast and can't capture prey very well in the air.

Large trees are favored for nesting but not exclusively. Red-tails always build a stick nest. These are large bulky nests and may be used for several seasons. In Nebraska egg laying usually begins in early April. Two or three eggs are normal. The eggs are grayish white with some brown blotching. Incubation averages 30 days and is shared by both sexes. As with most birds of prey, the male supplies nearly all food until two weeks after hatching. Young Red-tails develop rapidly. Within a month after hatching, they are exercising their wings on the rim of the nest. They may attempt

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## Golden Eagle Declines

By Clem Klaphake

Are the numbers of Golden Eagles in the western part of the United States declining? According to data collected by Hawk Watch International (HWI), the number of Golden Eagles has been dropping since 1980 and has accelerated between 1998 and 2005. Their data shows the decline continues today at the two largest Golden Eagle count sites (Mount Lorette in Alberta and in the Bridger Mountains site in Montana). Other sources such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) data show the same trend.

For example, their data shows there are fewer “floaters” (such as non-breeders and juveniles) in the Golden Eagle population. This may be due to a decline in adult nest activity and productivity as documented by HWI’s nest studies in Utah and Idaho. Golden Eagles are long-lived and slow at reproducing - they don’t start reproducing until they are 5 years old and usually produce one or two eggs per year. So once their numbers start declining and there is less nesting activity, it can take a long time before an adult population could again be seen as increasing.

What might be causing this declining population? As usual, there isn’t one single factor. Humans and nature have a way of making things complicated beyond “A causes B.” First, there

is habitat loss through development and wildfires. HWI has found that cheatgrass-related fires destroy large amounts of shrubs that are used by jackrabbits, a major food source of Golden Eagles. Second, by using satellite tracking of eagles, HWI has found electrocution (from unprotected power lines) and lead poisoning as additional causes of Golden Eagle deaths. Third, shooting and other forms of poisoning or contamination continue to be threats. And, fourth, there is the continuous expansion of wind turbines.

To try to deal with these issues, there are a number of organizations and interests working to get a better understanding of the causes of the declining population of Golden Eagles and what some potential solutions might be. USFWS is working with wind turbine companies to try to avoid turbine siting in high Golden Eagle-populated areas. To do this there are “eagle working groups” (from citizen science groups to the federal and state governments) continuously gathering more data to try to pinpoint existing Golden Eagle concentration areas and evaluate how those populations are doing.

Additionally, some western states are working with developers, trying to figure out what are the actual risk factors associated with wind turbine collisions, reducing the risks of electrocutions from power lines/poles, and educating

the public about reducing the shooting mortalities.

My concern is, can we turn this decline around before the numbers get extremely small and then the Endangered Species Act can come into play (and we all know what “westerners” in general think about that legislation). Or will it have to come to a head as it did with the Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon in the 1970s?



*golden eagle from National Geographic.com by Joe McDonald*

One major difference is that the Golden Eagle is pretty much worldwide and not just a North American species as is the Bald Eagle.

A second difference is that the Golden Eagle in eastern North America seems to be holding its own or even increasing. So any ‘protective’ legislation would probably be limited to the more western populations of this species.

Stay tuned for more data collection and analysis on the status of the Golden Eagle from the western half of this country over the next couple of years.

## Bird Seed Sale Volunteers --Thanks!

Our 32<sup>nd</sup> annual bird seed sale is over and it was truly a group effort from start to finish. When all the bills are paid and the checks counted, we should clear approximately \$4,500.00. Thanks go out to all the volunteers and customers who make this sale a success each year. We apologize if we miss anyone but we would really like to recognize the workers who made this sale a success. Head-of-it-all. Neal Ratzlaff  
Chief assistants: Carole and Dick Rasmussen, Jerry Toll, Kathleen Crawford-Rose  
Computer Backup & Labels: Duane Schwery  
Web Master: Jim McLochlin

Mailing: Helen Bartee, Kathleen Crawford-Rose, Nelli Falzgraf, Essie Grill, Eunice Levisay, Carole & Dick Rasmussen and Kathy Schwery.

Garages : Neal Ratzlaf, and Bob and Kathleen.



Distribution crew (Loading the seed): Jerry Toll, Crew Chief. Crew: Jo Bartikowski, Dolan Collins, Kathleen Crawford-Rose, Jonas Grundman, Mace Hack, Tim Kautzman, Clem Klaphake, Wendell Kuhlman,

Eunice Levisay, Maria McIntosh, Jim McLochlin, Loren & Babs Padelford, John Pollock, Justin Rink, Bob Rose, Al Reyer, Duane Schwery, Eric Scholar, Larry Sekyra, and Don Westling.

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## *Irruptions and Invasions*

*continued from page 2...*

During the summer of 2011 there was an overabundance of food, namely lemmings, on the high tundra. This large food surplus caused many of the young of the year to survive. During the late autumn months, the food population plummeted, and many territories were occupied by adult birds. This chain of events sent many young of the year south seeking a sufficient food source. Unfortunately many birds that made it south would not return. Due to expending so much energy and to lack of rodents, several Snowies were either found exhausted, emaciated, or dead. Close to 100 birds were observed in Nebraska alone. Some were discovered as far south as Oklahoma and Texas. Large numbers of these pale northern phantoms were sometimes observed in one area. Such was the case of a large lake in South Dakota on which 13 birds could be seen.

Other owls that are prone to irrupting or invading due to a lack of rodents include a few of the smaller species such as Northern Saw-Whet and Boreal. Some

northerly species such as Great Gray and Northern Hawk-Owls will make southward journeys of their own.

So as winter closes in on eastern Nebraska, keep in mind that there have already been several sightings of Pine Siskins and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Will this mean that an irruption is well underway this year? Are Evening Grosbeaks and White-winged Crossbills soon to follow? Only the upcoming months will tell.

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## *Spotlight on Nature*

*continued from page 3...*

their first flight at about 45 days. By mid-August the young birds are essentially solitary and they migrate from the nesting area as individuals. Interestingly, Red-tails have also been found to nest occasionally in places other than trees, e.g. a NYC Central Park window ledge, athletic field light poles, etc.

Keep your eyes open as you drive around the state, and as the trees lose their leaves, these birds will become more noticeable.

The author wishes to thank Clem Klaphake for reading over this article and providing me with helpful suggestions.

## October Field Trip Results

Here is the list of the birds heard and and/or seen during The field trip on Saturday, October 13th at Spring Creek Prairie.

Mallard  
 Ring-necked Pheasant  
 Turkey Vulture  
 Northern Harrier  
 Sharp-shinned Hawk  
 Red-tailed Hawk  
 Killdeer  
 Red-headed Woodpecker  
 Red-bellied Woodpecker  
 Downy Woodpecker  
 Blue Jay  
 Horned Lark (heard)  
 Barn Swallow  
 Black-capped Chickadee  
 House Wren  
 Ruby-crowned Kinglet  
 Eastern Bluebird  
 American Robin  
 European Starling  
 American Pipit (one heard as flyover)  
 Sprague's Pipit (several heard/observed)  
 Smith's Longspur (one bird heard vocalizing diagnostic dry rattle call during beginning of hike)  
 Orange-crowned Warbler  
 Yellow-rumped Warbler  
 Eastern Towhee  
 Field Sparrow  
 Chipping Sparrow  
 Vesper Sparrow  
 Savannah Sparrow  
 LeConte's Sparrow (one very cooperative bird that sat up for us)  
 Lincoln's Sparrow  
 Song Sparrow  
 Swamp Sparrow  
 Harris's Sparrow  
 White-throated Sparrow

White-crowned Sparrow  
 Dark-eyed Junco  
 Northern Cardinal  
 Red-winged Blackbird  
 Common Grackle  
 Western Meadowlark  
 House Finch  
 American Goldfinch  
 Pine Siskin

## Christmas shopping

Are you looking for a gift for the Birder in your life? Consider buying one from ASO. The following items will be at the November general meeting. (We cannot accept credit cards at this time, cash or check only.)



The pewter cranes are artistic miniatures produced by the Gary Ginther Studio in Cambridge, Nebraska. These include a crane pin, a window hanging featuring three cranes, and two different free-standing sculptures of cranes on pedestals.



Caps and shirts are offered in multiple colors, featuring an embroidered ASO logo.

We also have a small selection of books which might be of great value in building a nature library, they focus on birds and wildflowers.



“Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect.”

**Aldo Leopold-  
 Foreword to “A  
 Sand County  
 Almanac” 1948**

## Addresses to Remember

### President Barack Obama

The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW  
Washington D.C. 20500-0001  
Comments: 202-456-1111

### Senator Ben Nelson

U.S. Senate, Washington DC 20510; 202-224-6551  
fax 202-228-0012; Lincoln phone: 402-437-5246;  
Omaha phone: 402-391-3411;

Omaha address: 7602 Pacific St, #205, 68114

### Senator Michael Johanns

U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 202-224-4224  
Lincoln: 402 476-1400

100 Centennial Mall N Rm 294, Lincoln NE 68508-3803

### Representative Lee Terry

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515  
Phone: 202-225-4155; Fax: 202-226-5452

Omaha Address: 11717 Burt St, Omaha 68154  
Omaha phone: 402-397-9944

### Representative Jeff Fortenberry

House of Representatives, Washington, DC 20515  
Phone: -202-225-4806

Lincoln phone: 402-438-1598

Lincoln Address:

### Governor Dave Heineman

Capitol Bldg, Box 94848 Lincoln, NE 68509  
Phone: 402-471-2244; Fax: 402-471-6031

### Mayor Jim Suttle

Omaha/Douglas Civic Center  
1819 Farnam St, Omaha NE 68183  
Phone: 402-444-5000 Hot Line: 402-444-5555

Lincoln Capitol Switchboard: 402-471-2311

Washington Capitol Switchboard  
Senate: 202-224-3121; House: 202-225-3121

## Memorials

The Audubon Society of Omaha greatly appreciates the memorials it receives. When sending a gift please identify the person you wish to memorialize and the name and address of the person to be notified.

Mail to Audubon Society of Omaha, P.O. Box 3542, Omaha, NE 68103-0542

We offer two choices of membership: one includes membership in National Audubon as well as in our local chapter, receiving the *Audubon* Magazine and our newsletter, *The Meadowlark*. A portion of the dues is returned to our local chapter.

The other choice is local membership only: this includes receiving *The Meadowlark* and participation in all of our local activities. Dues all go to our chapter.

### **Membership in the National Audubon Society**

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### **Introductory Membership (1st & 2nd Year) \$20 Make check payable to National Audubon Society**

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## Bequests

A bequest to Audubon is a gift to those who will succeed us; a gift to secure our natural heritage.

If you find an injured bird of prey, please contact a Raptor Recovery Center volunteer at 402-731-9869.

Audubon Society of Omaha Mailing Address: P.O. Box 3542, Omaha 68103 - 0542

Phone: 402-451-3647 - <http://audubon-omaha.org>

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Other Activities:

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