
The Meadowlark

May 2010

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ASO is a Chapter

*of the National Audubon
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*Serving Eastern Nebraska
and Western Iowa*

Annual Spring Banquet Thursday, May 20

Anthony's Steakhouse, 7220 F Street, is the location for our annual spring banquet Thurs

day, May 20. All members, spouses, friends, and visitors are welcome. Photo contest results and a program will highlight the evening.

The program presenter, Phil Swanson, is a noted photographer who will show his artful photos and share experiences of a recent trip to New Zealand and its incredible beauty.

He describes it as "a place of sand beaches, snow-capped mountains, 2000-year-old trees, sky-blue water teeming with seabirds, caldera lakes, and every shade of green you can imagine and more. These are some of the wonderful sights we saw as we toured New Zealand in search of its fantastic birds.

"There were ancient birds like the Rock Wren that hardly has a tail, and kiwis that have evolved to almost not being birds. Some endemic birds such as the Stitchbird, Rifleman, and Saddleback are being protected and are growing in numbers. Seeing and hearing them is almost a religious experience.

"The seabirds are a true highlight. Over 75% of the

world's seabird species are seen near New Zealand. Many of these can be viewed on short day trips out to the waters off the New Zealand mainland. There you can see albatrosses with 12-foot wingspans or the New Zealand Storm-petrel, a bird once thought extinct but now rediscovered after being unseen for 150 years."

Phil will share all this and more as he takes us on a journey through the country, a journey he took on a Ross Silcock-led birding tour in late 2009.

Please join us for this once-a-year event. A reservation form is included on page 5 of this issue. **We must receive your reservation by Thursday, May 13.**

If you have questions, please call 451-3647 for information.

Bird Count Replaces Field Trip in May

By Clem Klaphake

The annual Sarpy County Spring Bird Count will be held Saturday, May 8. The County will again be divided into the following four sectors: Fontenelle Forest, Central Sarpy County, Schramm SRA area, and the area west of I-80 to the Platte River.

This Count is usually held during the prime passerine migration period—lots of warbler, vireo, flycatcher

and tanager species. It can still be quite good for shorebird migrants, depending on the river sandbars and possible water in farm fields.

Anyone interested in helping out for a half or full day should contact Clem Klaphake at 292-2276, or at ckavian@cox.net

2

Avian Concerns

By Clem Klaphake

with the large number of bird species that

either are permanent residents or migratory visitors to North America, I'm always amazed at how many at any particular time are either being threatened or endangered. And the causes of this can range from habitat loss, to disease, to innumerable human interferences to natural changes. I would like to highlight a few species that are facing these dilemmas.

The American Bird Conservancy reports that in addition to the loss, or threat of loss, of sagebrush habitat due to urbanization, agriculture, oil and gas exploration and wind power development, barbed wire fencing contributes to increased mortality rates of the Greater Sage Grouse.

After some anecdotal reports of dead Greater Sage Grouse on and next to fence lines in Wyoming, a study was done on the Sweetwater/Sublette County line. In a 4.7 mile stretch of a barbed wire fence over a 7-month period, 146 dead Greater Sage Grouse were found hanging on the fence or on the ground. As of now the barbed wire fencing may be the direct highest cause of human-induced mortality for the sage grouse. This is a species whose range and population have declined by as much a

a negative impact on grassland bird populations of the upper Midwest.

This study, done for the National Wildlife Federation, is one of the first to focus on the Prairie Pothole Region, which of course had already reduced the grasslands and wetlands over the past 200 years by over 50%. Now, 3.2 million additional acres have been plowed under in just 3 years (2005-2007) to make room for corn crops. Much of this corn is grown to meet U.S. mandates for fuel ethanol. Much of this new corn acreage comes from a shift of CRP land to one of corn production.

Grassland birds experiencing marked declines due to this land conversion are Grasshopper Sparrows, Upland Sandpipers and Meadowlarks. Despite the impacts on habitat and species, this land conversion is expected to continue over the next 5 years. The federal Energy Department sees production of blended gasoline expanding from 10.57 billion gallons in 2009 to 15 billion gallons in 2015.

And then there is the issue of alien species that are destructive to native bird species. You probably all have read, seen or heard about the various python

90% in recent decades.

Some of the fence/mortality problems have been dealt with through fence relocation (related to topography and lek locations), wire markers, and winter range locations. This research has had an impact on the views of the Bureau of Land Management.

Their recent statement issued in December 2009 was that all new fence proposals "are carefully evaluated for sage grouse collision risk, and are sited in a manner consistent with conservation measures outlined in the State Sage Grouse Conservation Plan." This is a species that will again undergo evaluation by the Fish and Wildlife Service for possible 'endangered' listing.

As some of us have suspected, with an increase in corn production and removal of conservation reserve program (CRP) acreage, grassland bird species are being impacted by these changes. The University of Michigan just released a study in January 2010 that shows that government incentives to farmers to convert land for corn production for biofuels is having

species that are growing in number in southern Florida—especially in the Everglades National Park. The Burmese pythons are long-lived and have high levels of fecundity. Eradication efforts usually can't keep up with their proliferation rates.

Burmese pythons are not picky about what they eat: reptiles, mammals, amphibians or bird species. A recent study of the intestines of 56 captured pythons in Everglades National Park were found to have eaten a great variety of bird species, including Anhinga, Coots, Pied-billed Grebes, Limpkin, King Rail, Purple Gallinule, Great Blue Heron, White Ibis, Virginia Rail, Great Egret, Magnificent Frigatebird, Clapper Rail and House Wren. Four of these species' numbers are on the decline. The White Ibis and Limpkin are Florida Species of Conservation Concern, and the King Rail and the Clapper Rail are on the U.S. WatchList of birds of national concern. A bird not found in the

*Continued on page
3*

Great Backyard Bird Count Made History

With the help of diligent members of the GBBC, the record of checklists submitted was broken. More than 63,000 persons sent in 97,209 checklists. These came from all 50 states in the U.S. and all 10 provinces and 3 territories of Canada.

The Count revealed highs and lows, and how populations are moving about. Contrasting sharply with last year's invasions was the scarcity of Pine Siskins and redpolls. This was a dramatic swing not unlike others of the

April Field Trip Finds

By Elliott Bedows

ASO ran its April field trip to Branched Oak Lake, north of Lincoln, on March 27. Fifteen participants wisely ignored the weather forecast (some light showers early, but those abated by 10:00 A.M., and all we had to deal with were annoying northerly winds. These made it feel colder but didn't really impact birding other than keep the passerine counts lower than usual.

We tallied 54 species for the day, including a few seen on the way home to Omaha. The following highlights

past and likely influenced by more food for reproductive success, plus a greater food supply to the north.

Leading the way in overall numbers was the American Robin: 1,850,08, with 1,450,058 reported from St. Petersburg, Florida, alone where robins roost in massive numbers. Second was Canada Goose with 748,356 individuals. Snow Goose, American Crow and European Starling all were reported at about 500,000 individuals each.

Some rare sightings were Black-legged Kittiwake in Havasu City, Arizona, and a Black-legged Kittiwake in McAllen, Texas. A first since 2005 was a Crimson-collared Grosbeak. And a first for the GBBC—a Red-billed Tropicbird off the coast of San Diego.

Canadian birders reported a Rustic Bunting in Creighton, Saskatchewan, and a Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch in Marathon, Ontario—greatly beyond its normal Rocky Mountain range.

The photo contest yielded nearly 7,000 images. As of April 6, the judging hadn't been completed.

If you haven't as yet checked, you can access much more information on line at www/birdcount.org.

Avian Concerns,

Continued from page 2

intestines of these 56 pythons was the Wood Stork that also resides in this area and is endangered under the Endangered Species Act.

What can exacerbate the influence of

(numbers are approximate given the number of people present). A * indicates first of year.

Common Loon* 2 - both in breeding plumage

Eared Grebe* 4-5 - all in breeding plumage

Pied-billed Grebe 6

American White Pelican* 6

Double-crested Cormorant* 1, Northern Pintail* 1

American Wigeon* 2 seen at Jack Sinn on return home

Redhead 4, Canvasback 4,

Ruddy Duck ca. 15, Ring-necked Duck 10, Greater Scaup 1

Lesser Scaup - dozens

Common Goldeneye - dozens

Bufflehead - dozens, Hooded Merganser 12

Duck sp. many 100's

TV* 2 seen on the way home

Cooper's Hawk 1, seen on the way home

Northern Harrier 1 and 3 more at Jack Sinn WPA

California Gull* 2, Franklin's Gull* 1

Other "good" gulls 0

Tree Swallow* 35-40

Eastern Bluebird 1, Rusty Blackbird* 1

Harris' Sparrow* ca. 4

Eric Scholar Recognized for Volunteer Work at Fontenelle Forest

The Fontenelle Nature Association recently recognized Eric Scholar, past president and current board member of ASO, for his years of work at the Forest. For FNA's *NatureSearch*, Eric searched out and identified Slime Molds and Fungi. He also leads hikes and conducts

Burmese pythons is that climate maps suggest this snake could find suitable habitat, comparable to that of the pythons' native range in Asia, in the southern one-third of the contiguous 48 states. This part of the U.S. is already one of the fastest growing areas in terms of urban sprawl. Adding another invasive predator species only adds to pressure on native bird species.

programs for visitors and members. A specialty of his is wildflowers.

A member of the Bird Club and Photography Club, Eric is also a Director on the Fontenelle Nature Association Board.

Spotlight on NATURE

Prothonotary Warbler

By Eric Scholar

Warblers are the largest group of neotropical migrants and a special group of birds that most birders look forward to seeing every year. For a few weeks in spring, mainly in May and again in the fall, people in this area of the country (Eastern Nebraska) experience the phenomenon of warbler migration.

Wood warblers are small colorful perching birds that breed throughout North America and winter anywhere from the southern U.S. to the tropics. There are in all roughly 48 species of wood warblers regularly found in the U.S. Most can be found somewhere in Nebraska. The Missouri River valley adjacent to eastern Nebraska provides a primary migration route for many of these birds. Fontenelle Forest is now recognized as a prime warbler migration hotspot. These warblers are found in almost all forest types as well as brushy border habitat and shrubby fields. They utilize all levels of the forest from the floor to the upper canopy of the tallest trees. They glean insects from branches, trunks and leaves, eat fruit and berries and even catch insects in flight.

One of the most prominent and beautiful warblers seen or heard in forested areas near the wetlands of Eastern Nebraska during this time is the Prothonotary Warbler. This bird is identified by its



habitat. It nests in a tree cavity usually in a tree which is surrounded by water. It and Lucy's Warbler (of the southwest) are the only North American warblers which habitually nest in cavities. Most nests are in natural cavities or crevices, but woodpecker holes and man-made objects such as nest boxes are used. The nest is built mainly by the female usually 4 ½ to 9 feet above the water. Moss is an important constituent of most nests. Males sometimes build dummy nests early in the season. The clutch size is relatively large for a warbler, with up to eight eggs. Slow-moving water pools or ponds are typical habitat components of nesting areas. The presence of dead snags or stumps is essential. In the southeastern U.S, dominant trees include cypress, gum and tupelo. Farther north such as in this area a variety of trees are used, all of which are associated with ponds, pools or slow-moving streams. These include willows, maples, ash, cottonwoods, and American elms. The prothonotary is fairly common-to-locally common, breeding in the lowlands of southeastern North America, from eastern Minnesota and

brilliant golden-yellow head and underparts, becoming white on the undertail coverts. It has olive-green upperparts, unmarked blue gray wings and a blue-gray tail with large white spots, making the male very distinctive. It has a large dark eye that is prominent in its yellow head. Female and first year birds are similar but duller on the head and underparts.

The prothonotary's shape is different from other largely yellow warblers because of the long spikelike bill, overall heavy appearance and relatively short tail. This bird is about 5 ½ inches long with a wing span of about 9 inches. Its song is very characteristic and easily recognizable, being ringing and clear with repetitious, slightly up-slurred notes such as sweet-sweet-sweet or tweet-tweet-tweet. The prothonotary breeds in flooded or swampy mature woodlands. Occasionally it is found in higher areas. It winters mainly in coastal mangroves, also in lowland swamps and wet woodland and occasionally in drier woodlands. Unlike most migrant warblers, the pair-bond with the prothonotary appears to be maintained through the winter. Also the prothonotary often roosts communally in winter, gathering in flocks towards dusk, having spent the day feeding on territory or roving in small groups.

The prothonotary is also well known for its breeding

Central Texas east to Florida and the Atlantic coast. The breeding range extends west in river floodplains to Iowa, southeastern Nebraska (rare and local), Eastern Kansas, Central Oklahoma and throughout the Eastern third of Texas.

The prothonotary warbler populations are considered largely stable, but this species is probably limited by nest site availability, and reproduction is often severely curtailed by heavy spring floods. The destruction of floodplain forests has caused important local declines in the Mississippi Valley wetland. Drainage has also probably reduced populations in the southeast. In Fontenelle Forest they used to nest along south stream trail, but the beavers have basically removed all potential nesting trees near the stream. Some cowbird parasitism has been seen with the prothonotary warbler, but as cavity nesters this bird is probably immune to heavy parasitism.

So as we get more and more into spring, keep your eyes and ears open for this bird.

I want to thank Clem Klaphake for providing some background information on this warbler and Phil Swanson for the photo of the bird.

Photo by Phil Swanson

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