

The Meadowlark



February 2012

Volume 41 Issue 2

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

The Ecology and Management of Prairies Feb. 9th Audubon Meeting

by Clem Klaphake

Come join us Thursday February 9th at 7:00p.m. at the Hanscom Park Methodist Church, 4444 Frances Street (1 block south of 45th & Center). A brief business meeting will follow the program, and a social hour will conclude the evening.

The topics of our February 9th general meeting will be PRAIRIES. I consider our speaker to be an expert on the management and restoration of Nebraska prairies. What does this mean? It means analyzing and assessing the impacts of various grazing methods (cattle vs bison, seasons, duration, number of animals, weather, etc), prescribed burns (frequency, total vs patch, intensity, etc), and seeding and/or reseeding of grasses and forbs. And in turn study how these various actions influence or impact birds (nesting and migrants), mammals, amphibians, reptiles, insects (especially butterflies) and the microbiotic systems (mainly below the ground surface).

These are all issues that Chris Helzer, our speaker, has been working and struggling with for over 15 years in Nebraska.



LeConte's Sparrow on Big Bluestem by
Phil Swanson

Chris is always open to any questions concerning prairies. He lives and breathes prairies. In the summer of 2011 Neal Ratzlaff and I spent 5 hours roaming a number of different prairies that Chris manages in the Grand Island area. It was a wonderful experience to walk through the prairies with Chris and see, smell and hear things that were pointed out to us that we might not have noticed had it not been for Chris's enlightened comments.

Chris is a native Nebraskan who has Bachelors and Masters degrees from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and currently lives in Aurora, Nebraska with his wife and three children. Chris

started working with The Nature Conservancy as a land steward and now has worked for the

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Birdseed Pickup

If you ordered birdseed please mark your calendar for February 4th. You can pick your order up at Neal's garage at 536 Brentwood Road between 9:00 and 4:30.

February Field Trip Saturday the 25th

by Justin Rink

Join Justin Rink for a birding trek around some of Omaha's Cemeteries. These places can be quite productive in some years for finches, sapsuckers, and various other species. Places we will hit include Forest Lawn, the Bohemian Cemetery, and Westlawn (weather depending). We will meet on Saturday Feb 25th at 9:00am at the Forest Lawn Cemetery Parking lot. Be sure to bring optics, comfortable footwear, and warm clothing as we will be outside.

Postcard From The President by Jer Toll

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Notes on the Snowy Owl Irruption

We have been fortunate to experience a once-in-a-lifetime event this past month. As of this writing, there have been 133 confirmed Snowy Owls in Nebraska and 121 Snowy Owls in Iowa as of January 18th. I found an older national map online showing the distribution as of December 1. It clearly demonstrates that this is a massive movement southward to a band extending from Washington State to east of the Great Lakes. A Snowy Owl even showed up at Honolulu Airport. I'd like to know how that bird got there! The peak of the irruption in Nebraska seems to be over now, as new sightings have drastically tapered off.

Snowy Owls, on their home range, are highly dependent upon lemmings - rodents - whose population may vary by as much as 100-fold over a 3-6 year cycle. As an adaptation to this boom-and-bust food cycle, the breeding and migratory life cycles of Snowy Owls are highly variable. As the lemming population soars, Snowies produce large clutches of young owls and move about very little during non-breeding seasons. When the lemming population plummets, reproduction is poor or nonexistent and Snowy Owls are forced to move, sometime great distances, in search of food. This is when we see an irruption in the lower 48 states.



Snowy Owl by Jer Toll

However, the cause of an irruption is not this clear cut. It has to do with the predator/prey ratio. An irruption could occur when the lemming population is still climbing but there is an overabundance of Snowy Owls, thus forcing movement, usually by the offspring of that breeding season. The converse could happen as well. Snowy Owls have no fidelity to where they were born as do obligate migrants. They wander in search of food. Satellite tracking has found them hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles away in subsequent breeding years. Obligate migrants generally return to the same area in winter year after year. With Snowy Owls, their movements may be in any direction in search of food. This flexibility in their movements helps to explain the

short duration that they can be found in one locale in Nebraska.

So what is different about this irruption year? If their boom/bust cycle is 4-6 years, what sets this year apart with massive movement of Snowy Owls to the south? In the typical bottom of the cycle, only a relatively few young owls make it to the lower 48, and those are usually regionalized. That is because the lemming population cycle is synchronized sort of like a wave. When the lemmings crash in one region, surrounding regions will usually still have relatively high populations that will support enough of the overabundance of Snowy Owls to maintain the species.

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Postcard From The President *continued ...*

What appears to have happened this winter is that this synchronicity has failed, and there has been a massive die-off of lemmings across the Arctic range in North America, forcing a massive movement southward. This is highly theoretical because the irruption is ongoing with no data to back it up, and Snowy Owls are a difficult species to study given their range, low population densities, and migratory habits.

Sadly, many of the Snowy Owls we are seeing will die without returning to breed. These ghosts of the north are magnificent creatures, beautiful to behold and eminently adapted to their harsh environment. While the individual owl suffers, the species has these coping mechanisms to combat the high variability in their life-cycle, insuring their species fitness. Most of the Snowy Owl sightings in Nebraska were of juvenile birds, suggesting this was the peak year of the lemming boom - thus no lemmings this winter. This suggests that most of the adult breeders will find enough to eat and remain north to breed again next summer. Remember, it only takes two young owls to survive to breed from each pair of Snowy Owls over the course of their lifetime to insure a stable population.

Newton Ian., 2006. *Advances in the Study of Irruptive Migration*. Ardea

94(3): 433–460. This is a paper containing most of the information used to write the article. It discusses all of the characteristic shared by seed-eating and rodent-eating irruptive migrants and compares facultative (irruptive) and obligate (seasonal) migration. It can be found by Scholar Googling “snowy owl irruptive migration”.



The Ecology and Management of Prairies *continued...*

Conservancy for 15 years. Chris is currently the Conservancy’s Eastern Nebraska Program Director in charge of about 5000 acres of land – primarily along the central Platte River, but also includes the Rulo Bluffs Preserve in the southeastern corner of Nebraska and the Little Salt Fork Marsh saline wetland north of Lincoln.

Chris has published a book entitled [The Ecology and Management of Prairies](#) and blogs at: <http://prairieecologist.com> Chris is also an accomplished photographer and contributes articles frequently to NEBRASKAland Magazine.



Introductory Bird Identification Class

Saturdays March 24th, April 21st, and May 5th

8:00 a.m. to Noon - At Fontenelle Forest/Neale Woods Nature Centers. Admission \$20.00 for all three sessions **MUST** be paid in advance.

Ages 12 and up - This class is limited to 15 participants.

With over 50 million ‘birders’ in the U.S, bird watching is the fastest growing outdoor activity today. Led by Clem Klaphake and Justin Rink, both Board members of the Audubon Society of Omaha, this class includes local field trips designed to teach you how to identify the birds in your backyard or places you go on vacation.

No prior knowledge of bird identification is needed. To sign up, contact Clem Klaphake at 402-292-2276 or ckavian@cox.net.



Banquet May 10th

Mark your calendar for the 2012 Audubon Banquet on Thursday, May 10. Our speaker will be Larkin Powell of UNL - on the culture and conservation efforts in Namibia, Africa, where he and his wife have worked. She will share the podium with him.

2012 Audubon Greater Omaha Student Art Contest

The 2012 Audubon Greater Omaha Student Art contest is underway. Students from grades K -12 are asked to research one of the birds of Nebraska or one of an endangered species of birds and then draw the bird using an artistic technique such as watercolor, oil paint, chalk, print, etc... The students are also asked to research what the particular bird eats, where it is likely to be found and at what time of the year it can be found in the particular area.

Instructions for preparation of the entries and other information can be found on the Audubon website www.audubon-omaha.org.

All entries will be hung for display at the Bellevue University Gordon Lozier Center in Bellevue on Saturday, March 31. Awards will be distributed at 2:00 pm on March 31.

Entries must be brought to the Audubon Office at the Center Mall-lower level, 42nd & Center Friday, February 24 4:00-6:00 pm or Saturday, February 25 10:00am -3:00 pm.

Volunteers are needed to receive the artwork at the Audubon office, to hang the entries on Friday, March 30 or to greet the public and to help with the awards program on Sat. March 31.

Please contact Jackie Scholar at 551-5045 or jbscholar@cox.net

for more information or to volunteer.



Mark your Calendar for the 42nd Annual Rivers and Wildlife Celebration

by Kevin Poague, Audubon, Nebraska

The 42nd annual Rivers and Wildlife Celebration, Nebraska's Crane Festival, will be held March 15-18 in Kearney, Nebraska, the sandhill crane capital of the world. See current information at <http://nebraskacranefestival.org>.

Organized by Audubon Nebraska and the Nebraska Bird Partnership, the conference gathers together nature enthusiasts from across the country to witness the migration of over half a million sandhill cranes and millions of waterfowl and other birds through central Nebraska. Events include guided field trips; the Wild Experience Room, with free activities and wild animal shows for the whole family on Saturday; and daily visits to river blinds operated by Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary for up-close views of cranes roosting on the Platte River.

Local and national speakers will present information on a variety of wildlife and conservation topics. Michael Forsberg will be featured on Saturday evening. Al Batt returns to the RWC for performances in the Wild Experience Room and as lunchtime speaker on Saturday. Other presenters include Paul

Johnsgard, noted Nebraska ornithologist; George Happ, who will share his experiences with sandhill cranes nesting, literally, in his backyard in Alaska; Sharon Stiteler, who runs the popular birding blog Birdchick.com; Caroline Jezierski, the Wind and Wildlife Coordinator with the University of Nebraska Coop Unit; and Keanna Leonard, education director at Audubon's Rowe Sanctuary.

The festival is open to the general public. On-line registration will be available beginning in January at nebraskacranefestival.org. To be put on the mailing list, write Nebraska@audubon.org or call 402/797-2301. Rowe Sanctuary has information about viewing the sandhill crane migration, 308/468-5282; www.rowesanctuary.org.



Great Backyard Bird Count

Make sure your local birds are represented in the upcoming Great Backyard Bird Count—they won't count unless YOU do! Save the dates: the 15th annual GBBC takes place February 17-20.

Everything you need to know to participate is on the website at www.birdcount.org, including downloadable instructions, FAQs, and a how-to video. Get a regional list of the birds you might see in your area in February so you can brush up on your identification skills ahead of time.

Northern and Loggerhead Shrikes

These two birds are often referred to as butcher birds. Unlike most songbirds, the shrikes have a lifestyle and habits more like small grassland hawks than typical songbirds. The name comes from the fact that the shrike impales its prey on thorns and barbs. There are two species of shrikes in North America, and both are frequently seen in Nebraska. In the winter the Northern Shrike is the shrike most likely to be seen. The Northern Shrike breeds across Canada into Alaska and winters across the northern U.S. Like Snowy Owls, more Northern Shrikes move south into Nebraska during years when snow cover is particularly heavy in Canada or vole populations crash. Loggerhead Shrikes nest across Nebraska and are occasionally found during the winter in southeastern counties.



Loggerhead Shrike by Phil Swanson

Shrikes are passerines, belonging to the same scientific order as perching songbirds, but have evolved habits quite unlike passerines. Most songbirds feed mainly on insects and derive much of their nutrients from seeds. Shrikes are exclusively

carnivores - or raptors posing as songbirds. When insects are abundant, they comprise as much as 70-80% of their diet. There is also a vertebrate component to their diet, e.g. mice, lizards, small snakes, and once in a while small birds. However, small mammals comprise the bulk of the shrikes' winter diet.

Although they act like raptors in several ways, shrikes are physically unprepared for life as predators, unlike hawks and owls.

Thus they have evolved certain behavioral skills to compensate for this. More than any other physical feature, it is the shrike's weak perching feet that keep it from being a small hawk. They also lack the sharp talons of true raptors. The shrikes hunt by perching on isolated trees, fences or power lines, although they also have been observed ground hopping to collect insects and other prey. They have excellent vision and can skillfully locate even small and unmoving prey. Shrikes also resemble kestrels in their ability to hover.

When a shrike observes prey on the ground, it leaves its perch, pins the prey to the ground, and kills it with its heavy, hooked bill. Small prey is carried in the shrike's bill while larger prey is usually carried with its feet. This latter ability shows the shrike's accommodation for life as a raptor. To manipulate and dismember larger prey, shrikes impale the prey on fence barbs, tree thorns or small broken branches. Once the prey is impaled, it can be taken apart by the shrike. Prey is killed by the

shrike biting them in the back of the neck and cutting the spinal cord. Often the prey is stored on barbs and thorns. Sometimes shrikes are known to forget or leave the stored prey uneaten. One explanation for this is that they kill more than they eat to impress potential mates. Shrikes have been shown to have impressive memories. They feed most aggressively just after dawn, probably because of the lack of food overnight; also, nocturnal rodents are still active, and insects are not very active then.



Northern Shrike by Phil Swanson

Superficially the two species of shrike are similar, but Northern shrikes are larger (10" vs 9"). Loggerheads are slightly smaller than robins, and their back plumage is a darker gray than Northern shrikes'. Both species have a black mask passing through the eyes from the bill to the back of the head. The mask of Northern Shrikes is narrower and does not rise above the top of the eye while the mask of loggerheads rises slightly above the eye. At a distance the shrikes have a blocky head, which is a good clue as to their identity. Also aiding in their identification are their rapid wing beats, undulating flight and habit of rising abruptly to a perch.

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Spotlight on Nature

continued...

Shrikes are territorial, and these territories are defended from other pairs. In migratory species, a breeding territory is defended on the breeding grounds, and a smaller feeding territory is established during migration and in the wintering grounds. Where several species of shrikes exist together, competition for territories can be intense.

Generally monogamous breeders, male shrikes attract females to their territory with well-stocked caches, which may include inedible but brightly colored items. During courtship the male will perform a ritualized dance which includes actions that mimic the skewering of prey on thorns, and he will feed the female. Shrikes make simple, cup-shaped nests from twigs and grasses in bushes and the lower branches of trees.

I don't want to leave this article on a pessimistic note, but I would be remiss not to point out that the numbers of Loggerhead Shrikes have been declining in recent years. The North American Breeding Bird Survey considers them the most persistently declining species surveyed in North America. From 1966-2004 the species declined at an average rate of 3.7% per year. They were almost added to the endangered species list in 1991. Loggerheads require open grasslands with isolated, elevated perches. Without exception, the main explanation for declining

numbers has been conversion of former grasslands to row crop production. Corn and soybean fields are not shrike habitat.

The author wishes to thank Clem Klaphake for providing some useful comments.



I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder for a moment, while I was hoeing in a village garden, and I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance that I should have been by any epaulet I could have worn.

Henry David Thoreau

Backyard Bird or Squirrel Feeder Donations for Salvation Army

Judy Grace of the Salvation Army, 3612 Cuming St, wishes to add bird and squirrel feeding to their garden for the enjoyment of their residents. These are elderly persons who lack the opportunity to get out to natural areas.

If you have used feeders to donate or you are willing to purchase a new one, please call Judy at 402-250-1016. Two bird feeders and one squirrel feeder are all that they need.

These may be dropped off at the Security Desk at the main entrance of the building at 3612 Cuming Street.

If you
find an injured bird of prey,
please contact a Raptor Recovery Center
volunteer at



Raptor Recovery
Nebraska™
402-731-9869.

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

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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.

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19612 Ridgeway Road

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19612 Ridgeway Road
Plattsmouth, NE 68048 COZCP030Z

Bequests

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

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

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

Office: 1941 So. 42nd Street, Omaha, NE 68105

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