



Meadowlark

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As winter settles in, birds do, too How to see more birds in November and December

by *Conor Gearin*

When you think “winter shelter,” what do you picture? A cozy mountain cabin with fireplace aglow? Birds don’t rely on furnaces: their fiery metabolism and insulating layers of feathers keep them warm. But they still need shelter from the elements. Understanding what they need in the cold months will help you find more birds — and know how to help them make it through the winter.

In November, the shift change from our fall migratory birds to our winter resident birds is nearly complete. Overwintering ducks such as Common Goldeneyes and Ring-necked Ducks float on lakes and rivers, Dark-eyed Juncos scratch the ground for seeds and insects, and Sharp-shinned Hawks keep a keen eye on their songbird prey.

For birds spending the winter, good habitat is key. Rather than a log cabin, a Harris’s Sparrow’s idea of a charming home for December is a hedge or shrubby field edge. Those habitats are full of seeds that can sustain them for months. During storms, the plants offer protection from wind, rain and snow,



Dark-eyed Junco by Larry Frame

too. Though birds’ feathers are great at keeping them warm and dry, they don’t make birds totally invincible. They still rely on the shelter and food provided by native plants to survive the worst that winter throws at them.

Waterfowl depend on habitat in winter, too — just in a different way. They seek out open water that gives them access to aquatic plants, arthropods, and fish, depending on their preference. Deep freezes tend to concentrate waterfowl in smaller patches of open water — and that also makes them easier targets for Bald Eagles. All this can create quite the show on waterbodies like Lake Manawa or Carter Lake, often best enjoyed from inside a car with binoculars or with a spotting scope at a

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Nov. program starring Phil Swanson is a “Must See”

If you missed our Bird-friendly Backyard Tour on July 12, you’re in luck! Phil Swanson, one of our Bird-friendly Backyard hosts, will present an eye-popping photographic visit to his amazing backyard.

In the middle of a bustling Papillion neighborhood, Phil’s small backyard is a hotspot for an astounding 172 bird species, including 27 species of warblers! It offers seclusion, native trees and ferns that bring in the bugs and provide shelter, bird feeders, and a pond with running water all year round — which Phil credits for “bringing in the birds.”

Learn his secrets for designing and maintaining a water feature, positioning bird feeders for maximum viewing, and capturing close-up photos of birds.

Join us on Thursday, November 13 in the private meeting room at DJ’s Dugout, 777 N 114th St. Food and drinks are available for purchase at the 6 p.m. social hour. The program begins at 7 p.m. Please register at Audubon-Oma-ha.org/calendar of events. Invite your nature-loving friends to sit back and enjoy the show! Free and open to the public.



Canada Warbler by Phil Swanson

GREEN CORNER: HOW YOU CAN HELP WILDLIFE AT HOME *Conservation begins at home; each of us can help restore our unique ecosystem.*

Snow season window safety

Bright white snow boosts window reflections. Add screens or decals to help birds see the glass and avoid accidental crashes.

Cozy winter hideaways

In winter, birds like chickadees and wrens use nesting boxes as roosting sites, providing warmth and protection. Just make sure to clean them out after the nesting season!

Join our trip to Homestead National Historical Park!

Saturday, November 1, 2025

"The Homestead Act of 1862 transformed the world. Millions were invited to file claims, including families, women, immigrants, and formerly enslaved people. Over 10 percent of the United States was homesteaded!" —NPS website

Join the Audubon Society of Omaha at Homestead National Historic Park located in Beatrice, Nebraska, on Saturday, November 1, by 10 a.m. (park opens at 9 a.m.) All ages welcome!

Schedule of Events

10 - 10:45 a.m.: Plan to arrive at the Heritage Center by 10 a.m. for a Ranger-led talk and film that will provide information about: the Homestead Act of 1862 and its impact on Native lifeways; the growth of Midwestern communities and expansion of the United States into western spaces; and opportunities the act afforded women, immigrants, and Black Americans.

10:45 a.m. - 12 p.m.: There will be a ranger-led Bird Walk where we hope to see woodpeckers, plus prairie and woodland species that



Heritage Center at Homestead National Historical Park. Photo: NPS

may still be in the area. The trail system at the park includes tall grass prairie, riverine complex and mature forest areas.

12 p.m. - ? (Park closes at 5 p.m.):

Bring your own picnic basket or cooler with drinks, snacks and food to enjoy on the Heritage Center Grounds with other field trip participants. (Indoor space available if weather necessitates.) After lunch, spend the rest of the day enjoying self-guided hiking or exploring the park at your own pace.

Please dress in layers for variable fall weather. Consider long pants, socks to cover pant hems and bug spray to prevent ticks. Trails are gravel and grass so

sneakers/running shoes are appropriate. If there is rain before our visit, consider hiking shoes/boots for support in potentially muddy conditions. A limited number of wheelchairs are available — we highly recommend contacting the park to discuss availability before the trip.

There are no food or drink services at the park, so please bring your own water, snacks and a lunch to enjoy at the park. Restrooms and picnic tables are available. Please leave pets at home as they are not permitted on the trails nor in the buildings.

Please register (including all family members planning to attend). Space is limited to 30 participants. See you there!

Field notes from the president: Changes for the better *by Conor Gearin*



It began as a tradition of shooting as many birds as possible. In the 1800s, many men in the U.S. would step aside from family Christ-

mas celebrations to stretch their legs and spend some time outdoors. Called the "Side Hunt," this holiday tradition involved hunters competing over who could bring down the most animals of any and all species, including lots of birds. In the era before the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, protections for birds from poaching and overhunting were either nonexistent or unenforceable.

In 1900, an ornithologist named Frank Chapman came up with a way to redirect the outdoorsy impulse of the Side Hunt into something that could benefit both birds and people. He

proposed the "Christmas Bird Census." Instead of competing for the biggest pile of dead birds, he challenged people to identify and count the largest number of birds where they lived. It would be fun, and it would also help scientists learn more about bird species in the U.S. and Canada. In that first year alone, observers in 25 locations counted a total of 90 species and over 18,000 individual birds. Clearly, Chapman was on to something — there's something to this birding thing that gets people hooked ...

That same year, the last known wild Passenger Pigeon was shot in Ohio. People were realizing that many bird species would soon perish from unregulated hunting. The National Audubon Society, founded in 1905, ultimately took over the organization of what became the Christmas Bird Count (CBC), an annual survey of bird species that

has now expanded to Latin America, the Caribbean, and Pacific Islands. And unlike the exclusively masculine Side Hunts, the CBC welcomes people of all genders and backgrounds.

The National Audubon Society has designed the CBC to bring together experienced birders and enthusiastic beginners to both gather scientifically valuable data and help train new generations of bird counters to keep the tradition alive. It's a fun, often sociable way to contribute to science. CBC data have helped biologists identify at-risk species to guide conservation priorities and protect key habitats.

The CBC is just one example of how traditions can be remixed, adapted, and continuously changed into something better.

Fall and winter in your backyard habitat

Article and photos by Steve Geddes



Dogwood berries

The Xerces Society reports that pollinators are essential for the reproduction of over 85% of the world's flowering plants, and that the United States alone grows more than 100 crops that either need or benefit from pollinators. Additionally, The National Audubon Society estimates that 96% of land birds feed insects to their chicks.

With those statistics in mind, the mantra these days from environmental experts for fall and winter natural habitat maintenance is, "Let it be." That mess of leaf clutter, sticks and shallow dirt underneath provides shelter for hibernating pollinators and their eggs, and offers them food when they wake up or hatch in the spring. Leaving up dead stems and untrimmed shrub branches also provides valuable egg casings for spring pollinator hatchlings. More food

in the spring may mean more birds in your yard.

Of course, if you have a vegetable garden, it's still mostly recommended to get rid of the rotting, dead remains of the garden plants so that any disease-causing bacteria will not overwinter to attack again in the spring.

The Xerces Society website (xerces.org) has a wealth of information about the when, why, and how of preserving pollinator habitat. I tried some of their recommendations last winter for the first time, and I noticed a big difference in the quality and quantity of wildlife visiting my yard this past growing season. Although maybe the weather was just better, improving the survival rates, I like to think that I made a difference.

In line with Xerces' recommendations, I did a couple of other things differently. One thing was to not remove the seed stalks of the purple coneflowers in my prairie habitat. In the past, in order to minimize their prolific seeding habits, I had cut them down each fall. Because I left them standing last fall, I was rewarded with near-daily visits by a goldfinch couple feeding on the seed heads.

The other thing I did differently was to not trim back the red twig dogwood



Insect eggs on a dead leaf

shrubs as aggressively as in the past — mainly because after five years in the ground, they finally sported their characteristic white berries. The berries were quite a draw last winter, especially for the cardinals. As a consequence, I added several more native understory plants over the spring and summer, including a serviceberry and four viburnum varieties. Although the viburnums are known for their great fall color, it can take up to five years for them to fruit, so be patient.

All of the plant varieties mentioned above are readily available at local nurseries, big box stores and Nebraska State Arboretum (plantnebraska.org) through its in-season retail plant sales.

So, give it a try! "Let it be," and see what happens!

Join the ASO Christmas Bird Count

Sunday, December 14, 2025

Organized annually by the National Audubon Society, the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) involves thousands of volunteers across North America and beyond 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. Omaha's CBC

takes place on Dec. 14. If you are interested in taking part, please email Bob Wells at rcwells@cox.net.

If you are an experienced bird counter without an assigned survey area, report to the Fontenelle Forest visitor center between 7:30 and 8 a.m. on Dec. 14, and you will be assigned to a trail. For newcomers, arrive between 8 and 8:30 a.m., and you will then join Bob Wells, Hannah Miller, or another experienced counter to help survey a trail at



Black-capped Chickadee by Ron Hiatt

Fontenelle Forest. The event is free with daily admission to the park (free passes are available through the Omaha Public Library).

Get to know our keystone prairie grasses

By Sheila Glencer

“Anybody can love the mountains, but it takes a soul to love the prairie.”

—Willa Cather

A prairie landscape is dominated by grasses and non-woody broad-leaved flowering plants. Most prairies have less than 10% tree cover. Other characteristics of a prairie ecosystem include moderate temperature, moderate rainfall and rich soils. Prairies are among the most endangered ecosystems on the planet.

Nebraska has four distinct prairie regions, each with unique landscapes, and a variety of plants and wildlife. The four types are: the Mixed Grass region of the Niobrara and Platte Valleys, the Sand Hills region, the Short Grass region of Pine Ridge and finally the Tallgrass region, which covers the eastern quarter of the state and includes the greater Omaha area.

To watch for volunteer opportunities to help with prairie restoration seed harvesting, please visit:

- Glacier Creek Preserve: <https://www.unomaha.edu/college-of-arts-and-sciences/nature-preserves/preserves/preserve-events.php>
- Platte River Prairies: <https://www.nature.org/en-us/get-involved/how-to-help/places-we-protect/platte-river-prairies/>
- Golden Hills RC&D: <http://goldenhillsrcd.org/prairieseed>

The tallgrass prairie has thick rich soil in which the deep-rooted prairie plants survive. Grasses and flowering plants dominate. Trees that are found are often along water corridors. The tall grass prairie receives 25-36 inches of rain per year and includes several wetland systems.

There are significant conservation efforts focused on bringing back Nebraska’s native grasslands. Less than two percent of Nebraska’s original tall grass prairie is left. Native grasses are often

harvested for prairie restoration. Seeds might be collected from established prairies or restored sites. Collection of the seeds usually occurs during the end of the growing season in September or October. These seeds are dried and used to create site specific seed mixes for restoration projects.

Native grasses used to help restore the tallgrass prairie of our region include the species pictured below.



Photo: Tom Potterfield

Little Bluestem is widely distributed in tallgrass prairies. The blue-green blades turn reddish in the autumn. It is Nebraska’s state grass.



Photo: Peter Gorman

Indian Grass often grows alongside Big Bluestem. It has golden plume-like seed heads and provides nesting cover for birds and other wildlife.



Photo: USFWS Mountain Region

Big Bluestem, also known as the “king of the prairie grasses,” is dominant in tallgrass prairie. It can grow as high as 10 feet.



Photo: Matt Lavin

Prairie Cordgrass thrives in the wetter areas of tallgrass prairie. This grass was helpful to early settlers as hay and thatching.



Photo: Matt Lavin

Switchgrass is used for hay and pasture, and provides soil stabilization and erosion control in tallgrass prairies.

The eyes have it – your photos

Send in your bird photos to audubonomaha@audubonomaha.org!



Male Wood Duck molting into nonbreeding plumage by Nathan Hack



Baltimore Oriole by Jennifer Dobey

As winter settles in, birds do, too

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convenient window.

If you try to look at the landscape as a bird does, you'll start spotting their preferred hideaways and find them more reliably in November and December. This can also help guide your gardening. Shrubs and trees create shade in the summer, and they also offer food and shelter in the winter. Planting native species helps give birds what they need year-round. See how the residents of your neighborhoods' habitats change throughout the year. Notice how

shrubs such as serviceberry and native prunes, which gave us flowers earlier in the year, now provide fruits that carry Cedar Waxwings and other fruit-eaters through to the spring.

And don't forget about the ducks! Supporting wetland conservation helps ensure waterfowl get the food they need to sustain their fat reserves and survive.

Marvel at the ways that birds make it through fall and winter — and consider how you can help them out by improving habitat wherever you live.

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

We want you – to volunteer

Have you ever been told you're a leader? Or do you want to be a leader? How about leading a birding field trip to the destination of your choice? Please contact Sarah Shepherd at sshepherd@audubonomaha.org and let us know you're interested in getting involved with your local Audubon chapter.

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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STEWARDSHIP OF THE EARTH AND ITS CREATURES

the Meadowlark

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*Photo: Hooded Merganser
by Mike Benkis*

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.

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