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The Chat

Lakeland Audubon Society

August 2021

CHAPTER MEETING

Tuesday, August 24, 2021
7:00 PM – 8:00 PM

White River Park – 6503 Sheridan Springs Road, Lake Geneva, WI (Town of Lyons)

MIDWESTERN PRAIRIES AND OAK SAVANNAS

By Alan Eppers

In this talk, the speaker will cover the basic ecological functioning and general characteristics of prairies and savannas, also known as grasslands. He will also delve into the history of these iconic landscapes that once dominated the area. His talk will give insight regarding the dos and don'ts for establishing and maintaining prairie and savanna landscapes in the Midwest.

Alan is a professional restoration landscape contractor. He co-owns and operates Return to Native Prairie Services, located in Salem, Wisconsin. Among his other pursuits are: Serving as a Board Member for the Chiwaukee Prairie Preservation Fund for over 20 years, Steward for the Benedict Prairie in Bristol, Wisconsin (Owned by the University of Wisconsin and managed by The Prairie Enthusiasts).

Join Alan and members of our chapter for an educational walk. We will follow the trails of White River Park's restored prairie, observing the various plants and animals along the way.

Event Schedule

5:30 PM – 6:30 PM Prairie Walk

6:30 PM – 7:00 PM Break

7:00 PM – 7:10 PM Introduction & Birding Reports (from attendees)

7:10 PM – 8:00 PM Talk (followed by Q&A session)



White River Park (restored prairie - July 2021)



Prairie Blazing Star (White River Park - July 2021)

Grassland Birds

By Wayne Rohde

As some of you may recall, I grew up on a 120 acre dairy farm in Wisconsin's Green County. Yes, smack-dab in the middle of cheese country! And when I wasn't milking cows or helping with various chores, I spent much of my time hiking in the maple/hickory woods on our farm, looking and listening for birds like owls, woodpeckers, flycatchers, vireos, chickadees, nuthatches, wrens, thrushes, thrashers ... and, of course, those showy wood-warblers.

But farm life also afforded ample opportunities for observing the species which frequented our cropland and pastureland. Since many of my summer days were occupied with driving a tractor around our alfalfa fields --where we mowed, crimped, raked and baled hay three times each summer-- I regularly came across the many Red-winged Blackbirds and meadowlarks which nested there in abundance. Armed with a cassette tape deck and parabolic microphone, I particularly enjoyed recording the songs and call notes of Eastern and Western Meadowlarks – both of which were common summer residents. Those of the latter were especially melodious, with a rich variety of song patterns. So taken was I with their melodies, I even carried a little notebook, penning their notes on a musical scale.

Yet the old fields and over-grown pastures intrigued me even more. Why? Because they provided additional habitat diversity, and they weren't subject to the early cutting of the first crop of the alfalfa fields which caused nest failure. An early memory from such pastures comes from the top of the wooden fence post next to our barnyard, where a Vesper Sparrow routinely sang its minor notes each summer evening. Not far from there, I crossed paths with another sparrow, perched on a barbed wire fence, which uttered an insect-like, "Tsit, tsit, tsit tseee, tsaaay," and proved to be a Savannah Sparrow. And, though I was only able to locate one on rare occasions, I happened upon another but smaller, flat-headed sparrow, which buzzed its "Pit-tup-zeee" notes: a Grasshopper Sparrow.

The bird which really hooked me, though, with its unusual dark-colored breast and light-colored back (the reverse of the pattern in most birds), and its rollicking, twangy song, was the Bobolink. The first time I saw this bird I was driving my Dad's tractor down a long, narrow lane toward our woods, and I was so absorbed (entranced?) listening to and looking at it that I was suddenly interrupted by another, albeit strange, unwelcome, metallic sound nearby. That's precisely when I noticed what had happened: I had unknowingly turned the tractor's steering wheel off course toward the fence, and had run over and broken off a couple of steel fence posts – even as four strands of barbed wire wrapped their way around the tractor's axle! Needless to say, my Dad was not impressed by my preoccupation with birds that day.

Other days were calmer. Like the day I heard what sounded like a wolf whistle, and raised my binoculars to spot my first-ever Upland Sandpiper (known, in those days, as the Upland Plover). Or the evening I listened to displaying American Woodcocks and Wilson's Snipes in the field next to the big woods where our neighbors made maple syrup each March. Or other spring days when the fields, especially the ones with old corn stalks, were filled with the high-pitched tinkling of Horned Larks as they pushed their way north. Or those many hot, steamy, lazy summer days, when I raked hay while I watched Red-tailed Hawks wheeling high overhead, screaming as they soared, and American Kestrels diving for insects from power lines, briefly punctuating the silence and serenity with their sharp, "Klee, klee, klee" notes.

When it comes to birding --and, most importantly, the well-being of our environment-- I'm a big fan of diversity: whether grasslands or marshlands or woodlands. And I'm also a big fan of large expanses of such habitats. For just as birds like Pileated Woodpeckers thrive in large tracts of forested areas, but suffer when this habitat is divided up into smaller parcels, so grassland species such as Western Meadowlarks, which were once abundant in Wisconsin, are now threatened by the increasing absence of contiguous open natural spaces.

Decades ago, I delighted in the songs of the Western Meadowlark on the farm where I grew up. But I haven't heard even a single individual on that farm for well over a decade. Or two. Years ago, I enjoyed this songster's notes every morning, from April through July, just across the road from our Walworth County home. But the last time I heard its tune here was about a dozen years ago. Or so. The same goes, unfortunately, for the music of the Bobolinks and the Upland Sandpipers. How I long to hear them once again. And how I hope we'll see our way straight (yes, straight!) to protect our precious grasslands and the birds which live there. Very soon. Lest even more of them disappear.



Western Meadowlark



Bobolink



Upland Sandpiper

Click on the names of the birds to learn more!

Swift Night Out

Thursday, September 9, 2021

5:30 PM - Dusk

Geneva Lake Museum, 255 Mill Street, Lake Geneva, WI

Witness an amazing show of nature at Swift Night Out as thousands of acrobatic Chimney Swifts circle and swoop into Geneva Lake Museum's tall chimney. This awesome spectacle happens every year in early September as the small birds gather in large groups to begin their fall migration to South America.

This year the City of Lake Geneva's Avian Committee celebrates this natural phenomenon on Thursday, September 9 at the Geneva Lake Museum, 255 Mill St. in downtown Lake Geneva. Events begin at 5:30 pm with food for purchase. At 6:30, CBS Channel 58 Milwaukee meteorologist Michael Schlesinger will be on hand to introduce a special birding program from the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center featuring an eagle and other raptors. At dusk, go outside to watch as the energetic Chimney Swifts gather by the thousands and begin to circle the museum's chimney. As if at a single cue, these little aerobatic swifts will swoop, creating a vortex as they dive inside to roost.

Swift Night Out is a continent-wide effort to raise awareness about - and encourage interest in Chimney Swifts and their declining population.

Swift Night Out in Lake Geneva is an educational program presented by the City of Lake Geneva Avian Committee and supported by the City of Lake Geneva Tourism Commission. This event is free and open to all. Be sure to bring binoculars and cameras to capture this amazing event!

Natures Little Wonders

Take time to notice the small things!



Camouflaged Looper Caterpillar on Western Sunflower



Monarch Caterpillar on Common Milkweed

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Newsletter

(volunteer needed)

Education

(volunteer needed)

Bird Seed Sale

(volunteer needed)

Conservation

(volunteer needed)

Hospitality

Kathy Wisniewski (262) 949-4174

Field Trips

(volunteer needed)

Publicity

(volunteer needed)

Bird Walks

Wednesdays: Big Foot Beach State Park

9:00-11:00 AM

N1550 S Lakeshore Drive, Lake Geneva, WI

Meet in the main parking area to the right of the entrance station a little before 9:00 AM. A state park sticker (\$28, \$13 if age 65 or older) or daily pass (\$8, \$3 if age 65 or older) is required to enter Big Foot Beach State Park.

<https://lakelandaudubon.com/contact/>



Sedge Wren (Photo By Wayne Rohde - June 2021)

The Chat is the newsletter of the Lakeland Audubon Chapter of the National Audubon Society, P.O. Box 473, Elkhorn, WI 53121. Subscription is \$15 per year for printed copies sent by US mail.