

LAKELAND AUDUBON SOCIETY



The Chat



November 2023

CHAPTER MEETING

Tuesday, November 28th

7:00 PM

Lions Field House - 270 Elkhorn Road (Hwy 67), Williams Bay, WI

Free and open to the public.

Cranes over Wisconsin

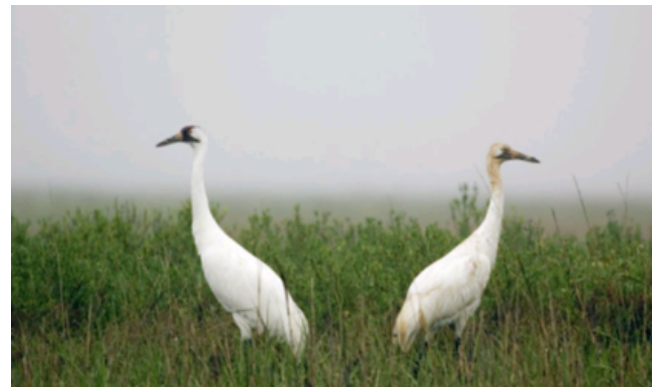
By Stephanie Schmidt

Wisconsin's wetlands are home to Sandhill Cranes and endangered Whooping Cranes. In the not-so-distant past, both Sandhill Cranes and Whooping Cranes faced near extinction throughout North America as they battled with increasing threats of unregulated hunting and habitat loss. Thanks to widespread conservation efforts, Sandhill Cranes are now one of the most populous crane species in the world and Whooping Crane populations, while still endangered, are slowly growing. Today Wisconsin residents see around 20,000 Sandhill Cranes and 76 Whooping Cranes each year!

Unfortunately, Whooping Cranes and Sandhill Cranes continue to face threats in Wisconsin and across their flyway. Join Stephanie Schmidt, Whooping Crane outreach coordinator for the International Crane Foundation, to learn the history of the cranes of Wisconsin and how you can help safeguard their future. Following this presentation, you will be able to identify Sandhill Cranes and Whooping Cranes, know the history of both crane species, understand the current work crane conservation partners are doing to protect cranes in Wisconsin and throughout their flyways, and find out how you can be an ambassador for cranes in Wisconsin as a volunteer and citizen scientist.

About the Speaker

Stephanie Schmidt is the Whooping Crane Outreach Coordinator for the International Crane Foundation. Stephanie grew up in Elkhorn, neighboring the Kettle Moraine area in southeastern Wisconsin, a region that is known for its many Sandhill Cranes and ignited her early love for birds, wetlands, and nature. She attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison to earn her bachelor's degree in Zoology and Environmental Studies in 2018 and in 2022 she earned her master's degree in Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



Whooping Cranes

Lakeland Audubon's Christmas Bird Count 2023

By Kyle Cudworth, Citizen Science Chair - Lakeland Audubon Society

What is the Christmas Bird Count? If you've been around Audubon for awhile you have probably heard of it, but if you haven't participated yet you may not have much understanding of it. From a participant's viewpoint it is a day, or a few hours of birding, keeping careful track of numbers of birds of which species, all with a purpose beyond just the enjoyment of birding.

From a researcher's perspective it provides data on population numbers and distribution of birds in the U.S. all the way back to 1900. It is the longest running Citizen Science survey in the world. Counts are done on a chosen day between Dec. 14 and Jan. 5 in well-defined 15-mile diameter circles, of which there are now over 2000. Wisconsin has a very extensive history of participating in this effort. In recent years our state has contributed data for over 100 count circles, second only to much larger and more populous California. Wisconsin probably has the richest and most in-depth Audubon count data of any place in the world.

On Sat. Dec. 16, 2023, local birders will have our opportunity to extend this wonderful legacy by joining in this year's Christmas Bird Count. Our Lake Geneva circle is centered at the Ridge Hotel on highway 50, near the southwest end of Lake Como. We divide the circle into several zones and typically one or two birders cover each zone by car and hiking, with a few of us hiking small areas. Those who live within the count circle can also participate by watching feeders in their yards. The Lakeland Audubon Society count will be coordinated by Lisa Granbur, with data compiled after the count by Kyle Cudworth.

All birders are welcome to participate, and we especially encourage those who haven't done so before to join the effort. Yes, it can be cold, but it is also fun and satisfying. You don't have to be a candidate for best birder in the county. If you know the common birds of the area in this season and can use your guide book (and binoculars or a spotting scope) to identify others, you can help. I (Kyle) was certainly not a great expert when my daughter (Christy) and I first participated on Jan. 2, 2011, and she is still a better birder than I.

We choose our count day to be early in the allowed time frame to maximize the open water for migrating water fowl. We always have plenty of Canada Geese, but sometimes less common geese will be found among the large flocks if one looks carefully enough. It used to be noteworthy to see a Bald Eagle on our count, but now it would be surprising if we did not have a few of them to report. Sometimes even out-of-season birds will show up: Christy and I were surprised by a Great Blue Heron that first year we counted.

Those who are interested or possibly interested in joining the count should contact:

Lisa Granbur (email: parula13@sbcglobal.net or cell: 312-354-0199).

At the end of the count day we will gather at 6:00 PM at the Lions Field House in Williams Bay (our usual meeting place) for dinner, conversation, and turning in our count forms.

Count data can also be emailed to me at: k-cudworth@uchicago.edu.

I can also answer some questions, but Lisa will coordinate who counts which area.



Great Blue Heron - Four Seasons Nature Preserve, Lake Geneva, WI. Photo by Kevin Dickey.

Remembering Cranes

By Wayne Rohde

Memories of cranes, including many experiences with them, have taken several twists and turns throughout my birding days. Although I started birding in 1967, I didn't observe my first Sandhill until 1981, some 14 years later. I do recall, however, my Uncle Dave, the one who sparked my interest in birding, telling me stories about how he and his birding buddies would go to prime Sandhill country, in search of what was then an uncommon and elusive species. These die-hard birders would arrive before sunrise, crawling on their hands and knees a half mile through the cattails, just to catch a glimpse and capture some photos of these regal but wary birds.

I also remember the day in June of 2005, while birding the wetlands of the Turtle Valley Wildlife Area north of Delavan, when I lifted my binocular for a better view of a small flock of distant cranes in flight, to discover --to my delight-- that I had been fortunate to spot a handful of Whooping Cranes! A few years earlier, while visiting the Necedah National Wildlife Refuge in central Wisconsin, it had been my pleasure to observe (from a distance!) one of several training flights by Operation Migration, as the juvenile Whoopers were prepared for their initial autumn flight to Florida.

One of my fondest memories of cranes occurred during my second trip to the International Crane Foundation near Baraboo back in 2010, when I took along our grandson Oliver (who was only six years old at the time). In addition to paying careful attention to the orientation session at the main visitor center, I was surprised to learn that Oliver had memorized the names of all the world's cranes while we were touring the outdoor displays. He proved his ability by telling me the names of each one of them while we retraced our steps (even as I covered up the various signs so that he couldn't read them!).

Many years ago, Bryce & Paula Dreeszen, the owners and operators of Wild Birds Unlimited in Lake Geneva, led an annual fall birding outing to nearby Peterkin Pond, where we watched scores of Sandhills as they staged there prior to the remainder of their flight south. More recently, I've enjoyed a great many trips to the 30,000 acre Crex Meadows Wildlife Area, near Grantsburg, Wisconsin, which is home to thousands of staging Sandhill Cranes each autumn. The well-known music of the cranes is almost deafening when flocks in the thousands are present. And the sheer number of birds affords ample opportunities to witness the birds' peculiar behaviors and diverse vocalizations, as well as to secure countless digital images of these stately birds in a pristine habitat.

Although Sandhill Cranes are now common residents throughout Wisconsin, and may be readily (and closely!) encountered during both the nesting season and the migratory season (I've often seen northbound flocks in February, as well as southbound ones while getting our Christmas tree in late November), the increase in their population has resulted in sizeable numbers of birds which overwinter in the Badger State. And with this increase has also come a sense of complacency on our part ... and more than a few debates about the impact of cranes on agricultural crops, and the prospect of a hunting season.

Yet the recent rise in the population of both Sandhills and Whoopers should remind us of days not so long ago when the former species was not frequently found in the Midwest, and the latter was nearly extinct world-wide. Even though the current population in the state is nearly 100,000 individuals, it's estimated that only 15 breeding pairs of Sandhills were present in Wisconsin as recently as the 1930s.

May the time never come then, when, on some cold day in February or November, we peer high in the sky, searching in vain for another look at yet another flock of these magnificent birds, straining in vain to hear their once familiar and welcome rattling notes ... only to be greeted with emptiness and silence, and nothing but memories of their music. For memories are good ... unless they're only memories. May our fond memories of these special birds inform our choices about them now ... so that they're much more than a mere recollection.



Sandhill Crane - Crex Meadows SWA, Grantsburg, WI. Photo by Wane Rohde.

Crater Lake National Park and the Rogue River

Written by: Janice Bain, Education Chair - Lakeland Audubon Society

Photos by: Janice Bain

Have you been to Crater Lake National Park in Oregon? It is a magical place unlike any other national park. The park gem is a volcano that collapsed upon itself and has been filled with nothing but rain water and melted snow since its collapse 7,700 years ago. The purity of the water is the cleanest and clearest in the world. There are no inflowing streams degrading the water. The only degradation is from a couple of highly efficient, clean running boats that transport visitors to the mini volcano dubbed: "Wizard Island." The Island protrudes above the surface of the water inside the collapsed volcano. The clarity of the water is beyond compare and the hues change to match the atmosphere; it is simply breathtaking. This is not my first trip to this park, but it is the first time that I wandered on trails near the park's outer boundaries.



A hike on the nearby Boundary Springs trail was full of surprises. The trail required lots of tree hopping. Large trees crossed the path like fallen toothpicks on a table. I was glad for my long legs, the trunk diameters were large. My coconspirator on this adventure, Lynn, longed for a chainsaw to aid trail maintenance. Lack of rain was evidenced by the colorless thirsty plant life. Charred trees surrounded the trail, remnants of a past fire. Despite the description, it was a beautiful hike. It led to the Rogue River and that is where the rewarding part of the journey began.



The Rogue River is renowned in the west. It starts in the Cascade Mountains near Crater Lake National Park and meanders more than 200 miles before reaching the Pacific Ocean at Gold Beach, Oregon. It is one of 8 rivers with segments covered under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968. The act establishes boundaries that provide watershed protection for the wild section of the Rogue River. It strives to preserve the steep terrain of near vertical cliffs, razor-sharp ridges, and cascading mountain creeks. About 84 miles of the river falls under the Act. It is known for salmon and steelhead fishing and for high-quality whitewater boating activities. The movie "The River Wild" with Meryl Streep, Kevin Bacon and David Strathairn, includes rafting scenes filmed on the Rogue River near Medford, Oregon. It's an edge of your seat movie from 1994!

The river was a feast for all the senses. The multitude of rapids and waterfalls that appear around different river bends and the soothing sounds made us pause in admiration. The best part was the rich diversity; mosses, flowers, insects, fish and of course birds. Mountain rivers, with all their wildness, attract a specific bird that holds the limelight in the next article, the American Dipper or the "water ouzel".

DIPPER



Written by: Janice Bain, Education Chair - Lakeland Audubon Society

Photos by: Janice Bain

The American Dipper, also known as “water ouzel”, earned its name for its repeated up-and-down bobbing movements. Collectively, you would have a “ladle” of Dippers. It is an underappreciated bird. It is a rather drab gray with no distinguishing markings, but this bird is nothing short of extraordinary. The American Dipper spends a lot of time in and around cold water, particularly mountainous rivers. Dippers are birds that patrol a linear section of a river, similar to Kingfishers. They will hunt up and down the same stretch of river all year long. Dippers don’t migrate, they tough out the icy cold winter until their stretch of the river finally freezes, then they will give in and find a new stretch of river at a lower elevation. When getting from point A to point B on a winding river, Dippers don’t cross over land to follow a direct line as a crow would. Instead they zig zag over the water, following each river bend.

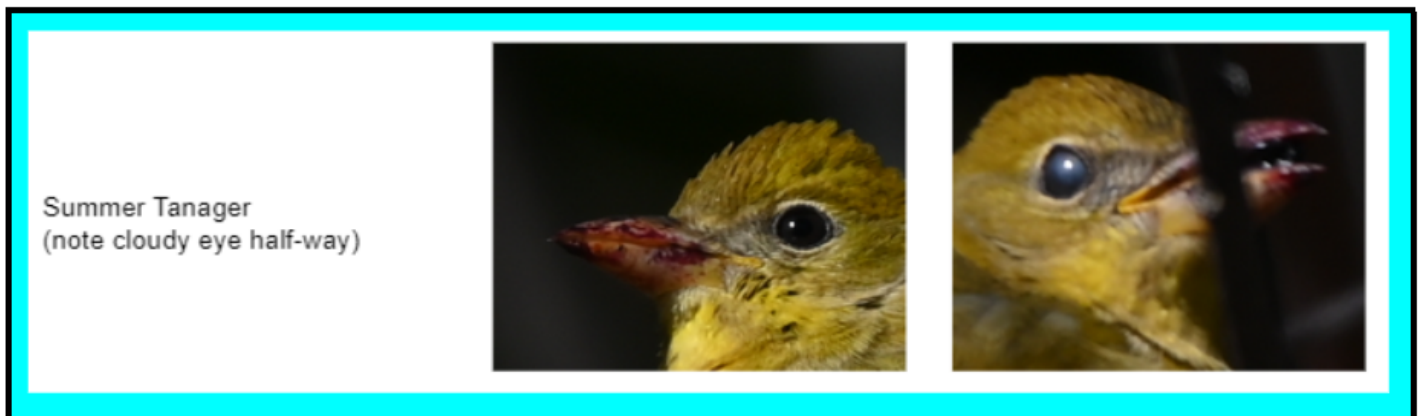
The American Dipper is a songbird that is a bit smaller than a robin. It is a close relative to both the thrush and the wren families. Both sexes sing year-round. Unlike thrushes and wrens, they are one with the water, aquatic. They often fly in and then out of the water on a quest for insects. They patrol the shoreline with the same goal. Currents that would knock us off our feet are no match for a dipper. They use the current to their advantage, the pressure helps hold them down as they use their long toes to grasp underwater rocks. The amazing thing is, dippers have songbird toes, perching toes. Evolution didn’t grant them webbed feet like a duck, but it did elongate their toes a bit longer than songbirds of comparable size. Clearly it’s an adaptation to aid in their underwater escapades. Despite the fact that their feet are not webbed, they can swim on the water’s surface like a duck and underwater like children at a pool. At times, they are aerial artists, like swallows, snatching insects on the surface of the water or even midair. Land, water or in the air, the dipper transitions seamlessly.

Besides their elongated toes, they have other ingenious adaptations helping them succeed in a demanding environment. Let’s figure out why they aren’t completely water-logged, they are songbirds after all. It is thanks to a uropygial gland located right above the tail. If you have prepared a whole chicken, you may know what it is and might have cut it out. When birds preen, they reach back and rub the gland with their beak, collecting oil and wax, which they then distribute on their feathers. The oil and wax is the secret weapon used to maintain high quality feathers and to keep water beading off as they burst out of the water. All birds have uropygial glands, but the dipper’s uropygial gland is 10 times larger than their similarly-sized counterparts. To insulate them from the icy water, they sport a layer of downy feathers under their outer contour feathers. Their metabolic rate is lower-than-usual and they can carry extra oxygen in their blood, all to retain body heat in the cold water.

Think about your childhood and swimming in a lake, pond, or pool. Did you ever play in the water searching for a cool rock or try to find rings thrown to the bottom of a pool? As I recall, it was pretty uncomfortable to do without goggles. What about these dippers? They drop their heads, using the force of the water to keep them low and walk along the bottom of the river perusing it for insects. Caddisfly and stonefly larvae that hide on the bottoms of river rocks are dipper favorites. So how do they protect their eyes from debris and the rush of the water? They use their nictitating membranes, a third inner eyelid that all birds have. Rather than closing up and down like regular eyelids, it is a vertical membrane that closes from front (near their beaks) to back. It is

relatively transparent, but when closed, appears cloudy. In flight, the nictitating membrane can protect eyes from drying out and other airborne hazards. When birds want to rest, they will often close their nictitating membranes so they can keep an eye out for predators and get some rest. Nictitating membranes are not lenses for improved vision, instead they perform like a window. Hawks, which need sharper eyesight, will get stronger acuity from an increased number of cones inside their eyes. The nictitating membranes help water ouzels clear spray from eyes, like windshield wipers on a car. They have white-feathered eyelids which they blink to provide visual cues to other dippers. Visual cues are of utmost importance as audio cues can be dominated by the sound of rushing water. The flashes of white also provide a degree of camouflage since it resembles the sparkling of water. Guess what else. They have little flaps to cover their nostrils when they enter the water. No nose plug required.

Here are two images, one without and one with the nictitating membrane in use. “Nictitating” means blinking. The first time I photographed the nictitating membrane in use by a bird, a grackle, I was perplexed. It looked as though the bird had a bad case of glaucoma. Not realizing what I was seeing, I deleted the photo.



The family life of dippers is also fascinating. Dippers tend to be monogamous, bonding with the same mate from year to year. Sometimes the male might attract a second female to nest in his territory. This makes them polygynous. A second brood is wise due to the short breeding season. If there are two females, they will stagger their clutches. The male will help care for both sets of young.

Female dippers collect clumps of moss, grass, leaves and bark and stitch together an oven-like nest. It has multiple layers of these materials to ensure that the eggs stay warm. Sometimes, the nest can be larger than a soccer ball and can be reused from year to year. The nests hide in plain sight, maybe on a rocky ledge or a riverbank. They may be located on a log in the river or hidden behind a waterfall. Either way, the running water keeps the moss fresh and protects the chicks from predators. Snakes, martins, weasels, racoons and mink all seek to eat eggs and chicks. Nests hidden behind a waterfall are virtually impossible for these predators to reach. This frees up the female to forage for meals.

A typical nest will house 3-6 eggs. Once hatched, they will spend 24 days growing before they are ready to fledge. These chicks are more like waterfowl than songbirds when it is time to fledge. They are precocial, meaning mom doesn't need to teach them to dive, swim, run or even fly for short distances. They will hang out with their parents for a mere week before they live independently within their own newly chosen territory.

I hope you get the chance to explore our western states. Be sure to seek out some fast-moving mountain streams and search for the captivating American Dipper. It will not disappoint.

Information gathered from:

- <https://www.rivers.gov/rivers/river/roque> [National Wild and Scenic Rivers System](https://www.nps.gov/roque/)
- Secrets of the Nest by Joan Dunning
- <https://www.audubon.org>
- <https://www.nps.gov>
- <https://abcbirds.org/bird/american-dipper/>

Planting for Wildlife

Native Plant Spotlight

By Mariette Nowak



Jack Pine



Red Pine



White Pine

Wisconsin's Pines

Pines rank above every other conifer in their value as a food plant for birds and other wildlife. The winter season, when their green limbs are often frosted with snow, is the one of best times of year to admire both their value and their beauty.

Wisconsin's three native pines include Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana*), Red Pine (*Pinus resinosa*) and Eastern White Pine (*Pinus strobus*). All three pines are very important species for wildlife. However, the first two have more scraggly open crowns and are usually not grown for ornamental purposes. The Eastern White Pine, on the other hand, has outstanding value for landscaping, both as a specimen tree and for privacy screening. Like the others, the White Pine often loses its leader creating a flat-topped look. But this emphasizes its tiered, horizontal branching and gives the White Pine a classic, windswept appearance - one professional landscapers seek and appreciate.

Value for Birds: Pine seeds are eaten by at least 48 species of birds and are especially favored by grouse, crossbills, jays, nuthatches, siskins, and woodpeckers. The seeds make up more than 50% of the diet of three species of birds - the Red Crossbill and two western species, Clark's Nutcracker and White-headed Woodpecker. Pine needles provide food for grouse, while some songbirds use them for nesting material.

Pine Siskins, as their name suggests, are birds of pine forests, both nesting in pines and favoring pine seeds for food. The Pine Warbler is also aptly named since it strongly prefers nesting in pine forests and, when insects aren't available, will feed on pine seeds. Pine grosbeaks, on the other hand, are somewhat misnamed, since they are seldom found in pines in summer, preferring spruce/fir forests for nesting, and feed mainly in fruiting deciduous trees in winter, although they do sometimes eat pine seeds and may shelter in pine groves.

Pines not only offer food for birds, but also provide shelter and nest sites. Some Midwestern birds occurring in pine woodlands, in addition to those mentioned above, are the Hermit Thrush, Eastern Bluebird, Ruffed Grouse, Bald Eagle, and Black-throated Green Warbler. Mature white pines are often chosen as nest sites by ospreys and eagles. Of special note is the endangered Kirkland Warbler which nests only in large stands of young Jack Pines (*Pinus banksiana*) in Michigan and for the last few years, in Wisconsin (Yay!).

Value for Other Wildlife: Many mammals from mice to bears feed on pine seeds, bark, foliage, and sometimes twigs. Prime users are snowshoe hares, and porcupines which feed on pine seeds, bark, and foliage; chipmunks which eat the seeds, and deer which browse on pine foliage and twigs. As with birds, pines also provide cover and nesting sites for many animals.

In addition, pine needles nourish over 200 moth and butterfly larvae, (which are, in turn, the preferred food for most nestling birds.) I was delighted to find one of adults the large handsome Imperial Moth in my yard. Next summer, I'll be searching my pines for the larvae, which are also said to be very beautiful. While the Imperial Moth larva feeds on many tree species, some insects are pine specialists including some sphinx moths and inchworms. Sawfly larvae also feed on the needles and entomologist Douglas Tallamy (*Bringing Nature Home*. Timber Press, 2007) watched bluebirds rear their first clutch of the year almost entirely on sawfly larvae from his White Pines.

Landscaping Notes: The White Pine grows throughout the state, but it is most abundant and grows best in the "North Woods". It is also an important species in the pine forests of south central and southwest Wisconsin. A tall, majestic tree, it commonly can reach 60 to 90 feet in height, and thus is best suited to larger suburban and rural gardens and other sites of adequate size. Its glossy, aromatic needles are in clusters of five and it has deeply furrowed dark brown to black bark. Although the White Pine prefers loamy well-drained soils, it can tolerate sandy soils. It grows best in sun, but will survive in light shade. The White Pine is susceptible to air pollution and also to rusts when growing conditions are not ideal.

Field Trip

Tuesday, December 5th

9:00 AM – 11:00 AM

Peterkin Pond – W2311 County Road B, Lake Geneva (Town of Bloomfield), WI

Open to the public and free to attend!

Join us for an outing to Peterkin Pond. This body of water is a 24 acre seepage lake that is surrounded by wetlands. The pond and the surrounding wetlands are owned and managed by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. Access to the property is off of Hwy B in the Town of Bloomfield. This field trip will consist of a fair amount of walking, standing or sitting outdoors. The focus will be on migrating Waterfowl and Cranes. We will meet by the entrance sign along Hwy B that is across from Speckman Leedle Road at 9:00 AM. For more information about the property and to view a map, please visit the website listed below by clicking or tapping on this link: <https://apps.dnr.wi.gov/lakes/lakepages/LakeDetail.aspx?wbic=745200>

Please contact us and let us know if you are interested in attending this field trip.

<https://lakelandaudubon.com/contact> Call or Text: +1 (262) 729-9702

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Bird Walks

Saturdays

11:00 AM - 1:00 PM

Big Foot Beach State Park

N1550 S Lakeshore Drive, Lake Geneva, WI

Meet in the main parking area to the right of the entrance station a little before 11:00 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.

Sundays

11:00 AM – 1:00 PM

White River County Park

6503 Sheridan Springs Road, Lyons, WI

Get out and enjoy one of the best parks Walworth County has to offer. We'll walk the trails and be on the lookout for birds and other critters. We'll also watch for plant blooms and other interesting elements of nature. Meet at the kiosk by the parking lot a little before 11:00 AM.

Please contact us to let us know you are interested in attending a walk.

<https://lakelandaudubon.com/contact>

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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.