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Flyway

Spring 2012

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NINE MARCH ARRIVALS

by Leonard Weber

No matter how satisfying winter birding has been, I am always excited when March arrives. I am ready to start welcoming back the species that I have not seen since the fall. Many other migrants will be putting in their appearance later, but there is something special about the first spring arrivals each year.

My regular bird walks are in Detroit's Eliza Howell Park. Over the years, I have learned that I can anticipate the arrival here of the same nine species by the end of March. One or two other spring migrants might show up in March in any given year—and perhaps one of these nine might not show until April on a rare occasion—but the chances are very good that I will see these nine in Eliza Howell each March. It is easier to predict migration patterns than March weather.

The nine species have two characteristics in common. First, they spend the winters in the United States, only a few hundred miles south. They are not among the birds, the neotropical migrants, that winter in Central or South America. Second, southern Michigan is part of their breeding territory. They are returning here for the summer, not migrating through to destinations further north, as do many of the later spring migrants.

The Eliza Howell March nine are these: (1) **Red-winged Blackbird**, (2) **Killdeer**, (3) **Common Grackle**, (4) **Brown-headed Cowbird**, (5) **Turkey Vulture**, (6) **Song Sparrow**, (7) **Great Blue Heron**, (8) **Wood Duck**, and (9) **Eastern Bluebird**. In other locations, with different habitat, there are other regular March arrivals.

In Your *Flyway* -----

March Arrivals	1
Birdathon 2012	2
Point Pelee Campout	3
Think Spring	4
Snowy Visitors	5
President's Message	6
St. Clair Sanctuary	7
Birding for Beginners	8

Some readers may be surprised that the **American Robin**, the most famous of the early birds of spring, is not on this list. Robins are certainly found in greater numbers in March in Eliza Howell, but almost every year I have already seen them in January or February.

The **Red-winged Blackbird** is often the first of the March nine to arrive. The males arrive before the females, who might not make it until April. When the first males arrive, their red shoulder patches are still winter dull. As the month advances, this changes noticeably, and by the end of March they are ready to welcome the females with bright scarlet patches. Red-winged Blackbirds nest in Eliza Howell Park every year.

continued on p. 3

Flyway

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DAS Mission Statement

Our mission is to promote awareness and protection of the environment through education, research and advocacy.

We support local activities to foster the preservation of birds and the clean air, water, wetlands, grasslands, woodlands and other natural resources they depend upon.

BIRDATHON 2012

The annual Detroit Audubon Society Birdathon will be held May 5 through May 27, 2012.

Each team is asked to select any date between May 5 and May 27 for their birding day and to choose any location(s) in southeast Michigan.

In advance of the birding date, all team members seek pledges from sponsors. While enjoying a day in the field at the peak time of the spring migration, Birdathon participants also raise money in support of the Detroit Audubon Society's efforts to protect wild birds and their habitats and to promote nature experiences and education.

During Birdathon 2011, one team recorded 111 species.

As in previous years, individuals of all skill levels are invited to organize teams or to volunteer to participate on a team.

Team leaders are asked to register their teams by May 1.

To volunteer to participate or to register a team, please contact daspres@detroitaudubon.org or the Detroit Audubon office at (248) 354-5804 or detas@bignet.net.

For more complete information on Birdathon guidelines, visit the Detroit Audubon Society website, <http://www.detroitaudubon.org/>.

Feathered Tales

by Beverly Stevenson

Richard Quick, long-time board member, past president, and current treasurer of Detroit Audubon, was charmed by the unexpected visit of a Carolina Wren that perched on the railing outside his window in mid-January as we talked on the phone.

Christmas Bird Count Results

The results of the 2011 Rockwood Christmas Bird Count are tabulated and available on the DAS website, www.detroitaudubon.org by clicking on the "Citizen Research" tab and then selecting "Christmas Bird Counts."

Member of
EarthShare
Michigan

continued from p. 1

The **Killdeer** is also a reliable March arrival, but never in great numbers, and its presence during the spring and summer is sporadic. I can count on seeing it sometime during March, but I cannot count on seeing it on every one of my visits to the park, in March or any later month. Nor have I ever seen evidence that it nests in Eliza Howell.

While the **Common Grackle** and the **Brown-headed Cowbird** are not species that excite many observers, their unfailing arrival in March is another announcement of spring in the neighborhood. Grackles nest in the park. Brown-headed Cowbirds, as brood parasites, do not build their own nests at all. They are, however, very successful in reproducing in the park, being specialists in adding an egg to those that are hatched by some other species. In the breeding season in 2011, I spent some time watching an adult Chipping Sparrow feed a considerably larger juvenile cowbird.

Hinckley, Ohio, celebrates the annual arrival of the **Turkey Vulture** every year on March 15. It is usually only a few days later that I see the first vultures of the year in Detroit. They soar overhead, surveying the terrain singly or in small numbers. They will appear repeatedly over the next few months, but I don't know where they nest.

The **Song Sparrow** is another common bird in the park beginning in March. In breeding season, I often see these sparrows carrying food to their young, but their well-hidden nests are extremely hard to find. Once in a while, a Song Sparrow spends part of the winter in Eliza Howell, but that is the exception. Most years they are absent until March.

The Rouge River flows south through Eliza Howell, and less than two miles downriver there is a **Great Blue Heron** rookery. This might be where the herons that forage in the park nest, though I don't know that for sure. I do know that I can expect their arrival along the river or in the spring-flooded bottomland in March.

Of the birds on this list, the **Wood Duck** may be the

most thrilling and the most mysterious. It arrives regularly on the river in March, the only duck besides the Mallard that I normally see here. The male in the spring is so striking, especially in the sunlight, that it always produces a "wow" response. The unanswered question, even after years of watching, is where the Wood Ducks have their tree cavity nests. The presence on the river every year of young ducklings suggests that they are likely nesting close to the river. Perhaps 2012 will be the year I find a Wood Duck nest.

A few years ago, the **Eastern Bluebird** would not have been on this list. It is only recently that it has become more regular at Eliza Howell Park, where it now nests. While Eastern Bluebirds are sometimes seen at other locations in southern Michigan in the winter, I have not yet seen them here until March.

The appearance of these March species does not result in the frenzied excitement sometimes encountered in popular hotspots during the peak of warbler migration in May. But for those of us ready for the first arrivals of spring, these early birds, as common as most of them are, provide an occasion for celebration: the first migrants are returning!

DAS Spring Campout at Point Pelee

The annual spring campout at Point Pelee National Park, Ontario, will be held May 17-20, 2012. These three nights and four days occur during the peak of spring songbird migration at North America's premier migrant stopover.

This campout, held in the park's group campground site, is for tents only. The cost is \$18 per person, per night. You may reserve one, two, or all three nights.

Please make check out and send to Mike Fitzpatrick, 56 Hubbard St., Mount Clemens, MI 48043. A detailed confirmation will be returned. Please include a phone number and the names of all campers.

Think Spring - Get-Away Up North!

Although spring and its migration season often seem like the shortest season of the year, there is a way to prolong them—plan to spend Memorial Day weekend on Loon Lake, just a few miles north of Hale, Michigan (175-200 miles from Detroit). Because it's so much farther north, you'll be able to experience spring all over again.

Join us on the Memorial Day Weekend Nature Get-Away Friday, May 25 through Monday, May 28 at Loon Lake Lutheran Retreat Center, which sits on a high bluff above picturesque Loon Lake, the only state nature preserve on private land. Here your lullaby will be the eerie plaintive song of the Common Loon, the hoot of Barred Owls, and the song of lovesick frogs. Experience Michigan pleasures such as trillium, nesting Pileated Woodpeckers, Yellow Lady's-slipper and a loon carrying her young on her back. Family-friendly features will include canoeing, a challenge course, an owl prowl, nature discovery walks, and climbing the roll-ways (man-made dunes on the Au Sable River used in the lumbering era to roll logs down to the river below). And, of course, hearty meals will be offered.

Field trips will also be available to nearby sites such as Tawas Point State Park, the Kirtland's Warbler breeding area, largo Springs, and the Rifle River State Recreation Area.

Because the Loon Lake Lutheran Retreat Center is being sold, this could be the last time in more than 30 years that the Detroit Audubon Society will be able to offer this opportunity. So don't miss this chance to experience a wonderful spring tradition.

MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND

NATURE GET-AWAY

Friday, May 25 - Monday, May 28, 2012

Fees for 2012:

With Lodging at the Loon Lake Lutheran Retreat Center

Adult (6th grade up) \$192

Child (K-5th grade) \$168

Day-Use (for those staying in motels or cottages or who live nearby)

Adult (6th grade up) \$164

Child (K-5th grade) \$141

***To register, download the registration form available on the DAS website, www.detroitaudubon.org or call (248) 354-5804 to request that a form be mailed to you.

Questions about the Nature Get-Away can be directed to Jim Bull at (313) 928-2950 or jamesbull22@yahoo.com.

2012 Annual Conservation Conference to Be Held This September

After many cold Annual Conservation Conference bird walks, we have decided to try a fall event. This year the Annual Conservation Conference is September 29, 2012. The location is the beautiful Edsel and Eleanor Ford House in Grosse Pointe. We are fortunate to have the best possible guides for the morning bird walk: Rosann Kovalcik, owner of the Grosse Pointe Wild Birds Unlimited store, and Bill Rapai, president of Grosse Pointe Audubon. There may not be anyone who knows the grounds better than these two knowledgeable birders. Save the date and watch the website and the next Flyway for registration information.

Snowy Visitors

Michigan birders will very likely remember two things about the special winter of 2011-2012: the incredibly mild, dry weather and a remarkable invasion of Snowy Owls.

Scientists hypothesized that large numbers of the owls moved southward in search of food as a result of a highly successful breeding season that caused competition for food at their Arctic wintering ground. Such large-scale migrations of birds are called "irruptions."

Irruptions of Snowy Owls (and other owl species) are not unusual. Population levels of their food source, mainly small rodents called lemmings, crash every three to five years, sending mostly younger birds roaming across Canada and the northern United States. And each winter there are sporadic sightings in most northern states.

This Snowy Owl irruption, however, was believed to be a little different: during the summer of 2011, a spike in the lemming population likely caused a spectacular breeding season for the birds. A Reuters article (Jan 28) reported that researchers at the Owl Research Institute in Montana speculated that each breeding pair may have hatched as many as five to seven offspring, compared to a typical clutch size of no more than two.

It's estimated that a few thousand Snowy Owls were seen from coast to coast across the country—hunting at local airports, patrolling lakeshores, and feeding in farm fields. They have turned up as far south as Oklahoma. The sheer number of sightings was bound to attract a lot of publicity. The story was featured on the NBC Nightly News on February 2 and made headlines in the Detroit Free Press on January 29. According to the Free Press, nearly 100 sightings had been reported in Michigan by early December.

Unique and impressive birds, Snowy Owls have a four- to five-foot wingspan, stand from 20 to 28 inches tall, and weigh from three to six pounds. Young male owls are dark barred and become whiter as they age, with some males becoming almost completely white adults. The females show darker markings throughout their lives. They are skillful daytime predators who will supplement their diets with small mammals, birds—including waterfowl—and even fish.

Locally, the most reliable place to see one of these wonderful raptors was in Harrison Township, atop light poles and structures along the Clinton River and the shore of Lake St. Clair, where many people got fantastic views of one or more birds beginning in late November. One was also reported at Pointe Mouillee State Game Area in Monroe County and environs in late January.

Sightings were also reported from Tawas Point (as many as six birds), Muskegon (three birds), Kalamazoo, Port Huron, and Lenawee County, among many other locations.



Harrison Township Snowy Owl seen in late November 2011. Photo by Janet Hug.

 **Feathered Tales**
by Beverly Stevenson

Poor **Shep Davidson**, who called and said he had seen a Snowy Owl sitting in his yard in Muskegon. I gave him a hard time, thinking he was mistaken because he said it had a lot of black markings on it and he didn't have a photo. I didn't hesitate to call him back to apologize after seeing the front-page article in the Detroit Free Press on Sunday, January 29, stating how Snowy Owls have been spotted all over lower Michigan due to the over-abundance of young, who do have black markings.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE:

A CHIMNEY NEAR YOU

by Leonard Weber

The Detroit Audubon Society was recently asked whether we would be interested in working with other groups in the state to gather data on Chimney Swifts in Michigan. The tentative plan is to monitor the roosting sites of Chimney Swifts before their fall migration. We are very interested.

For this project to be as successful as possible, we need assistance from our members.

Chimney Swifts are unlike most other small birds. We typically see them flying rapidly, foraging for insects on the wing. Their feet are made for grasping rough vertical surfaces; they cannot perch or walk. Historically, they used hollow trees for nesting and roosting. When European settlers spread across the eastern part of the country, felling forests and building buildings, Chimney Swifts quickly adapted to their brick and stone chimneys (and so the name).

Chimney Swifts winter in South America, and, like many other neotropical migrants, their numbers are declining. In the late summer, after the breeding season and before they head south, they congregate in large flocks, sometimes hundreds of individuals, and roost together at night in their selected chimneys. The planned monitoring program means identifying as many of these communal roosting sites as possible and sending out volunteers to estimate the number of birds disappearing down the chimneys at dusk.

While no decision has yet been made, I am hoping that the project will begin in the summer of 2012. Here are ways you can contribute:

- If you are aware of any roosting sites used by flocks of Chimney Swifts in the late summer,



Nesting Chimney Swift. Photo courtesy of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

please let us know their locations. Perhaps you have seen them circling near a chimney shortly before dark in late summer. Please let us know the location.

- Once we have identified the sites, we will rely on volunteers to monitor the sites. Please let us know if you are able to assist in this effort; any needed training will be provided. Chimney Swifts congregate in urban areas, and the chances are quite good that one of their communal roosts is a chimney near you.
- We will also need individuals to assist in coordinating the project and keeping accurate records. Please let us know if you are interested in being part of this "committee."

If you can assist in any of these ways, please email me at daspres@detroitaudubon.org or contact the Detroit Audubon office at (248) 354-5804 or detas@bignet.net.



Detroit Audubon Society

Now on Facebook

In case you haven't noticed yet, the Detroit Audubon Society has a Facebook page! "Like" the Detroit Audubon Society Page (NOT GROUP), to get reminders of field trips as well as notifications of volunteer opportunities, upcoming programs, and workshops.

St. Clair Woods Nature Sanctuary

Did you know?

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Detroit Audubon Society purchased three parcels of land to establish the 175-acre St. Clair Woods Nature Sanctuary, just west of Port Huron. The forested land provided habitat for Barred Owls, Ovenbirds, and Red-headed Woodpeckers, but the land was purchased primarily to protect a flower: the Painted Trillium (*Trillium undulatum*). At the time, Painted Trillium was listed by the state as a threatened species, and fewer than a dozen locations were known to exist in the entire state.

The Michigan Nature Association partnered with Detroit Audubon by purchasing three adjacent parcels totaling nearly 49 acres. This created a 224-acre refuge to harbor the rare trillium. In the ensuing years, thoughtless development destroyed some of the last colonies of Painted Trillium, to the point where the plant is now found at only six locations in the state, all in St. Clair County. Sadly, Painted Trillium is now a state-listed endangered species, at risk of becoming extirpated in Michigan.

The survival of this species depends not only on protecting unique habitats such as St. Clair Woods, but also on reducing the mortality rate of individual plants. Trillium are especially susceptible to loss because if the flowers or leaves are picked, the entire plant will die. This is why high populations of White-tailed Deer are a major concern, since they favor browsing on trillium. Add in the fact that trillium need at least seven years to grow from seed to flower, and it is understandable why perpetuation of this species is such a challenge. Clearly, increased efforts are needed to protect and restore Painted Trillium colonies in Michigan.

Volunteer!

The DAS Sanctuary Committee is charged with overseeing stewardship of the St. Clair Woods Nature Sanctuary. Over the past few years, we have held a number of work days at the sanctuary, primarily to clear and mark trails. If you would like to help with stewardship efforts at the sanctuary this spring, please contact the DAS office or contact Committee Chair Jack Smiley at jackrsmiley@gmail.com. You'll enjoy seeing the more northern-like forest habitat of Eastern Hemlock, White Pine, Red Maple and Paper Birch. And, if the timing is right, you might be lucky enough to see the rare and beautiful Painted Trillium.

DETROIT AUDUBON SOCIETY

I'm enclosing or charging my tax deductible contribution of: \$1000 \$500 \$100 \$50 \$20 OTHER

Name _____ e-mail _____ Phone _____

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To Charge, indicate: Visa MasterCard Card Number: _____ Exp. Date _____

Name as Shown on Card _____ Signature _____

This gift is (circle one: 'in memory of' 'in honor of'): _____

Please send acknowledgement to: _____

Mail this completed form (your check payable to Detroit Audubon Society) to:

Detroit Audubon Society, 24433 W Nine Mile Rd, Southfield, MI 48033

Thank You for your support!

Want to Become a Birder?

The Waterford Township Recreation Department is offering a spring class called "Birding for Beginners." Led by Scott Jennex, one of Michigan's top birders, the class will provide lots of how-to help with topics including field guides, birding by ear, optics and other gear, and birding locations in southeast Michigan and beyond. The class will consist of two sessions in the classroom and two in the field.

You will meet at the Drayton Plains Nature Center, 2125 Denby, Waterford, 48329, on Tuesdays, April 10 and 17, from 6:30-8:00 p.m. and Saturday, April 14, from 8:00-10:00 a.m.

On Saturday, April 21, you will meet at Indian Springs Metropark (Tot Lot parking area), 5200 Indian Trail, White Lake, 48386, from 8:00-10:00 a.m. There is a \$5 fee to enter Indian Springs if you don't already have an annual Metropark pass.

The class fee is \$35.

For more information, visit the Waterford Recreation Department's website at <http://webtrac.twp.waterford.mi.us/vsiwebtrac102.html>, call (248) 674-5441, or email webtrac@twp.waterford.mi.us.

Hope to see you there!

Have You Heard?

As of December 2011, Metro Beach Metropark has changed its name to Lake St. Clair Metropark. Birders in Southeast Michigan know the park as a top birding site, particularly for seeing migrating songbirds, breeding Great Horned Owls, and waterfowl.

Detroit Audubon will be sponsoring a field trip to Lake St. Clair Metropark on May 6, 2012.

For details about this trip and the other field trips offered by DAS, visit the website at <http://www.detroitaudubon.org>.