

A Note from your Co-Editors

If you are interested in writing a short article or poem, if you have any suggestions or comments, or if you would like to have an event included in the calendar, please send an e-mail to:

Alyssa DeRubeis, co-editor
Diana Rankin, co-editor
newsletter@moumn.org

Deadlines for 2014 are:

May/June - March 25
July/August - May 25
September/October - July 25
November/December - Sept. 25

Thank you!

Inside this Issue

- 1 Conservation Column
- 2 MOU Calendar
New Members
- 3 Rusty Blackbird Migration
Salt Lake Weekend
- 4 MOU Membership Information

Minnesota Ornithologists' Union
J. F. Bell Museum of Natural History
University of Minnesota
10 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455
Email: mou@moumn.org
Web: <http://moumn.org>

MN Birding is published bi-monthly
Editors: Diana Rankin and
Alyssa DeRubeis
Designer: Thomas Benjamin Hertzell
© 2014 Minnesota Ornithologists' Union

Minnesota Birding

Scaup Populations, A Cause for Worry?

March / April 2014
Volume 51
Number 2

by Bob Baden

Duck populations in North America have been doing quite well in recent years. Abundant spring wetlands and millions of acres of retired grassland nesting cover courtesy of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) have been a boon for many ducks, especially in the core Prairie Pothole Region. The 2012 spring breeding duck population was estimated at 48.6 million birds, an all time high since surveys began in 1955. While this is great news for birders and waterfowlers alike, there is reason to be concerned for some species. The population of Lesser and Greater scaup (collectively referred to as scaup herein) has declined by 50% since the 1970s, and the causes of this decline are still clouded.

Scaup are the most abundant and widespread diving duck in North America. Males are predominately black and white, with a glossy purplish (lesser) or greenish (greater) head. Females are dark brown with a white band at the base of the bill. Both sexes have a distinctive blue bill and are commonly known as "bluebills". Scaup populations peaked at almost 8 million in 1972 and have been trending lower since, bottoming out at a low of 3.25 million in 2006. The 2013 population of scaup stood at 4.2 million, 17% below the long-term average.

Theories on the decline of the scaup population abound, including changing breeding habitat conditions in the boreal forest due to global warming, reduced female survival and fitness due to contaminants, and changing migration habitat conditions effect on food availability. Invasive

species, an all too common theme here in Minnesota and elsewhere, are also impacting scaup. Invasive faucet snails are the host species for trematodes, which have been linked to large scale scaup die offs on Lake Winnibigoshish, Bowstring Lake, and on the Upper Mississippi River National Fish and Wildlife Refuge in recent years. Another invasive species, zebra mussels which are spreading in Minnesota from the Great Lakes, are rapidly becoming a favorite food source for migrating scaup. While one may think this new food source would be good for scaup, a zebra mussel diet may not be smart if you are a scaup. Zebra mussels accumulate contaminants in their tissue easier than native mussel species, and some heavy metals, most notably selenium, may cause reproductive failure if ingested in high enough concentrations. Harvest by hunters, on the other hand, has not been shown to be a cause in the scaup decline.

As a habitat manager, I'm keenly interested in which wetlands scaup utilize during spring migration because their presence is a good indicator of the overall health of a wetland. Females feed heavily on aquatic amphipods, also known as freshwater shrimp, in the spring, gaining fat reserves crucial to migration and egg production. Documented decreases of amphipods in Minnesota wetlands is a cause for concern for scaup and many other bird species that rely on the energy rich invertebrates. Increased overwinter survival of fish in previously fishless wetlands, higher turbidity

continued on page 2

*Scaup Populations,
continued from page 1*

levels, grassland conversion, and wetland drainage are all factors leading to poor wetland quality, and in turn may affect amphipod abundance. Minnesota alone has lost 300,000 acres of CRP grasslands in the past three years; nationwide CRP acres are down 11 million since 2007. Decreased numbers of amphipods mean female scaup have to spend more time feeding in order to gain the necessary fat resources to produce a clutch of eggs, time they may not have.

For birders and waterfowlers alike, scaup have long been cherished here in Minnesota. Whether it's the sight of a flock of bills ripping across the whitecaps into your decoys or their animated courtship display that gives you a rush, the decline in scaup numbers should be a concern to us all. MOU members can help by recording scaup sightings in the MOU Seasonal Reports with notes on location and numbers and by supporting additional funding for wetland and grassland conservation and enhancement programs.

Rob Baden is an Assistant Area Wildlife Manager for the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources residing in Windom. He is an active birder and waterfowler who spends countless days in the field during the spring and fall waterfowl migration.

The M.O.U. Welcomes Its New Members

Brenda Thompson, *South St Paul MN*
Mike Marchant, *Mahtomedi MN*
Jacqueline Hosch, *Mahtomedi MN*
Susan White, *Minneapolis MN*
Robert Seigfreid, *North Mankato MN*

MOU Calendar

Minnesota Birding Weekends (MBW)

March 29–30: Southwest Minnesota birding trip, led by Kim Eckert

Salt Lake Birding Weekend

April 26: Headquartered in Marietta/Madison with birding in Lac qui Parle and Big Stone counties.

Minneapolis Audubon Society

The following two programs begin at 1 pm at the Bryant Square Park Building in Minneapolis:

March 14: Wildlife of Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge
Betsy Beneke, Visitor Services Manager, on improving the oak savanna and building a visitors' center

April 11: Wildlife Scenes from Aitkin & Beyond
Warren Nelson, Nature Photographer and a favorite guest

International Festival of Owls

March 7–9: Sponsored by the Houston Nature Center in Houston, Minnesota

MRVAC (Minnesota River Valley Audubon Chapter)

March 15, 8:00 am.

Field Trip: Bird Watching Trek, Old Cedar Avenue Bridge

March 21

All Day Event. Field Trip: Le Sueur County Birding Day

March 22, 8:00 am.

Field Trip: Bird Watching Trek, Old Cedar Avenue Bridge

March 24, 8:00 am.

Field Trip: Bird Watching Trek, Old Cedar Avenue Bridge

3RD ANNUAL BOUNDARY WATERS CLASS BIRD ECOLOGY OF THE NORTHERN FOREST a canoe camping birding adventure LED BY SUSAN PLANKIS AND ROB KESSELING

Curriculum approved by the University of St. Thomas
Travel by ultralight canoe, Camp in deluxe tents. Wholesome meals
Many boreal species
Amazing, fun, birding adventures
No experience needed

2 Sections
May 23-26, 2014
May 28-31, 2014
\$499 ALL-INCLUSIVE

robkesseling.com

e-mail: rob@robkesseling.com splankis@gmail.com
phone: 952.432.8884 or Sue at 952.201.6062

**HELD IN THE BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA WILDERNESS
Rob is a USFS Licensed Wilderness Guide**

**KNOW IT
WILD NATURE
LIVE IT**

Be a Part of the Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz

by Alyssa DeRubeis



photo by Dave Cahlander

Believe it or not, I actually enjoy standing in sub-freezing temperatures as the ice and snow begin to thaw and turn backroads into mudslides. In addition to looking for ducks, geese, and swans, I love listening to the sky while hundreds of returning blackbirds fly overhead. But there is always one sound that stands above them all. I think of it as a high-pitched squeaky version of the Killdeer's namesake call. This bird is the Rusty Blackbird. Some may ask why I am so intrigued with a dully-colored songbird with a pathetic song. It has to do with the journey and mystery surrounding the bird. It overwinters in the southeastern United States and stops briefly in Minnesota en route to its boreal wetland breeding grounds. So I only get to see the Rusty Blackbird for a relatively short period of time, and considering its precipitous decline, my opportunities to see them may decline as well.

For a species whose population has decreased between 85 and 95% over the past 50 years, surprisingly little is known about the Rusty Blackbird's migration ecology. But that is about to change. From mid-March through mid-April, the Minnesota state coordinators of the Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz (RBSMB) ask that you share your Rusty Blackbird observations to eBird.

The RBSMB is a coordinated ef-

fort led by the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (IRBWG), along with eBird, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and the Vermont Center for Ecostudies. Participants will be collecting data throughout the migratory range of the species, from the southern United States, through the Midwest and Atlantic Coast, and all the way into Canada. The objectives of the RBSMB are 1) determine important migratory stopover sites; 2) assess consistency of use and timing at these locations; 3) strengthen relationships with other conservation organizations and enhance the conservation of rusty blackbirds; and 4) increase awareness of rusty blackbirds among the birding community and general public.

Not only could you be helping out with this citizen science project, but you would also be partaking in a long-held rivalry between Minnesota and Wisconsin. The state coordinators are organizing a competition to see which state reports more Rusty Blackbirds to eBird. The winning state will get a trophy of some sort. Let's bring honor to Minnesota ornithology, shall we?

If you'd like to learn more about how you can participate in the RBSMB, or if you're looking for some pointers on Rusty Blackbird identification, visit the IRBWG website (<http://rustyblackbird.org/outreach/migration-blitz/>). Also, feel free to contact the RBSMB Minnesota state coordinators: Alyssa DeRubeis (alderubeis@gmail.com), Brittney Larson (brittneylarson27@gmail.com), or Steve Winter (stephen.winter@ok-state.edu). With your help, we can advance our knowledge in Rusty Blackbird migration ecology so that I (and you) can enjoy these squeaky Killdeer birds for many years to come.

Salt Lake Weekend

Sponsored by the MOU

Join us for the 39th Annual Salt Lake Birding Weekend. On Saturday, April 26, 2014, volunteers will guide birders around Salt Lake, Big Stone Refuge and the lakes, wetlands, and prairies of Lac qui Parle and southern Big Stone counties. This event is free and open to all who are interested. No pre-registration is needed. Last year, over 80 birders surveyed Lac qui Parle County and located 135 different species of birds. Highlights included White-faced Ibis, American Avocet, Short-eared Owl, Ferruginous Hawk, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Smith's Longspur, and Great-tailed Grackle.

Meet on Saturday April 26 at 7:00 a.m., at the Marietta American Legion, located one block west of the intersection of County Road 7 and State Highway 40, 11 miles west of Madison. Coffee, sweet rolls, juice, and milk will be available for purchase. Caravans will leave between 7:00 and 8:00 am. At noon, stop back at the Legion for a sloppy joes and cake (available at a modest cost) and to compare notes. A Saturday chicken dinner, for \$10, will be served at 7:30 pm at the Sons of Norway Hall on Highway 75 in Madison. Reservations are necessary; please contact Julie Claffin by e-mail at JulieClaffin@gmail.com. After dinner, there will be a short program and then the species count for the day will be recorded. Sunday birding is on your own, but you may stop by Prairie Marsh Farm for advice and directions to local sites.

Check the MOU web site for maps and lodging information (<http://moumn.org/saltlake/>). Contact Ken Larson for more information or to reserve a camping site — home 952-595-9265, cell 612-210-8486. E-mail prairiemarshfarm@comcast.net.



Minnesota Ornithologists' Union

Bell Museum of Natural History
10 Church Street SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455

PRSR STD
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 90155
Twin Cities, MN

The Mission of the M.O.U.

We foster the study and conservation of birds by amateurs and professionals. We promote the conservation of birds and their natural habitats. We support these aims primarily by publishing and sharing information, by serving as a repository for records, by conducting field trips, by awarding grants for research, and by supporting programs that educate members and the public about birds.

MOU Officers

Roy Zimmerman, President
Bob Bossert, Vice President
Tamara Holmer, Recording Secretary
Elizabeth Bell, Membership
Mark Lystig, Treasurer
Carl Greiner, Past President

Editors of *Minnesota Birding*:

Diana Rankin and Alyssa DeRubeis

Birding Hotlines

Statewide: 763-780-8890
Toll Free: 800-657-3700
North Shore: 218-834-2858
Northwest: 800-433-1888

MOU Contacts

Minnesota Birding: newsletter@moumn.org
Web site: http://moumn.org
President: president@moumn.org
Vice President: vicepresident@moumn.org
Membership Secretary: membership@moumn.org
Treasurer: treasurer@moumn.org
Recording Secretary: secretary@moumn.org
The Loon editor: editor@moumn.org
CBC compiler: cbc@moumn.org
Statewide RBA compiler: rba@moumn.org
Duluth RBA compiler: duluthrba@moumn.org
MOU Records Committee: mourc@moumn.org
Conservation Chair: conservation@moumn.org
Grants: grants@moumn.org
Youth Mentorship: mentorship@moumn.org
Field Trips: fieldtrips@moumn.org
All other MOU functions: mou@moumn.org

MOU Membership: New/Renewal

Name _____

E-mail address _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone (_____) _____

County _____

Membership Categories

- Youth (under 18) \$15.00
- Individual \$25.00
- Foreign (including Canada) U.S. \$35.00
- Family \$35.00
- Supporting \$75.00
- Corporate \$100.00
- Life, single \$500.00
- Life, joint \$700.00

Send to: Elizabeth Bell, MOU Membership Secretary
5868 Pioneer Road South
Saint Paul Park MN 55071-1143

Please make a contribution to the Savaloja Fund

The Savaloja Fund supports research and other projects selected by the MOU for special attention. Your contributions help fund a better future for birds in Minnesota. You can add a contribution to your membership check.

Amount: \$ _____