



Minnesota BIRDING

September
October
2020
Volume 57
Number 5

Inside

- 1** Notes from an eBird Reviewer
- 4** President's Message Conservation Column
- 6** Board Meeting Summary
- 7** Savaloja Grant Report
- 9** My Favorite Home Patch
- 11** MOU Calender
- 14** Birder Bio
- 15** New Members
- 16** Membership Info

Behind the Scenes: Notes from an eBird Reviewer

by Bruce Fall

eBird (eBird.org) is familiar to many birders as a free online database where users can submit observations, view specific and summarized observations of others, and keep a wide variety of personal lists. Started in 2002 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, its usage has grown exponentially. eBird was created with the insight that, collected systematically, the observations of the hundreds of thousands of people interested in birds could have considerable value for science, conservation, and education. The project's success is reflected in the long list of peer-reviewed publications using eBird data. Also notable are the animated maps of seasonal abundance and range for over 600 North American species.

I became an eBirder in 2005 and was recruited to be a volunteer Minnesota reviewer in 2007, and I'm still doing it 13 years and many eBird refinements later. In 2017 Jim Lind joined me as reviewer, and Ezra Horsch in 2019. In 2007, fewer than 8,000 complete checklists were submitted in Minnesota. This year we are on pace for 155,000, with over 650,000 all time. This does not include many more incidental and incomplete checklists. Since 2012, Dave Cahlander, the

MOU database architect, has been transferring all confirmed eBird records into the MOU database quarterly. In recent years, records in MOU originating from eBird have far outnumbered those entered directly. The MOU database is the basis for the quarterly Seasonal Reports (S.R.) in *The Loon*, so eBird records are an important component. In addition to us eBird reviewers, the S.R. editors also review eBird records after import. For challenging records, I frequently enlist the assistance of other S.R. editors.

eBird's basic premise is that each bird observation has value. However, some are more valuable than others. The most useful, for eBird's scientific goals, are observations reported on complete checklists (those in which all birds identified are included) of short duration and distance, made at a specific location, with numbers estimated or counted. Incomplete or incidental lists, lists without counts, and county-level and long-distance lists are less useful.

Errors (typos, misidentifications, checklist-level issues, and more) happen, even with experienced birders, but especially with novices. The goal of reviewers is to minimize errors and improve data quality. Filters are cen-

tral to the review process, and are the responsibility of us reviewers to create and update. All records pass through the filters, which are intended to identify and flag out-of-range birds, out-of-season entries, and unusually high counts. There are currently 18 filter regions in Minnesota, with some subdivisions in progress or planned. Each filter has roughly 550 taxa, including species, subspecies and subspecies groups, “spuhs” (e.g., swallow sp.), and “slashes” (e.g., White-faced/Glossy Ibis). Initially there was just a single statewide filter. Later, regional filters (counties or groups of counties) were implemented, but date intervals were restricted to entire months. The current filter system, as shown below, was established by eBird in 2012, with subsequent refinements. At least for the foreseeable future, eBird has no plans for filter regions to be smaller geographically than a county. Anyone can view the filters, for Minnesota or elsewhere. A link to the 70-page *Reviewer Handbook* appears at the bottom of *The eBird Review Process* on the Help pages; the link to the filters is on p. 34.

I use several resources for creating date and count limits for each taxon on a filter, including the MOU database, eBird line graphs, a file of early and late migration dates compiled by Paul Budde from MOU Seasonal Reports, and other sources, including personal experience. The MOU database, with rich filtering and sorting capabilities, has been invaluable. However, I have no doubt that ten experienced Minnesota birders independently creating a regional filter using the same resources would each come up with ten somewhat different dates and numbers for many taxa, as there are general guidelines but few rules. The goal is to identify rare and unusual records, including high counts. For spring migrants, I start with the median arrival date, then look at the long-term yearly arrival pattern and select a date somewhat earlier than the median but not near the record. Then I inspect the data for the specific region and make modifications. I repeat that for departures and for the fall season. For counts, I look at existing data for the filter region and choose a number that is near but generally less than the reported high. Numbers presume eBird’s checklist guidelines—traveling counts under five miles and stationary counts under three hours. Filters are not static and can be easily changed; I frequently update them based on new data.

The figure below shows sample filters from the Henne-

pin/Carver filter region. Together, these two counties have over 120,000 checklists (in contrast, 17 under-birded counties each have fewer than 1,000). Palm Warbler median arrival date (south) is April 20; I set the arrival date for this filter as April 16 based on data in the MOU and eBird databases for this region (the earliest date is April 10). Prior to April 16, any Palm Warbler report will be flagged for review and observer comments. Starting April 16 an entry of up to 15 individuals will pass without review. The median spring departure date is May 23, and based on MOU data I set May 27 as the date when late Palms will again be flagged. The interval from April 25 to May 19 is peak spring migration, and counts up to 80 are accepted without review. The date interval windows can’t be less than five days, and even an interval that short is hard to read, so most taxa have only two to four intervals per migration season; there is also a system limit of 12 intervals per taxon. There are two Palm Warbler subspecies on the filter: Western (the expected one, with filter limits identical to the parent species) and Yellow, for which there are only a few records in the state, with limits set at zero. Users not interested in subspecies can hide the subspecies display.

A flagged entry on a date where the filter is zero requires explanatory details from the birder, and will also place the record in the review queue. In the mobile app such an entry generates the message “Please add comments to support your ID (e.g., describe the field marks, behavior, and habitat).” We reviewers very much appreciate unsolicited diagnostic descriptive details (or photos), which obviates the need for follow-up requests. Unfortunately, not all users comply, either leaving the field blank or offering an incomplete or unhelpful description. Here are some real examples of details offered as sole support of a flagged species: “Heard unmistakable song”; “Eating below feeder”; “Flying.” While these statements are not inappropriate, by themselves they offer nothing supporting the ID. (The species in question were Black-throated Green Warbler, White-throated Sparrow, Sharp-shinned Hawk.) For flagged records lacking adequate details, I send email requests in which I usually try to explain why the record was flagged, and perhaps offer possible alternatives. For records only marginally outside the date interval window, the documentation need not be as detailed. It is common for lingering rarities to be visited by many birders. If

	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	JUL	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC
Black-throated Blue Warbler <i>Setophaga caerulescens</i>	JAN 1		0		MAY 5 2	MAY 26	0		AUG 23 2	OCT 1 1	OCT 16	0
Palm Warbler <i>Setophaga palmarum</i>	JAN 1	0		APR 1 APR 25 15 80	MAY MAY 27 9		0		AUG 22 SEP 5 6 25	OCT 1 35	OCT 26 3	0
Palm Warbler (Western) <i>Setophaga palmarum palmarum</i>	JAN 1	0		APR 1 APR 25 15 80	MAY MAY 27 9		0		AUG 22 SEP 5 6 25	OCT 1 35	OCT 26 3	0
Palm Warbler (Yellow) <i>Setophaga palmarum hypochrysea</i>	JAN 1						0					

Sample filters from the Hennepin/Carver filter region

there is good documentation initially, often merely stating “continuing” is sufficient, although descriptive details are always appreciated. For reports of Casual and Accidental species (review species by the MOU Records Committee), I try to work with the observer so they submit their record to MOURC as an RQD in addition to eBird, which defers to MOURC decisions for acceptance.

Records flagged for counts that exceed the filter limit (when greater than zero) will elicit the message “Please add comments to support your count (e.g., how you counted the birds and how you eliminated other species).” Some balk at counting or estimating numbers, and it’s acceptable to enter “X” (present) rather than a number. However, eBird strongly discourages “X” in lieu of some attempt at a count or estimate, because “X” is not nearly as valuable for scientific analysis. eBird’s Help section includes a lengthy chapter on counting and estimating numbers. Details supporting flagged counts could be something like: “counted individually”; “counted by tens”; “rough estimate”; “sample counts extrapolated to the flock”; etc. A real example (unfortunately one of many) of an unhelpful comment is: “Seen and heard everywhere.”

Flagged records with inadequate details after correspondence requests typically are left unconfirmed. This does not remove the record from the database—only the checklist owner (not reviewers) can physically delete a record. A reviewer’s decision to make a record unconfirmed simply keeps it out of public display and summaries (maps, line graphs, etc.). The record remains on the checklist, and also on the user’s various lists (life, state, county).

In 2015, eBird added the ability to upload media (photos and audio recordings) into the Macaulay Library, and the number has increased exponentially. Validating media ID has become a fairly recent reviewing task. Typically, dozens to hundreds of new photos and recordings are added daily; quality ranges from excellent to poor. The ID error rate is not trivial, especially for inexperienced users. Fortunately, this is one review area where experienced eBirders can assist as volunteers. Anyone who has submitted 25 or more checklists is eligible to report potentially misidentified photos or recordings. View media from the website (Explore / Search Photos and Sounds). You can look at the most recent entries or select a particular taxon. If you find one that appears misidentified, click the Report button; be sure to offer the correct ID. The record will then be placed in a reviewer’s queue. I expect that eventually experienced users will be able to report suspected non-media errors, but for now I recommend just contacting the reviewer with such issues. eBird continues to develop the Merlin Bird ID app with the goal of having novice birders start entering sightings there and gradually transitioning to eBird when they gain experience.

In addition to ID errors, there are various other types of errors that can be difficult to catch. If a traveling count is



Part of a large flock of Greater White-fronted Geese (with some Mallards mixed in), March 2016, Lake Byllesby, Goodhue County. Total goose estimate was 1,600, based on repeated sample counts by fives of birds on the ice. My counts from the photo: Greater White-fronted Goose (305); Mallard (15). Photo by Bruce Fall.

out and back on the same trail, or if portions are repeated, only the unique one-way distance should be reported. The mobile app tracking feature will give the total distance traveled, but this could be twice the true checklist distance, and must be adjusted. eBird encourages shorter checklists (under five miles) and automatically makes not public excessively long ones (greater than 50 miles), as well as those entered at the county level. Decisions on action for those from 5–50 miles are left to the reviewer. Many eBird hotspots (e.g., parks) have implicit boundaries, and checklists using the hotspot location should confine birding within the boundaries. Although not a reason for marking a record unconfirmed, breeding codes are frequently misused. These are intended for breeding season checklists, and especially for breeding bird atlases, but are often incorrectly applied out of season and away from a species’ breeding range.

I will close with a recommendation from years of reviewing and eBirding: make comments liberally in your checklists. Notes on weather, route, companions, non-avian sightings, habitat, all can be included in general checklist comments. Species comments about interesting behavior, song description, molt, ID notes, and especially documentation of unusual species all can be valuable to others and especially to you in the future as you look back on these checklists as entries in a digital field notebook.

*Bruce A. Fall is retired from the Biology Program, College of Biological Sciences, University of Minnesota. He is a Seasonal Report (Winter) editor for **The Loon**, and a past member of the MOU Records Committee. He has been an eBirder for 15 years and a volunteer reviewer for 13.*

Message from the President

Our world continues changing. We had hoped to be through with this spreading pandemic by now, but the coronavirus has other plans. The good part is that the healthcare system has learned better approaches to therapy, resulting in shorter hospitalizations and lower rates of death, and we are becoming accustomed to physical distancing, mask wearing, and crowd avoiding to stay safe. The unfortunate part is that the virus continues to spread in the population, creating anxiety for the activities that we enjoy in late summer and early fall, and adding stress for work, for returning to school, and for the upcoming election. There is an amazing effort to develop a vaccine, with frequent and significant advances, but effective vaccination is unlikely to be available for most of us until well into 2021.

For us birders, birds offer a bright spot. Devoted and casual birders continue to post great sightings as the fall migration develops. The newly fledged youngsters have now learned to keep their feathers in order and have improved their survival skills. The many chickadees, finches, and woodpeckers at our feeders continue to be a delight, and they offer diversion from everything else that is going on in the world. And the MOU provides an important community for helping us get through these times.

As with everything else, change in our community is inevitable. In the last newsletter, Vice-President Michelle Terrell and I invited MOU members to offer ideas and sugges-

tions for making the MOU a truly diverse and welcoming community, and we are making this request again. Tell us how the MOU welcomes you or how it makes you feel unwelcome. We are forming a Diversity and Inclusion Working Group, made up of members who are passionate about this and willing to volunteer to help make it happen. Please contact us if you are interested.

Other changes affect how we meet. The MOU has traditionally held the annual Paper Session on the first Saturday of December, most recently at the University of Minnesota St Paul Student Center. Putting 200 or more people in a large room will not be possible in 2020, so our in-person Paper Session meeting has been cancelled. Kara Snow chairs the Paper Session Organizing Committee, which is working to determine the possibility and format of a virtual meeting. Because members often renew their MOU dues when they register for the Paper Session, and we do not want these to get lost, we will also be sending a dues reminder.

I am hopeful for the MOU as we move toward fall and winter. We have a passion for birds, the type of outlet others lack. We have amazing volunteers who work to provide all the services and activities of the MOU with enthusiasm and a smile. We will get through this pandemic and meet together again, but it is important to stay connected until then, so call a friend. Enjoy the fall and stay well.

– Richard King

Conservation Column: Conservation at the Crossroads

by Carrol Henderson, Chair of the MOU Conservation Committee

I suppose my awareness of “conservation” began when I was ten years old. I was in fifth grade at Zearing Consolidated School when we were given a workbook for a six-week course in conservation provided by the Iowa Conservation Commission. The most memorable part of that experience was memorizing the Conservation Pledge: “I give my pledge as an American to save and faithfully defend from waste the natural resources of my country—its soil and minerals, its forests, waters, and wildlife.” The pledge originated from *Outdoor Life* magazine in 1946, the year I was born.

That pledge was not just a slogan; it was a way of life for our family. On our 132-acre family farm, my father, Curtis Henderson, rotated his row crops with oats followed by alfalfa. The alfalfa had nitrogen-fixing nodules on the roots

which re-fertilized the soil. The manure from our hogs, cattle, and chickens was regularly spread on the fields for additional fertilization—loaded one pitchfork-full at a time by my dad and me in the manure spreader. The soil on rolling topography of our farm was protected with grassy terraces, and there was a buffer zone of grass on both sides of Minerva Creek, which flowed through our farm. My dad also planted Sudex patches along the grassy waterway, which provided winter cover for pheasants.

In graduate school at the University of Georgia I majored in ecology and learned more about the history of “conservation,” beginning with the book *Man and Nature*, by George Perkins Marsh, originally published in 1864. I also learned about subsequent advances in conservation, like

the passage of the Lacey Act in 1900 prohibiting interstate transportation of wildlife taken in violation of state, federal, and international laws, and the creation of the first National Wildlife Refuge at Pelican Island in Florida in 1903 by President Theodore Roosevelt. I learned that the word “conservation” was coined in that same era by chief of the federal Forestry Division Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot knew that well-managed British forest lands in India were called conservancies and the managers were called conservators, so he adapted the word to describe the new concept of well-managed natural resource lands. He defined conservation as sustainable management of natural resources to provide the “greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time.”

Over the past 100-plus years, we have seen continuing evolution of the conservation concept as it applies to wildlife, watersheds, forests, prairies, wetlands, lakes, national parks, national wildlife refuges, air, and minerals. The concept has been institutionalized through creation and implementation of local, state, national, and international laws and treaties. Additional provisions for land stewardship have been incorporated into those laws to consider endangered species, preservation of biodiversity, climate change, and protection from environmental contaminants like DDT. Stewardship of our nation’s natural resources contributes to our economy and the health of our nation’s citizens and natural resource base. President Barack Obama added to this conservation legacy by signing presidential executive orders during his administration that further improved and refined provisions for land, water, air quality, and wildlife conservation.

However, during the past four years we have endured the continuing demolition, by presidential executive orders, of over a hundred years of laws and regulations that were implemented to improve the stewardship of our natural resources. To grasp the extent of this assault on our nation’s natural resource base, Google “The Trump Administration is Reversing 100 Environmental Rules. Here’s the Full List. Nadia Popovich et al. The New York Times. July 15, 2020.”



Black-crowned Night-Heron, by Tom Gilde

Apparently some politicians in Washington, and even some from Minnesota, have never heard of the Conservation Pledge. We need to send them back home in November.

We must become strong advocates both at the state and national level to reverse the presidential executive orders that have devastated our natural resource protection. Oversight of the laws and policies intended to protect our natural resources has been handed over to grazing, mining, logging, and oil extraction industries that seek to profit from them. National Monument lands have been opened up to developers seeking to exploit them. We need restoration of the natural resource conservation provisions that have been removed during the past four years by executive order. These could be restored by new executive orders. Thank goodness the president’s attempt to destroy the protection of migratory birds provided by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was overturned in August by a federal judge!

We also need the Senate in Minnesota to flip in November so we can proceed with natural resource legislation that has been stonewalled by Republicans, including approval of the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund recommendations and putting the fund off limits from raids intended to divert that money to non-related projects that should come from bonding.

There are other items on my November wish list. Internationally, the U.S. needs to stop “building walls” and start “building bridges” for international conservation efforts. I would suggest starting with Cuba, since they are an integral stopover and wintering site for many migratory birds that nest in the U.S. and Canada. We need to work with Cuban biologists, birders, and politicians as conservation partners, not political adversaries. We need to assess opportunities to support them with international conservation programs and to be able to support nature tour companies and their guides, who are currently living with no income from birding tourism during the pandemic.

At the federal level, perhaps within the Farm Bill, we need to explore the concept of expanding the Conservation Reserve Program to become a broader program that subsidizes landowners for practices that preserve and maintain “Ecosystem Services” on their lands. This broader interpretation would substantially increase stabilization of soils and watersheds, improve air quality, and reduce attempts to grow crops on marginal lands that are best left in an uncropped status.

Another promising idea includes creating a new Civilian Conservation Corps similar that of the 1930s to provide employment opportunities for youth and a renewed awareness of the benefits of holistic natural resource management. There is also a growing interest in the concept of the “Green New Deal” program: <https://jacobinmag.com/2020/08/fdr-green-new-deal-ccc>.

Just one more thing: Nontoxic hunting and fishing tackle! We need requirements that small fishing jigs and sink-

ers be manufactured with nontoxic materials like bismuth, tungsten, tin, and materials. This would avoid lead poisoning in waterfowl. We also need to require that all ammunition used for hunting be nontoxic. All major ammo manufacturers are making nontoxic ammo comprised of copper, copper and zinc, and even tin. The prices are comparable to premium lead ammo, there is good availability from sporting goods stores and online, and the performance is outstanding in terms of accuracy and effectiveness. This has nothing to do with anti-hunting. This is about the common sense idea that we should not be feeding lead to our families. Lead can cause neurological problems in development of unborn babies, can reduce the IQ of children, and can cause cognitive issues in older adults. And it works its way into the food chain when other animals and birds feed on deer carcasses

or offal left behind by hunters. Until now, Republican senators in Minnesota have prevented use of legislative funds for educating hunters about the issue of lead in venison.

We have taken lead out of paint, children's toys, and gasoline. I am a hunter and angler, but I must ask why do hunters and anglers get a "free pass" to pollute our wildlands and wetlands, poison our loons, Bald Eagles, and Trumpeter Swans and put lead on our tables. It is time to pass legislation that will require nontoxic small jigs and sinkers for fishing tackle and nontoxic hunting ammo in Minnesota.

The best guideline for all of us is to remember the Conservation Pledge: "I give my pledge as an American to save and faithfully defend from waste the natural resources of my country—its soil and minerals, its forests, waters, and wildlife."

Summary of MOU Board Meeting

August 8, 2020

by Kathrynne Baumtroug, Recording Secretary

The MOU Board held its meeting via Zoom on Saturday, August 8. The main theme was: How do we adjust all the regular events as Covid-19 protocol is changing everything? We saw last spring how Ben Douglas adjusted to the cancellation of the Spring Primer at Carpenter Nature Center by creating many wonderful YouTube tutorials (Ben Douglas Birdcast Episodes). Jennifer Vieth also created a different sort of birding festival and had two very successful events: Hastings Area Earth Day Birding Festival & Spring Migration "Safe at Home" Youth Birding Competition.

Kara Snow worked out plans for a virtual MOU Paper Session 2020. How are we going to hold one of our best annual events when we can't all get together?

The MOU board also discussed that some changes are not related to Covid-19. Of special concern to board members was now to make MOU more diverse and welcoming. Dick King will form a Diversity and Inclusion working group to work on this. (See the President's Message in the last issue and in this one.)

Treasurer's Report (Ann Kressen, Treasurer): The organization's finances are on solid ground.

Membership Report (Cindy Smith, Membership Secretary): The membership has been holding fairly steady.

A discussion followed that addressed both of these areas. How might we increase membership, and how do we encourage more members to support the Savaloja Grant Fund. Why do we support the MOU as members, and what should our money go toward?

Some of the money and efforts go toward simple house-keeping, such as registering as a 501(c)(3). (Did you know

that the MOU has an all-volunteer staff?) A funding and review process has been formalized for the Savaloja Grant Program. However, the MOU is sometimes asked to fund other projects: Sax-Zim Bog requested funds for land acquisition; the Bell Museum also asked for financial support.

Michelle Terrell presented a proposal to cooperate with eBird in creating a Minnesota portal to eBird. She described what this would mean and what the cost would be. Wisconsin and several other states already have an eBird portal. One advantage is that this would give MOU visibility to Minnesota birders using eBird. A discussion followed on how this would relate to the current web site. The board voted to approve the funding for creation of a Minnesota eBird portal.

Conservation Committee Report (Carrol Henderson, Conservation Committee Chair): Carroll reported on two important issues: a potential ban on lead ammunition and fish lures among other toxic materials, and the Recovering America's Wildlife Act passed in the U.S. House of Representatives. He also issued a call for anyone interested in joining this committee. Please contact the MOU for more information.

Bob Dunlap reported on the results of the MOU Membership Survey, which asked questions such as What do the members want to see done? Are we fulfilling our mission? Should we fund more Savaloja grants? How is our social media presence? What about our MOU web site?

Many of these issues also led into the President's call for creating a Diversity and Inclusion committee. (See the President's Message, and contact the MOU to get involved!)

Savaloja Grant Report: Using Technology to Find Barn Owls

by Karla Bloem

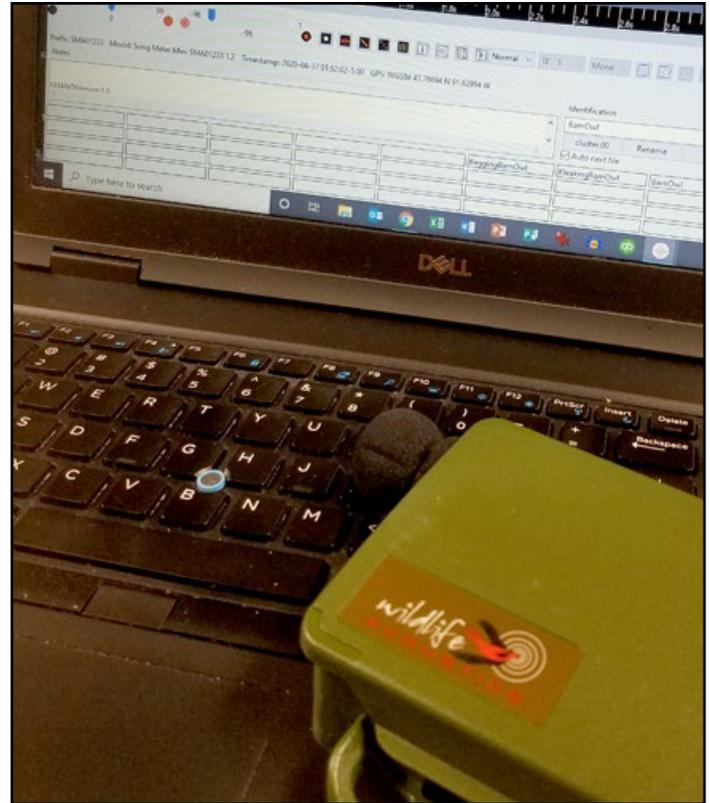
“Holy sh**, that’s in the yard!” I shout-whispered to my husband while lying on our bed in the dark with my head sticking fully out of the bedroom window, Sony M10 recorder in hand, at 11:01 p.m. on May 2nd. It’s not every night a wild Barn Owl flies overhead and screams while you have a recorder running to catch both the Barn Owl’s scream and your expletive. Meanwhile, I had two Song Meter Minis deployed not far away in the valley that also picked up the calls of the Barn Owl.

We have had fixed microphones (paired with security cameras) running 24/7 since 2010 to study the vocalizations of a captive pair of non-releasable wild Great Horned Owls and their young. The microphones are sensitive enough to pick up wild owls of various species within about half a mile also, which over the years have included Great Horned, Barred, Eastern Screech-, Northern Saw-whet, Long-eared, and Barn Owls. Because we livestream one of the cameras and audio, our cam viewers are able to hear and report the wild owls to us if we sleep through it (which we often do).

After picking up wild Barn Owls on our equipment for several years, I finally decided it would be worth getting some automatic recording units that could be placed in other locations to see if we could use audio recordings to detect Barn Owls elsewhere in suitable habitat. Thanks to a grant from the MOU’s Savaloja Memorial Fund this year, the International Owl Center was able to purchase two Song Meter Minis and a one-year subscription to Kaleidoscope Pro software from Wildlife Acoustics.

COVID-19 actually helped this research project. While it delayed the shipment of the Song Meters by a few weeks, it closed the International Owl Center for three months. The good folks at Wildlife Acoustics, since they could no longer go to conferences, started a series of online training programs and drop-in sessions to help people learn to use their software better. I was able to attend many sessions and get a solid handle on how to configure the software to best detect and cluster Barn Owl vocalizations in my recordings. Piper, our captive American Barn Owl, was also a big help in figuring out how far away I could detect their vocalizations and how to best train the software to detect their calls.

While it might sound glamorous to do acoustic monitoring for wild Barn Owls, the reality of it is that I spend most of my time sitting on my butt in front of the computer. First, I peruse Google maps for suitable grassland habitat (in addition to simply paying attention as I drive around). Then I track down property owners and get permission to place recorders. Since I only have two recorders, I move



Song meter mini with kaleidoscope software showing Barn Owl spectrogram

their location every two weeks.

The fun part of this research is driving to the locations and putting up the recorders. The Song Meter Minis are green plastic boxes about the size of two decks of cards with a foam-covered microphone sticking out of one side, stuffed inside with batteries, an SD card, and some electronics. I program them using an app on my cell phone and have them set to record from 30 minutes after sunset until one hour before sunrise every day. I use a locking cable designed for trail cams to strap the recorders to trees or posts, then leave them there for two weeks. When moving the recorders to new locations, we try to squeeze in an ice cream stop and swap SD cards (and batteries if needed) before putting them up at the next location.

We encounter all kinds of cool species on the recordings, and while putting up the recorders: birds (Dickcissels, Bobolinks, Sandhill Cranes, Whip-poor-wills, Upland Sandpiper), a bizarre variety of mammal sounds (raccoon growls, coyote grunts (like a pig), a dying rabbit, red fox, unidentified snorting and sniffing, lots of cows), and other

crazy things (fireworks, gunshots, and cattle water tank sounds similar to what I imagine a UFO landing sounds like).

And FROGS! Frogs call A LOT! The software focuses on the most commonly repeated sounds. I have reviewed tens of thousands of frog calls (spring peepers, western chorus frogs, gray tree frogs, and green frogs). Treefrogs are the bane of my existence because they vocalize at the same frequency as Barn Owls. Thankfully, I can crank through 1,000 gray treefrog or spring peeper spectrograms in five minutes flat if I don't blink much.

Kaleidoscope Pro software takes batches of recordings and detects sounds within the parameters you set. For Barn Owls I tell it to look at 1500–3300 Hz (except if it's spring peeper season, then I only go up to about 2800 Hz to try to avoid the frogs), sounds that last from 0.3–1.2 seconds, sounds that have no more than a 0.001-second gap between them (to try to exclude some of the gray treefrogs as well as Whip-poor-wills), and several other settings that tell the software how tightly to cluster recordings.

The software then searches for the dominant sounds, clusters them together, and I get to scroll through all the clusters and detections. If Barn Owls called as much as frogs or Barred Owls, I would only have to look through the different clusters rather than each individual detection. Sometimes I may have 5,000 detections to scroll through for one of the two recorders in a two-week period. If I'm really lucky, it'll be less than 1,000 detections. Because I am



Karla hanging a song meter

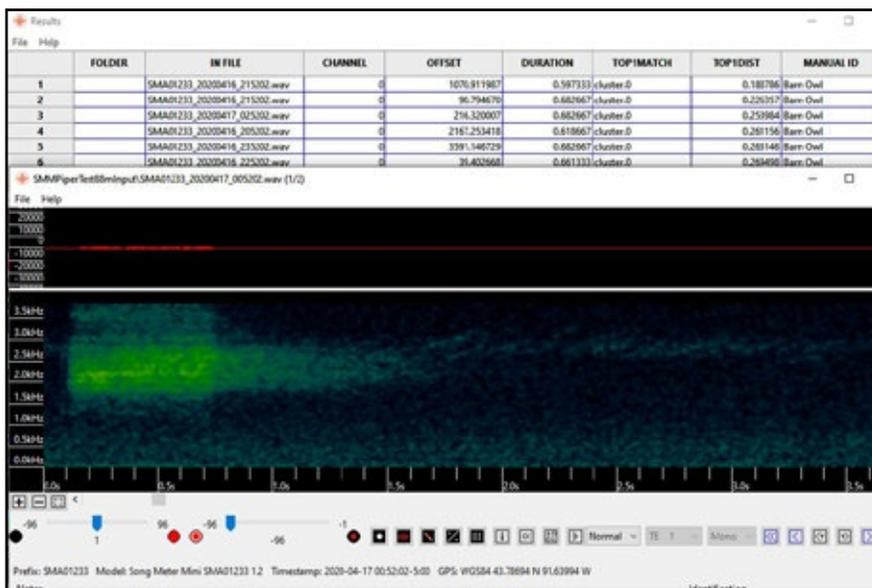
also interested in other owls (almost all of which have voices 1000 Hz or less), I run each set of recordings with a second set of parameters to scan for other owl species. Thus far I have picked up loads of Barred Owl vocalizations and a few Great Horned Owls.

Depending on what else is on the recordings, I probably spend about 2-3 hours reviewing the spectrograms of detected sounds each time I move recorders and swap SD cards on the two recorders. Not glamorous field work, for sure.

Thus far I have detected one wild Barn Owl on my first deployment in late April and early May. (This is the same owl I recorded outside my bedroom window.) This really isn't surprising, since over the years I have recorded wild Barn Owls in March, April, May, August, September, and October, but not in June or July.

Probably a better strategy going forward would be to have a larger number of Song Meter Minis and place each one in a fixed location from early spring through late fall rather than moving them every two weeks like I currently am doing. But the SMMs, fully accessorized with the soon-to-be-available rechargeable lithium battery lid, batteries, SD card, etc. cost around \$700 each, so perhaps we can get a few more sponsored each year for better monitoring. The lithium option (available soon) should allow them to be deployed for 100 days or more before needing the batteries recharged.

Hopefully we'll have some more luck as fall rolls around and owls get chatty again.



Barn Owl calls on Kaleidoscope



Song meter deployed with locking cable

My Favorite Home Patch(es): Three WPAs in Blue Earth County

by Chad Heins

Note from the editor: Do you have a favorite local spot for birding? I'd like to hear about it, and I'm sure other birders would too. Please send me a note at newsletter@moumn.org if you would like to write about your favorite local patch for this column. GH

When the editor invited me to write an article about my favorite birding location, I knew I would find that tough. When I head out for birding, I often have a difficult time deciding where to go, even though I pretty much limit myself to my home county, which is Blue Earth. I rarely leave the county in search of birds, in spite of living only a few miles from Nicollet and Le Sueur Counties. The Minnesota River and its tributaries act as migratory corridors, and the excellent county parks and abundant WMAs and WPAs provide ample birding habitat in Blue Earth County, in spite of the intensive agriculture typical of southern Minnesota. I never have enough time to explore all my favorite sites when I am birding, and I will not have sufficient space to detail them all here either.

I've decided to highlight three Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs) in the western portion of Blue Earth County that are not only proximal to one another but also to the 320th Street Walk-In Access (WIA) south of Madelia, which is just over the county line in Watonwan County. The WIA has produced some great birds in recent years (Great-tailed Grackle, Common Moorhen, Piping Plover, etc. in 2019-20), but so have the WPA I'm highlighting here. As is the case with most WPAs and WMAs, there aren't any established trails, but don't let that keep you from exploring them on foot.

The **Watonwan WPA** is about two miles east of the WIA, near the junction of Watonwan County Road 9 and Blue Earth County Road 30. It has a variety of habitats, including brome grasslands, restored prairie, an oak savannah restoration, and wetlands. Summer residents include Green Heron, Pied-billed Grebe, Bobolink, Dickcissel, Eastern Kingbird, Clay-colored and Swamp Sparrows, Sora, Virginia Rail, and Bald Eagle (nesting some years). The main draw for me is the large wetland, best viewed from Amber Road on the east side. In the early spring it can be covered in Greater White-fronted Geese, and then in the late summer, when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service draws it down to control carp (most years), it attracts numerous shorebirds. The adjacent Watonwan River Bottoms along Amber Road can also be great for warblers and other passerines during migration; summer breeders include Yellow-billed Cuckoo,



Watonwan WPA Eagle Nest, by Chad Heins

Wood Thrush, American Redstart, and Prothonotary Warbler (rarely).

The **Pauley WPA** is relatively new and does not appear on most maps. It is located northeast of Watonwan WPA at the corner of 171st Street and 478th Avenue (west of County Road 30). Its restored prairies are home during summer to Western Meadowlark, Sedge Wren, Bobolink, Dickcissel, Henslow's Sparrow, and Upland Sandpiper. Its wetlands are not as large as those of Watonwan WPA but they still draw some waterfowl and shorebirds during migration.

The **Lincoln WPA** is the largest WPA in Blue Earth County, and I'll focus most of my efforts on singing the praises of this one. It is located along County Road 32 and has parcels on both the east and west sides of that road, as well as north and south of 169th Street, which bisects the WPA. Its 700+ acres are covered in a mosaic of upland restored prairies, shrublands, and wetlands of various sizes and depths. Hikers, be aware that there are several parts that



Dickcissel, by Chad Heins

look dry but can have large pockets of water that go over your hiking boots (personal experience) along 169th Street. In winter you can find Northern Shrikes hunting meadow voles and American Tree Sparrows, and they are often joined by Red-tailed and Rough-legged Hawks. I've also seen Northern Goshawks pouncing on Gray Partridge and Short-eared Owls bouncing over the prairie during the winter season. Snow Buntings, Lapland Longspurs, and Horned Larks often pop up from the road as you go by.

Spring migration can be spectacular for waterfowl, and one of my favorite birding activities in early April is to watch all the ducks come in to roost in the evening as I wait for Short-eared Owls to begin hunting. Northern Harriers are often coursing back and forth over the grasslands, and the blackbird flocks can be deafening. American Woodcocks can often be heard too as it gets darker. One memorable April, I walked out into the prairie and was surrounded by hundreds of Smith's Longspurs in various stages of molt singing snippets of their song interspersed with their rattling call. Nelson's and LeConte's Sparrows are regular during migration too (the latter are quite abundant), and if the prairie has been burned the shorebird habitat can be pretty good. I've recorded both godwits, Red-necked and Wilson's Phalaropes, and Willet there, in addition to the more common migrants. There are also records of rarities such as Common Gallinule and White-faced Ibis from the wetlands.

In early summer the dawn chorus can be deafening. Along 169th Street you can hear distant American Bitterns pumping, while other marsh birds like American Coot, Yellow-headed Blackbird, Sora, and Virginia Rail sound off as

well. The willow and dogwood shrubs are filled with Yellow Warblers, Eastern Kingbirds, Orchard Orioles, Willow Flycatchers, and Clay-colored Sparrows, plus the occasional Bell's Vireo. The grasslands have Bobolinks, Dickcissels, Eastern and Western Meadowlarks, Upland Sandpipers, Savannah, Grasshopper, and Henslow's Sparrows (annually). Brewer's Blackbird, and Wilson's Snipe have bred here too (though the former is more difficult to find in recent years).

The fall season would probably match the spring experience if it did not also attract local hunters, who have learned that this is one of the finest locations to hunt for pheasants and partridge in the area. I typically avoid any walking of this site from October through November, but it still may be worth driving by.

While there are other sites in the area that are worth checking out, I don't have enough space to explore them here. You'll just have to check out the migrant traps at Minnesota Pheasant's WPA or Evans Slough WPA (south along County Road 30) for yourself when you are in the area. Happy birding!

Chad Heins has been birding for 20 years in the Mankato area, where he teaches biology at Bethany Lutheran College. When he's not birding (like that ever happens!), he spends his time trying to find new spiders for the Minnesota checklist.

Upland Sandpiper, by Chad Heins



September / October 2020

Note: Due to possible cancellation of events because of COVID-19, readers are advised to check the websites of the sponsoring organizations to confirm before going.

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat
		Sept 1	2	3	4	5 ZVAS Monthly Bird Walk, ZVAS MN Campus Bird Hike, Carpenter NC
6	7	8	9	10	11	12 WI Campus Bird Hike, Carpenter NC
13	14	15	16	16	17	19
20 Root River Field Trip, ZVAS	21	22	23	24	25	26 Fall Sparrow Walk, Kalmar Reservoir, ZVAS
27 Raptor Count & Hawk Watch, Carpenter NC	28	29	30	October 1	2	3 MN Campus Bird Hike, Carpenter NC ZVAS Monthly Bird Walk, ZVAS Owl Prowl, Intl. owl Ctr,
4	5	6	7	8	9	10 WI Campus Bird Hike, Carpenter NC
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31 Owl Prowl, Intl. owl Ctr,



MOU Calendar

September / October 2020

Note: Readers are advised to check the web sites of the respective organizations before going.

CARPENTER NATURE CENTER

Minnesota Campus:

12805 St. Croix Trail S., Hastings

Wisconsin Campus:

300 East Cove Road, Hudson, WI

Sept 5: MN Campus Bird Hike

Details: 8 am–10 am. Join Kevin Smith on a morning hike around the Nature Center. Learn to identify birds by sight and sound. Field guides and binoculars available to use, or bring your own. Program fee: \$6 or free for “Friends of CNC,” Hastings Environmental Protectors, and St. Croix Valley Bird Club members. RSVP at 651-437-4359 and let us know you are coming. Location: Minnesota Campus

Sept 12: WI Campus Bird Hike

Details: 8 am–10 am. Join the St. Croix Valley Bird Club on a morning hike on our beautiful Wisconsin campus. Learn to identify birds by sight and sound. Program fee: \$6 or free for “Friends of CNC,” Hastings Environmental Protectors, Hastings High School students, and St. Croix Valley Bird Club members. Please RSVP at 651-437-4359 and let us know you are coming. Location: Wisconsin Campus

Sept 27: Raptor Count and Hawk Watch

Details: 10 am–2 pm. Each fall thousands of raptors and other bird migrants follow the St. Croix/Mississippi River Flyway south to their wintering grounds in the southern U.S. and beyond. Our team of spotters and greeters will set up behind the Administration Building to count migrants including raptors, songbirds, gulls, and other southbound birds. Come ask questions, check in on the count totals, or participate in the count. Binoculars will be available upon request. Program fee: Free. For more information, please call 651-437-4359. Location: Minnesota Campus

Oct 3: MN Campus Bird Hike

Details: 8 am–10 am. See Sept. 5 description above.

Oct 10: WI Campus Bird Hike

Details: 8 am–10 am. See Sept. 12 description above.

HAWK RIDGE

Sept 20, 21, 22 Hawk Ridge Festival.

Canceled due to Covid-19

INTERNATIONAL OWL CENTER

Oct. 3 and Oct. 31: Owl Prowl

Details: Oct 3 at 6 pm and Oct 31 at 5:30 pm. Owls live all around us but are very good at evading detection. Come learn how to identify our local owls by size, shape, silhouette, and sound with the Owl Center’s human and owl staff. Following the indoor portion of the program participants will drive their vehicles following staff to several known owl territories in and around Houston to call and listen for Eastern Screech-Owls, Barred Owls, and Great Horned Owls.

Meet at the International Owl Center no later than the listed time (the Center will open 30 minutes prior to the program start time). Plan to spend the first 45 minutes indoors (chairs will be placed to keep households at least six feet apart) learning to identify owls by sound before going outdoors. Dress for the weather, and try to wear clothes that don’t make noise when you move. You will drive your vehicle following our staff to three or four locations within ten miles of Houston. Calling will be done from the side of the road, so very little walking is required. Children are welcome, but must be able to stand quietly for at least ten minutes at a time. Expect to return to the Owl Center roughly 2.5–3 hours after program start time.

Programs will be canceled in case of significant wind, rain, severe road conditions, or low enrollment, and refunds will be issued for these reasons. Cancellations will be announced at least 24 hours prior to the program time. If YOU need to cancel your reservation, please contact us at least 48 hours in advance. Masks are required both inside and outside when out of your car.

Pre-registration required. Email karla@internationalowlcenter.org. Cost: \$15 non-members; \$10 members. Location: International Owl Center, 126 E Cedar St., Houston, MN

MN RIVER VALLEY AUDUBON CHAPTER

MRVAC Bird Watching Treks: Due to the current social distancing guidelines in place, the September and October programs have been cancelled.

ZUMBRO VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

Sept 5: ZVAS Monthly Bird Walk

Details: 9–10 am. Join Terry and Joyce Grier on a casual walk through Quarry Hill Park. Meet at the Nature center. Bring binoculars if you have them, some are available to borrow from the nature center. Dress for the weather. Families and children are welcome. Stay for any length of time. Walks usually last about one hour. Free and open to the public, no registration required. Masks and social distancing may be required. Location: West entrance of Quarry Hill Nature Center, 701 Silver Creek Rd NE, Rochester

Sept 20: Root River Field Trip

Details: 8 am–noon. Leader: Sandy Hokanson. Meet in the east parking lot at the Heintz Center (1936 Collegeview Road East, Rochester) at 8 a.m. to car pool or meet us at the park at 8:20. Root River County Park is just south of Rochester near Simpson. The park has nice walking trails and good diverse habitat for a wide variety of birds. Dress for the weather. This trip will be cancelled if it's raining

harder than a light sprinkle. Masks and social distancing may be required.

Sept 26: Fall Sparrow Walk

Details: 7 am, Kalmar Reservoir. Jerry Pruett, leader. Late September and early October are great times to look for migrating sparrows. We should see White-crowned, Lincoln's, White-throated, Savannah, and Vesper Sparrows, and with a little luck we may pick up Nelson's Sharp-tailed, LeConte's, and Harris's Sparrows as well. Bring water-proof footwear, as the grass will probably be quite wet. Walk should last around an hour to 90 minutes, possibly longer if we see lots of birds. Masks and social distancing may be required. Meet in the lower parking lot on the east side of the Kalmar Reservoir (East Landfill Reservoir), just off of 19 St. NW and Valleyview Ct. (about two miles west of the Rochester Athletic Club) at 7 a.m.

Oct 3: ZVAS Monthly Bird Walk

Details: 9–10 am, Quarry Hill Nature Center, 701 Silver Creek Rd NE, Rochester. Join Terry and Joyce Grier on a casual walk through Quarry Hill Park. Meet by the Nature Center entrance. Bring binoculars if you have them; some are available to borrow from the Nature Center. Dress for the weather. Families and children are welcome. Stay for any length of time. Walks usually last about one hour. Free and open to the public; no registration required. Masks and social distancing may be required.

Green Heron, by Tom Gilde



Birder Bio: John Zakelj



John Zakelj and Bonnie Watkins on the Superior Hiking Trail

Tell us about yourself.

I was born in a refugee camp in Austria. My parents had to leave their homes in Slovenia when the communists took control after WWII. Most of my childhood was in a Slovenian neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio. I was interested in birds even then but the only species I remember from our neighborhood are House Sparrows and robins. For our 8th grade graduation, our class went on a field trip to an amusement park outside Cleveland. The other kids were excited about the roller coaster but I was more interested in the nearby pond. I saw my first Red-Winged Blackbird and I thought it was the most amazing bird I had ever seen.

In 1970, I came to Minnesota as a VISTA Volunteer. That led to a job with the MN Dept of Human Services, working on funding and legislation for community mental health services. I retired ten years ago and was asked to con-

tinue on special projects. I still work part-time. I live in St. Paul with my wife Bonnie Watkins. I go birding once or twice every day, usually in the nearby parks such as Battle Creek, Fish Creek and Maplewood Nature Center.

When did you start birding and what first sparked your interest?

Bonnie and I often went hiking, canoeing and camping in the 70s. We both came from families that loved learning about all aspects of nature. Bonnie bought our first bird guide and together, we began to notice the diversity of birds around us. Soon after that, I met Bill Litkey, one of the top birders in the state. We went on a number of birding outings and I learned a lot about where to go and what to look for. Bill introduced me to listing but at that time it seemed like too much work to me. Thirty years later, I discovered eBird as a convenient way to contribute to an international database and maintain my own records. Now I often submit one or two eBird reports every day.

What is the main attraction of birding for you?

Birding is part of my broader connection with nature and all living things. I have a passion for, and a deep need, to be outdoors. I can't explain it, but this is where I feel really alive. It's also an opportunity to experience nature more deeply through my camera. I'm always on the lookout for interesting and beautiful images, and I'm usually not disappointed.

How did you originally become acquainted with the MOU?

Soon after I arrived in St. Paul, I became a member of the Audubon Society. Their environmental goals and activities were a good match for my interests and abilities. I worked with them to save the heron rookery at Pig's Eye. Through Audubon, I learned about the MOU and began subscribing to *The Loon*.

Favorite places to bird inside or outside Minnesota?

Battle Creek Park in St. Paul is my favorite local place. It has a wide diversity of habitat ranging from views of Pig's Eye Lake on the west end to prairie fields on the east end and lots of woodland in between.

We are fortunate to live on the Mississippi River bluff, overlooking Pig's Eye Lake. Especially during migration, we see an amazing variety of birds passing through or near our yard.



White-crowned Sparrow, by David Keyes

It's very hard to choose a favorite place outside Minnesota. Bonnie and I have had great birding adventures in Mexico, Nicaragua, Colombia, Puerto Rico and many other places. Each one has been memorable but they are like romantic flings compared to the deeper, ongoing connections with our local parks.

Favorite birding style (i.e., by yourself, with others, etc.)?

I almost always carry my binocs and my Canon SX-70. I use my ears and my binocs to discover interesting birds and other wildlife, and my camera to document. I often shoot hundreds of photos and am sometimes amazed to see details in the photos that I missed earlier. That was how I "discovered" Minnesota's first accepted record of a Tufted Duck.

My early morning outings are usually alone. My most exciting birding outings have been with Bonnie, both locally and outside MN. I've also had some great outings with my good friends Alan Mathiason and Karl Isely. One birding experience that particularly stands out is photographing Prairie Chickens with my photography mentor John Anderson in a freezing blind before sunrise in northwestern MN. Each of my friends has a unique perspective which enriches my experience. I also go on MOU and Audubon field trips and always learn something new.

I was especially pleased that our son Johnny was willing to try out birding when we visited his home country of Colombia last January. And it's exciting to go birding with our daughter Cece, who developed her own birding perspectives on her blog: <https://ceceliapwatkins.wordpress.com/2020/04/21/top-20-birds-project-the-beginning/>

Favorite bird or bird family?

I'm fascinated by the diversity of birds, their behavior and their relationships with their environment. That's why I'm very concerned when I see declines in suitable habitat and declines in species that used to be common.

Any advice on how to be a better birder?

Relax and be open to the possibilities before you. You might go out looking for the latest rare bird sighting but Mother Nature may have something more interesting for you.

Ever had an unusual experience while birding?

On our first trip together to Arizona, Bonnie and I were determined to see an Elegant Trogon. By our fifth and last evening there, we had still not seen one. It was getting dark as we were hiking in Patagonia Lake State Park. A stunning Elegant Trogon suddenly appeared about 10 feet in front of me in full glorious view. Unfortunately, Bonnie was about 30 feet away, looking in the other direction. So I had a choice: do I call out to Bonnie, or do I raise my camera and get a photo? Either choice might cause the trogon to fly away. I called out to Bonnie, but she didn't see it before it flew away, and I didn't get a photo. I'm happy to say that we returned the next year and finally got some great looks and photos.

Any other interests or hobbies when you're not birding?

I help teach a beginner's class in my native language, Slovenian, where I have learned language learning techniques that can be applied to birding. For example, we use the Anki app to create language flash cards to connect words with pictures and sounds. I use that same app to create birding flash cards that are specific to each major birding trip. Bonnie and I practice on our phone whenever we travel to a new destination.

Any closing thoughts?

I am thankful to all the people who have worked hard to preserve our environment and natural areas. I do everything I can to help ensure that our children will have a healthy environment and the same opportunities that we have to enjoy the richness and beauty of nature. I am grateful to the MOU for providing a way to share our experiences and promote awareness of our natural environment.

New MOU Members

P.F. Tanghe, *New York City*

Nathan and Shelley Westgor, *Burnsville, MN*



Minnesota Ornithologists' Union

Carpenter Nature Center
12805 Saint Croix Trail South
Hastings, MN 55033

Minnesota Ornithologists' Union
Carpenter Nature Center
12805 Saint Croix Trail South
Hastings, MN 55033
Email: mou@moumn.org
Web: <http://moumn.org>

MN Birding is published bi-monthly
Editor: Gerald Hoekstra
Designer: Thomas Benjamin Hertzell
© 2020 Minnesota Ornithologists' Union

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

Richard King, *President*
Michelle Terrell, *Vice President*
Kathrynne Baumtrog, *Recording Secretary*
Cindy Smith, *Membership Secretary*
Ann Kessen, *Treasurer*
Bob Dunlap, *Past President*

Editor of *MN Birding*

Gerald Hoekstra
Julie Winter Zempel, *Calendar*

Designer of *MN Birding*

Thomas Benjamin Hertzell
Birding Hotline
Northwest: 800-433-1888

MOU Contacts

Minnesota Birding Editor: newsletter@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
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 web site: <http://moumn.org>
MOU Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/MNornithU/>

MOU Membership: New/Renewal

Name _____

E-mail _____

Address _____

City/State/Zip _____

Phone (_____) _____

County _____

Membership Categories

- | | |
|---|--------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Youth (under 18) | \$15.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual | \$25.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Foreign (including Canada) | U.S. \$35.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family | \$35.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting | \$75.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate | \$100.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Life, single | \$500.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Life, joint | \$750.00 |

Send to: Cindy Smith, MOU Membership Secretary
19885 Lillehei Avenue
Hastings MN 55033-9354

Please make a contribution to the Savaloja Grants

The Savaloja Grants 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: \$ _____