“Birds, it must be admitted, are the most exciting and most deserving of the vertebrates; they are perhaps the best entrée into the study of natural history, and a very good wedge into conservation awareness.”

- - Roger Tory Peterson

Do you remember your “spark” bird? Did you have a parent, friend, or teacher who encouraged your interest in birds? Did your own engagement with birds lead to a broader interest in habitat conservation? Iowa Young Birders (IAYB) is a new not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating more of those “sparks” and encouraging young Iowans ages 8-18 to study and enjoy birds.

Starting with our first trip in July, over 100 young birders, parents, siblings, and volunteer leaders have participated in seven Iowa field trips, including five sites designated as Important Bird Areas (IBA): George Wyth, Pleasant Creek, and Lake Manawa State Parks, Coralville Reservoir, and Neal Smith NWR.

Participation has ranged from three to as many as 18 enthusiastic, knowledgeable, young birders eager to learn more about birds. As a mother of one of our participants says, “It's a wonderful program—we’ve enjoyed it so much; it's opened up a new world to us.”

The support and encouragement from parents, grandparents and other relatives has been amazing. For example, for our trip to Neal Smith NWR, three of the participating families each drove more than 200 miles round trip on a Saturday morning to go birding! Jeffrey Gordon, President of the American Birding Association, who participated in an IAYB field trip at Iowa City, says, “There is nothing more important or rewarding that adult birders can do than to encourage our children, grandchildren, students and other young people to get involved in this fun, educational, and healthy activity. Iowa Young Birders is a great opportunity for young Iowans to develop their birding skills and meet new friends.”

Like any new organization, public awareness is vital to reaching new young birders and families around Iowa. An interview on statewide Iowa Public Radio and being included in a recent episode of Iowa Outdoors on IPTV has helped to spread the word. IAYB will roll out a full schedule of field trips for 2013. We’re also surveying our participants to help plan new programs and services for our young birders. We welcome input from groups and individuals who can help promote IAYB and field trips to local young birders, ages 8-18, and their families. Each field trip features a volunteer local leader who undergoes an orientation and background check. If you know of young birders, please send them our way!

Special thanks to the Iowa birders who have served as volunteer leaders in 2012: Ross Silcock, Denny Thompson, Francis Moore, Karen Viste-Sparkman, Rick Hollis, Jason Paulios, Keith Dyche, and Bill Scheible. In addition, we are grateful to the more than 30 families and individuals who care about the future of Iowa’s birding community and have made financial contributions to Iowa Young Birders.

Youth membership in IAYB is open to anyone age 8-18 and is only $10 per year. Adult Supporting Memberships are $35 which is fully tax-deductible. As a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization, we depend on contributions from the public. Anyone interested in supporting the future of Iowa’s birding community can give securely online through our website or by mail to P.O. Box 549, Solon IA 52333.

For more information, visit www.iowayoungbirders.org or contact Carl@iowayoungbirders.org.
Officially listed as an Iowa Endangered Species, the Northern Harrier was once a common resident nester on our grasslands and wet meadows. Although still observed commonly in migration and occasionally overwintering, harriers have mostly disappeared as an Iowa breeding species. Today it may be found in but a few large grassland or grassland-wetland landscapes, such as those in the Kellerton Grasslands IBA of Ringgold County or the Spring Run Grassland-Wetland IBA in Dickinson County.

Identification is relatively simple—look for a moderately large hawk with long, slim, rounded wings and a long tail with a white patch showing on the rump. Its head is rather small and sports fairly well-defined, owl-like facial discs, which it uses to focus upon the sounds of rodents in the grass below them as they fly. Flight is distinctively buoyant, low and slow over the ground, often rocking from side-to-side, with wings held in a slight dihedral somewhat like a Turkey Vulture. They also commonly hover with legs dangling out below them. For all this rather lazy-appearing flight, a Northern Harrier is capable of sometimes amazing aerobatics, throwing itself suddenly into a wingover, like that seen in swifts, and straight down to snare prey on the ground.

Adult males (see photo on front page of this newsletter) have bluish-gray mantles. Undersides and underwings are white, with black wingtips. Adult females (photo at left) are brown on the back and upper wing surfaces, while underparts are light brown with distinctive streaking. Immature harriers are somewhat darker than adult females and undersides tend to rufous with less extensive streaking.

Nests are constructed in grasses on the ground, resulting in great susceptibility to predation, especially when habitat is restricted and predators must concentrate to find food. Four to nine eggs may be laid, with five being typical. Eggs are incubated for 31-32 days and young generally fledge a little more than a month after hatching. Females both brood and feed the young. During the non-breeding season they will vigorously defend preferred foraging areas from male harriers.

During winter, Northern Harriers may be found in communal ground roosts in tall grasses, or even in corn stubble where it might be left untilled. They are not very aggressive towards other raptor species, save for Short-eared Owls, with which they share the same grassy habitat, prey and hunting techniques.

Although high rates of predation upon harrier eggs and young has contributed to their decline, it all really comes back to availability of habitat. This species requires large, unbroken expanses of grassland. There’s no doubt that Iowa once provided prime habitat for this species, which was almost certainly very common from the time of European settlement until the 1930s and 40s. Today, except for a few protected landscapes of public grasslands and wetlands, their habitat continues to decline. The federal CRP program may have stabilized our remaining tiny harrier population from the mid 1980s until recently, but with CRP now being converted back to row crops—mostly corn to feed the subsidized ethanol industry—the species will struggle to hold on in Iowa. Only with increased protection through more public ownership of grasslands, or permanent conservation easements on private grasslands, will the Northern Harrier avoid extirpation here.

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BOOK REVIEW


I’ve never paid much attention to, or read much about, Zen Buddhism, so even though the subject of this review has been around for more than two years I had never bothered to find a copy to read—until recently. Since purchasing a tablet computer last spring, I have been downloading a few books on it. In October I ran across *Zen Birding* and read some online excerpts which interested me, so I purchased and downloaded a copy. This was a fortunate decision, as the book has helped me reassess my own philosophy of birding.

New Mexican anthropologist and author David White had a life-long passion for birding. His profession, hobby and interest in eastern religion and thought have combined in this book to provide birders with some interesting perspectives upon their pastime. White was suffering from cancer as he wrote the book and died before finishing it. Fortunately, his friend and fellow anthropologist Susan Guyette, who has her own passion for environmental concerns, was able to complete and publish this work, with the support of Audubon New Mexico and its Sangre de Cristo Chapter. I think readers can readily detect where the authorship changed hands late in the book, as their appears to be a notable difference in writing style towards the end. While I found the book’s last chapters a bit repetitious, it is nonetheless an admirable tome and well worth the time of any birder/birdwatcher to read.

Note the use of “birder/birdwatcher” in the previous sentence. This is a major discussion point throughout *Zen Birding*, as author White attempts to justify stepping back somewhat from the current trend in birding, which is too often centered upon just increasing one’s life list as quickly as possible. While he denies no one the right to pursue a large list, by marrying Zen with birding he attempts to foster a heightened awareness of birds, their habitats, and the environment as a whole. Spending more time actually watching birds and learning more about the unique traits of each species can lead to greater personal satisfaction, which, in turn, might lead to a greater conservation ethic and practice by all birders. White illustrates each of his points with stories about many of the species he has personally observed and what he has learned about them as well as what might be applied to our own human lives.

One question that particularly struck me was, “Do you bird to live or live to bird?” White goes on the explain that “Eastern wisdom teaches us to value the journey over the destination”. This sounds to me like very good advice, as watching birds can lead to greater satisfaction and peace in one’s own life while allowing us to better understand our natural world.

I’ve always thought of myself as more of a birdwatcher than a birder, because studying the habits of birds can be so very interesting and educational. In recent years I must admit to a greater passion for building my life lists and have pursued that goal with more vigor in retirement. But there is still great enjoyment in just sitting quietly watching those beautiful feathered creatures go on with their lives. And I think it can lead to a deeper personal spirituality, regardless of whatever one’s religious beliefs or non-beliefs might be. In any case, this book is well worth a read.

—Doug Harr

**A note about our lead story**

Iowa Audubon is extremely pleased to feature our front page story about the new Iowa Young Birders organization, and our thanks go to IAYB Executive Director Carl Bendorf for providing it to us. Avian education is a major objective stated in the mission of Iowa Audubon. We believe it is important for people of **all** ages to learn more about birds—both to identify them and to understand the importance of their conservation to our environment. But it cannot be overstated how important is the need for supporting the **next generation** of birders and conservationists. For that reason, Iowa Audubon has pledged to partner with IAYB in whatever ways we can be of assistance, including volunteers to help conduct young birder field trips.

**CALENDAR OF IOWA WINTER BIRD EVENTS**

Winter might be considered a “dead” time of year for many people, but not for birders! The following is but a partial list of some of the events on tab through this winter.

**Christmas Bird Counts (CBCs):**

many locations across Iowa between Dec. 15 and Jan. 1. Check with your local bird club or Audubon chapter to learn where your closest CBC may be. You can also find a list of the CBCs at the Iowa Ornithologists Union website: www.iowabirds.org.

**Bald Eagle Days (BEDs):**

- **Clinton BED**—Jan. 5, 8AM-4PM. Ph. 815.259.3628 for information.
- **Quad Cities BED**—Jan. 5-6, Rock Island IL, QCCA Expo Center. Ph. 309.788.2543.
- **Dubuque BED**—9AM-4:30PM, Grand River Center. Ph. 563.566.4372 or 563.582.0881.
- **Keokuk BED**—School programs Jan. 18th; public programs Jan. 19-20) Keokuk Mall. Ph. 1.800.383.1219.
- **Coralville BED**—New this year! Feb. 9, Brown Deer Center, 10-4PM. Ph. 319.338.3543, ext. 6308.
- **Effigy Mounds BED**—Feb. 23, near McGregor, IA. Ph. 563.873.3491.
- **Sioux Rapids/Linn Grove BED**—Mar. 23. Ph. 712.296.4920 or 712.295.7200.

**Other Events:**

- **Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC)**—Statewide: see larger announcement on p.4 of this newsletter.
New Iowa Audubon Website Now Available for Browsing

The completely revamped Iowa Audubon official website is now up and running, thanks to the efforts of member and website expert Ann John-son, of Indianola. Our new site is filled with photos of birds and habitats, from the photographic talents of Carl Kurtz, Larry Dau and others. Along with many more graphics, users will find their way through the website with ease simply by clicking on highly visible “Read More” menu arrows. There is still some work to be finished, however, and not all the arrows will open those items which are still in the construction stage. We hope to have everything completed and running smoothly this winter. This website is linked to the Iowa Ornithologists Union sister website in order to share the bird record data base between the IOU/DNR Breeding Bird Atlas and Iowa Audu-bon’s Important Bird Areas program.

16th Annual Great Back Yard Bird Count (GBBC)

Friday, Feb. 15, through Monday, Feb. 18.

The GBBC is an annual 4-day event that engages bird watchers of all ages to count birds and create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are. Everyone is welcome—from beginning bird watchers to experts. It takes as little as 15 minutes on one day, or you can count for as long as you like each day. It’s free, fun, and easy—and it helps the birds. Participants tally the number of individual birds of each species they see during their count period. They enter these numbers on the GBBC website. For complete information go to: www.birdsource.org/gbbc/

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES, UPDATES AND EVENTS

Iowa’s IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS program update

The Important Bird Areas (IBA) pro-gram is growing worldwide under the leadership of three bird organizations. Iowa’s IBA program is linked primarily with the efforts Bird Conservation In-ternational (BCI), based in the U.K., and the National Audubon Society, which oversees BCI’s U.S. program. A parallel U.S. program is conducted by the American Bird Conservancy (ABC), a partner with Iowa Audubon through the Bird Conservation Alli-ance. ABC has named four Globally Important Bird Areas in Iowa: DeSoto NWR, Upper Miss. NWR, Mark Twain NWR and Saylorville Lake. Now, Iowa Audubon and National Audubon are preparing to recognize Effigy Mounds-Yellow River Forest IBA as the next Globally Important Bird Area. Designation will result from the area’s impor-tance to Cerulean Warblers, as doc-umented by Jon Stravers, of McGregor.