

I.O.U. NEWS

Winter 1991 Iowa Ornithologists' Union Newsletter Volume 7 Number 4

The Incidental Birder

Linda Bendorf, Iowa City

Over the years, my husband, Carl has been an avid birdwatcher, taking an active role in the Iowa Ornithologists' Union. And over the years I've been fascinated and mystified by the dedication of those who pursue this hobby. Carl, Tom Kent, Dick Tetrault and Jim Fuller have birded together, often waking at 3:00 a.m. mid-winter eager to tape an owl's call and to identify other species for the annual Christmas count. I've come to view bird watching as a marathon of sorts; each bird watcher moved by comradeship and the thrill of the chase — also eager to increase the "life list."

Initially, I thought birding was merely their hobby; soon after, I realized that it was far more serious: it had infiltrated heart and soul. Some travel to the water pits behind a cattle feeding operation near Oakland, Iowa. Others have spent three weeks in Attu, Alaska, the farthest island on the Aleutian Chain. They travel the world in search of rare species, enduring torrid conditions, sub-zero weather, wet feet and blisters. They know how to move quickly, to stand patiently

still, to summon an inquisitive bird by imitating its "pishing" noise.

While they bird in earnest, I am "the incidental birder."

Once on the way to Vail, we stopped at Pawnee National Grasslands. Standing on the edge of a shallow pond off the side of the road was an Avocet, a sleek and graceful shorebird. In a moment of weakness, I thought, "Maybe I'll be a birder yet." As the bird swept its bill from side to side in the water, searching for food, I waited for a rush of excitement to flood my veins. Nothing happened, except that suddenly the grasslands felt vast and desolate.

It's not that I'm not a naturalist. I love spotting things that slither, hop and crawl. I'll never forget the marmot that cornered me on a narrow hiking trail in Vail. Today, I fill our feeders with thistle and sunflower seeds; come winter, I will hang suet and slather pinecones with peanut butter.

But I just can't chase birds the way some people can.

Some years back while in California, we stopped along the San Diego Bay. Carl hoped to spot a shorebird called a Red Knot. He set up his telescope, when

suddenly, from behind the sand dunes, bolted a U.S. military jeep. A security officer leaped out, peered into the scope and asked what we were looking at. I was about to say, "a bird," until I glanced at the bay and realized that the telescope was also focused on a fleet of U.S. naval warships. Carl, always thrilled to share good birding, pulled out his field guide. The officer looked back and forth from the field guide into the telescope as Carl showed him a picture of the Red Knot, pointing out the bird's dappled brown coloring and buffy-chestnut face.

Convinced that we posed no threat to national security, the officer left. Carl was thrilled to have spotted another bird for his life list; I was thrilled to have been mistaken momentarily for a Russian spy. Maybe the thrill of birdwatching isn't so elusive after all, I thought.

What happened a few years later at Tampa's city incinerator did little to cement that notion. When we arrived, two burly, tattooed men at the far end of the lot headed toward our car. My heart raced. Like a plane on an undeviating course, Carl peered through his binoculars for a Black Skimmer, dead set on securing a positive identification before we left. The men came closer. Carl studied his field guide, then checked the bird through his binoculars once more, squinting now to see the black and white pattern and red bill. As we headed back to Saint Petersburg, I whispered, "nevermore," while visions of Poe's Raven, burly and tattooed, flapped menacingly overhead.

Since then, without apology, I remain the incidental birder.



Research on Iowa Birds

Birders realize that most of Iowa is covered with various kinds of agricultural crops which usually have few birds living on them. Thus birders generally ignore those lands and instead spend their time in more natural habitats. However, some those farmlands do support many birds. One example is alfalfa fields which cover about 1.5 million acres of Iowa each year. Brian Frawley, a former graduate student working with Dr. Louis Best at Iowa State, recently published some results from his masters degree research which considered the breeding ecology of nongame birds in alfalfa fields.

Brian found eight species of birds that commonly nested in alfalfa fields in his study plots in Adair County. By far the two most abundant species were Dickcissel and Red-winged Blackbird whereas Vesper Sparrow and Mourning Dove were rare. Since all of his fields were cut for hay in early or mid June, most of the birds had their first nests destroyed. Brian found that four species (Dickcissel, Grasshopper Sparrow, Western Meadowlark, and Vesper Sparrow) renested in the alfalfa although the first two were less abundant there after the first hay was cut. He found that the other four species (Red-winged Blackbird, Common Yellowthroat, Sedge Wren, Mourning dove) did not reneest in alfalfa after the first cutting. Apparently these species either moved to other habitats or stop nesting when their nest are destroyed. Bobolinks, which commonly nest in alfalfa fields elsewhere, were not found on any of Brian's plots.

Although biologists have long known the importance of delaying cutting hay until July so that game species like pheasants and waterfowl can successfully hatch their eggs, this study showed that such delays could be important for

nongame birds too. Alfalfa fields resemble native prairie in their vegetative structure and thus attract a number of grassland birds to them. However, these species seldom can nest successfully before the first hay crop is cut nor can they complete their nesting cycle between the first and second cutting of hay. Unless the birds that nest in alfalfa move on to another habitat such as CRP fields after the first crop of hay is cut, they probably have little chance of successfully raising a brood.

A native of Wisconsin, Brian got his B.S. at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point. He completed his M.S. in 1989 and after a short time with a consulting firm, is now working for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Brian's work was funded by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station.

Big Day 1991 Ray Cummins, Centerville

The 1991 IOU Big Day saw six teams with 19 participants spend 78 hours in the field between May 5-13 viewing over 220 species. The teams contributed \$347 to the IOU Endowment Fund lead by the Southwest Bush Boys with contributions of \$208.



The county team honors went to the Southwest Bush Boy's team who birded Fremont County. They set a new IOU Big day county record of 169 different species. The team consisted of captain Doug Rose, B.J. Rose, Ross Silcock, and Steve Dinsmore. Previous high county counts were 140 from Woodbury County in 1990 and 137 from Johnson County in 1990.

The state wide Big Day count was taken by the East Davenport All Stars for the third straight year. Captained by Pete Petersen and assisted by Brian Blevins and Don Moeller, the team birded Louisa, Muscatine, Scott, Clinton, and Jackson counties. The new record of 177 different species broke the previous high of 173 set in 1990.



↑ East Davenport All Stars
Pete Petersen, presenter
Gene Armstrong

The forms for next years Big Day count can be requested from Ray Cummins, 609 S. Main St., Centerville, IA 52544. Previous participating teams will automatically receive a set of forms.

← Southwest Bush Boy's
l. to r. B. J. Rose, Doug Rose,
presenter Gene Armstrong,
and Ross Silcock

1991 Feeder Survey

During the 1991 Winter Bird Feeder Survey, we had 13 species significantly increase and only 6 species decrease. Of the species which decreased, three of the species were cyclic or erratic winter visitors. These species appear in Iowa irregularly. Fluctuations in Pine Siskin and Red-breasted Nuthatch numbers seem to be correlated with the pine cone crops in the northern states. During good cone seed production, the individuals within these species (plus Evening Grosbeaks) tend to stay up north.

Cedar Waxwings were also observed at fewer households; however, those who did have waxwings saw an average of 15 birds. Cedar Waxwings travel in roving flocks that range from a few to several hundred birds. Although less households saw waxwings, they were still seen throughout the state and were within range of the last eight years of data.

During the Christmas Bird Count in December, Robin numbers were above average. During the January feeder survey, they declined. January 1991 was the coldest month in Iowa since December 1985. It was also the snowiest January since 1982 and exceeded the total snowfall for the last three out of four winters. The smarter Robins probably headed south!

Brown Creepers declined in 1991, but were still within their normal range of observation. Good decline news; the percent of House Sparrows seen at each residence declined from 84 to 79 percent. This is within their normal range, but perhaps all of the specialized feeders and control is beginning to pay off. Fewer House Sparrows were also noted during the summer Breeding Bird Survey throughout the entire Midwest.

New "highs" were set by Pheasants, Mourning Doves, Flickers, Crows, Tufted Titmouse, Cardinals, Song Sparrows,

Juncos and House Finches. Pheasants and Crows also hit a 10 year high on the Christmas counts and Cardinals were on the high end of the Christmas data. House Finches just arrived in Iowa in 1985 and they have been setting a new record nearly every year since. House Finches are also nesting throughout the state and are the finch that many people are now observing during the summer.

Mourning Doves didn't move south like the Robins but they did stay mostly in urban habitats. Only 45 percent of the people in northwestern Iowa were privileged to see Cardinals while 71 to 96 percent of the households in the other regions saw Cardinals. Song Sparrows were mostly seen in the southern half of the state while Juncos were seen everywhere and were the most commonly observed species this winter. Other increases included Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Flickers which have been basically increasing the last several years. Blue Jays, Tree Sparrows and White-crowned Sparrows also increased but were still within their normal range.

Overall, after the drought years of 1988 and 1989, the more "normal" rainfalls of 1990 probably helped nesting attempts. It will be interesting to see what the floods and drought of 1991 produces.

Over 1,346 people participated in the survey this year. Finch feeders continued to be the most popular feeder, and were used at 74 percent of households. Sunflower seeds were used by 70 percent of the participants and 68 percent of the people offered suet to the birds. Sixty-four percent of the households had mixed seed and 4 percent had cracked corn. Remember, if you see the birds just sorting through mixed seeds to get at a few favored seeds, you may want to consider going to pure sunflower or safflower. Many mixes include seeds that the birds don't like to eat and thus are not cost effective.

SPECIES	84	85	86	87	88	89	90	91
Pheasant	3.0	4.7	3.4	3.4	5.9	4.5	4.8	9.1
Rock Dove	6.6	7.1	7.3	5.0	6.2	4.9	5.1	4.8
Mourning Dove	13.0	13.8	8.9	10.4	18.5	9.4	19.0	24.0
Red-headed W.P.	21.8	13.1	11.7	6.7	12.0	9.8	13.0	15.8
Red-bellied W.P.	35.2	30.0	35.7	38.7	37.7	49.9	39.8	47.2
Downy W.P.	61.4	59.9	65.4	67.8	72.6	77.4	73.5	74.9
Hairy W.P.	30.7	28.5	33.7	35.9	35.0	41.7	37.7	36.5
Flicker	18.4	17.7	17.8	18.7	22.9	21.7	21.2	25.6
Blue Jay	84.6	82.7	84.7	83.7	87.2	81.8	82.1	86.5
Crow	5.7	15.2	18.1	15.7	16.8	16.8	17.2	22.2
Black-cap. Chickadee	81.8	78.2	82.6	81.4	80.5	87.3	84.5	85.8
Tufted Titmouse	22.2	21.0	18.7	20.6	19.6	22.7	21.6	27.0
Red-brsted Nuthatch	9.9	4.5	NA	7.8	4.4	5.5	11.1	5.9
White-brsted Nuthatch	59.7	51.2	NA	70.3	64.6	74.3	67.2	69.1
Brown Creeper	3.9	3.8	5.5	8.9	7.3	10.2	9.4	4.5
Robin	0.7	2.2	3.5	1.3	3.4	7.0	4.3	2.6
Cedar Waxwing	7.1	2.2	3.9	2.0	3.1	3.7	4.9	2.1
Starling	58.9	60.4	59.5	52.7	60.5	53.7	56.3	54.5
Cardinal	83.3	81.1	80.6	79.2	79.9	78.4	80.4	87.3
Tree Sparrow	30.2	38.3	23.0	17.8	22.9	17.7	21.9	33.1
Song Sparrow	13.7	11.5	10.6	6.2	10.9	6.3	8.4	15.5
White-thrt Sparrow	7.3	5.4	5.5	3.9	3.8	3.2	6.0	5.6
White-crwn Sparrow	5.5	4.3	3.8	2.7	2.1	0.8	2.7	4.2
Harris Sparrow	2.9	6.4	6.0	3.1	5.8	3.9	7.9	7.9
Dark-eyed Junco	88.7	87.1	88.7	82.2	84.7	70.7	82.3	90.9
Red-wing Blackbird	2.4	2.5	2.6	0.8	1.6	0.6	1.9	1.9
Grackle	4.3	12.9	13.5	12.8	13.6	11.2	11.5	11.8
Brown-hded Cowbird	3.6	3.6	3.8	2.8	4.8	2.1	2.1	2.7
Purple Finch	34.8	19.1	42.9	22.9	29.9	24.0	26.9	29.6
Common Redpoll	4.3	3.5	3.9	1.6	3.4	0.7	3.2	2.7
Pine Siskin	15.4	20.4	22.4	22.8	20.2	5.4	34.4	14.0
American Goldfinch	72.9	71.6	70.6	63.6	71.3	69.5	71.0	70.6
Evening Grosbeak	5.3	0.2	14.4	0.9	1.7	0.5	0.8	0.2
House Sparrow	77.4	79.5	82.5	78.5	82.6	79.8	83.8	79.3
House Finch	.06	.4	.3	.2	1.0	5.2	7.5	19.5

Total Participants 1754 922 965 1031 956 840 1200 1346





Christmas Bird Counts

Sioux City	Sat., Dec. 14	Jerry Probst	712/233-2742
Bremer	Sat., Dec. 14	Francis Moore	319/232-0217
Cedar Rapids	Sat., Dec. 14	Pete Wickham	319/232-0217
Glenwood	Sat., Dec. 14	Doug Rose	712/527-3380
Ames	Sat., Dec. 14	Mike Meetz	515/382-2534
Rathbun	Sat., Dec. 14	Bill Heusinkveld	515/856-2342
Saylorville	Sun., Dec. 15	Steve Dinsmore	515/292-3152
Quad Cities	Sun., Dec. 15	Pete Petersen	319/355-7051
DeSoto	Sun., Dec. 15	Refuge Htqrs.	712/642-4121
Cedar Falls	Sun., Dec. 15	Francis Moore	319/232-0217
Red Rock	Sun., Dec. 15	Tim Schantz	515/828-2213
Iowa City	Sun., Dec. 15	Carl Bendorf	319/351-4958
Lost Nation	Mon., Dec. 16	Pete Petersen	319/355-7051
Jamaica	Tues., Dec. 17	Ray Cummins	515/856-3518
Princeton	Thurs., Dec. 19	Pete Petersen	319/355-7051
Marshalltown	Sat., Dec. 21	Ed Savage	515/752-0105
Shenandoah	Sat., Dec. 21	Barb Cunningham	712/246-1203
Lucas	Sat., Dec. 21	Beth Brown	515/342-2783
Des Moines	Sat., Dec. 21	Gene Armstrong	515/996-2726
Muscatine	Sat., Dec. 21	Pete Petersen	319/355-7051
Mason City	Sat., Dec. 21	Jan Walter	515/424-1413
No. Linn	Sat., Dec. 28	Weir Nelson	319/848-4846
Red Oak	Sat., Dec. 28	Dave Carlisle	712/623-4753
Clinton	Sat., Dec. 28	Pete Petersen	319/355-7051
Tri-State	Sun., Dec. 29	Ross Silcock	712/629-5865
Boone	Wed., Jan. 1	Eric Munson	515/232-5077
Keokuk	????	Bob Cecil	515/277-5709
Dubuque	????	John Miller	319/556-2269
Sac Co.	????	Rita Efta	712/688-2873



Coming Dates

- Jan. 11 Rolling Hills Audubon (Indianola) field trip to Red Rock or for owls.
Sat. Ann Johnson: 515/961-2002.
- Jan. 16 Big Bluestem Audubon (Ames) program "Natural Beauty of Iowa" by Carl
Thurs. Kurtz at 7:30 PM, 280 Town Engineering, ISU. Sherry Dragula:
515/292-4014.
- Feb. 18 Des Moines Audubon program "Birding to and from Arizona" by Pam
Tues. and Reid Allen at 7:15 PM, Westminster Church, Beaver & Franklin.
Jane Clark: 515/223-5047.
- Feb. 20 Big Bluestem Audubon (Ames) program "Local Forestation Project
Thurs. on Land Treated with Sludge" by Richard Schulz at 7:30 PM,
181 Design Center, ISU. Sherry Dragula: 515/292-4014.
- Feb. 26 Rolling Hills Audubon (Indianola) program by Tim Schantz on his
Wed. trip to Venezuela at 7:30 PM at Indianola Public Library. Ann
Johnson: 515/961-2002.
- March 17 Des Moines Audubon program "Loons of Isle Royale" by Mike Meetz
Tues. at 7:15 PM, Westminster Church, Beaver & Franklin. Jane Clark:
515/223-5047.
- March 19 Big Bluestem Audubon (Ames) program "Prairie Chickens in Southern
Thurs. Iowa" by Malvin Moe at 7:30 PM, 181 Design Center, ISU.
Sherry Dragula: 515/292-4014.
- April 16 Big Bluestem Audubon (Ames) program "Birding Costa Rica" by
Thurs. Laura Jackson at 7:30 PM, 181 Design Center, ISU. Sherry Dragula:
515/292-4014.
- April 21 Des Moines Audubon program "Prairie Chicken and Sharp-tailed
Tues. Grouse in Nebraska" by Roger Hill at 7:15 PM, Westminster Church,
Beaver & Franklin. Jane Clark: 515/223-5047.

NOTE: Your club's meetings and field trips can be included in this listing simply by forwarding your club's newsletter or schedule of events to the IOU Newsletters editors.



BIRDFEEDER SURVEY JANUARY 23-26, 1992

Please fill out carefully. Feel free to copy the form for friends and patrons.
Thank you and enjoy yourselves!

1. Name _____
- 2A. Address _____
- 2B. County _____ 2C. City _____ 2D. Zip _____
3. The feeder survey period this year runs from Thursday, January 23rd to Sunday, January 26th. Count birds on two consecutive days only. Please record which days you counted birds for us in the space below.
Check one: Thursday (1/23) and Friday (1/24),
 Friday (1/24) and Saturday (1/25), or
 Saturday (1/25) and Sunday (1/26).
4. Is your feeder in Town (including suburbs) or in the Country? Circle T or C
5. Check the ONE description which best describes the area within a 2-block circle around your feeder:
 suburban, houses with shrubs and small trees but few trees wider than 20 inches.
 suburban bordered by: (circle 1) timber, grass, field or row crop.
 town, neighborhood has many mature shade and street trees.
 downtown with mostly buildings, sidewalks, roads, parking lots, high rises
 pasture
 row crop (corn, beans, etc.)
 timber
 farmstead with mature trees and shrubs around house.
6. Type and number of feeders: Thistle, Sunflower(only), Fruit, Safflower, Peanuts, Mixed seed, Peanut Butter, Suet, Cracked Sunflower, Corn, Millet(only), unfrozen water, other _____
7. On what date did you start feeding during 1991-92? About _____
8. Comments or additional description of your feeder or yard: _____

HIGHEST NUMBER SEEN FOR EACH SPECIES DURING TWO CONSECUTIVE DAYS

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ring-necked Pheasant | <input type="checkbox"/> White-throated Sparrow |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rock Dove (Common Pigeon) | <input type="checkbox"/> White-crowned Sparrow |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mourning Dove | <input type="checkbox"/> Harris' Sparrow |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Red-headed Woodpecker | <input type="checkbox"/> Dark-eyed Junco (All races) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Red-bellied Woodpecker | <input type="checkbox"/> Red-winged Blackbird |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Downy Woodpecker | <input type="checkbox"/> Grackle (Common) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hairy Woodpecker | <input type="checkbox"/> Brown-headed Cowbird |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flicker (All races) | <input type="checkbox"/> Purple Finch |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Blue Jay | <input type="checkbox"/> Common Redpoll |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Crow (American) | <input type="checkbox"/> Pine Siskin |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black-capped Chickadee | <input type="checkbox"/> Goldfinch American |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tufted Titmouse | <input type="checkbox"/> Evening Grosbeak |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Red-breasted Nuthatch | <input type="checkbox"/> House (English) Sparrow |
| <input type="checkbox"/> White-breasted Nuthatch | <input type="checkbox"/> House Finch |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Brown Creeper | <input type="checkbox"/> (other) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Robin (American) | <input type="checkbox"/> (other) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cedar Waxwing | <input type="checkbox"/> (other) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Starling (European) | <input type="checkbox"/> (other) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cardinal (Northern) | <input type="checkbox"/> (other) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tree Sparrow (American) | <input type="checkbox"/> (other) _____ |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Song Sparrow | <input type="checkbox"/> TOTAL DIFFERENT SPECIES SEEN |

I would like to receive the free *Nongame News*.

I would like information about the Iowa Ornithologists Union which is a statewide bird organization.

If you see a rare or unusual bird, please report it to the Iowa birdline 319-338-9881

1 9 9 2 W I N T E R B I R D F E E D E R S U R V E Y

SPONSORED BY THE IOWA ORNITHOLOGISTS UNION

AND THE IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES NONGAME PROGRAM

On two consecutive days during January 23-26, 1992, observe your feeder and using this form, describe your feeder and record the birds that visited you. In the space provided, list the highest number of each species that you saw together at any one time. For example, if you saw 10 juncos at 9:00, 11 at 12:00 and 7 at 4:00, the number you should record is 11. If males and females can be distinguished (cardinals, downy woodpecker etc.) record the combined total. For example, if you saw 3 male cardinals at 11:00 then 1 male and 2 females at 2:00, record 5 cardinals--the highest count for the males and the highest count for the females combined. Count only on the two consecutive days and record only the birds that you see at your feeder, under your feeder or in the trees around your feeder. Do not count birds which just flew past your house and did not use your feeder area. We want information only about birds influenced by your feeders. If you cannot get an exact count, record your best estimate. An honest estimate is far more useful than 'umpteens' or 'too many to count.' Mail the completed form to me by February 12, 1992:

R. J. Hollis
3351 Lower West Branch Road
Iowa City, IA 52245

If you would like a personal reply, please send a stamped, self-addressed envelope and be patient; it may take 12 months before I can get back to you. Look for results in the Iowa Nongame News and the I.O.U. newsletter.

XC

From the Iowa Birdline (Sept.-Nov.)

Jim Fuller, Iowa City

Two of the best rare bird reports to the Iowa Birdline during the past three months came from out-of-staters. Sam Dunkle, an Oregonian visiting his mother in Cedar Rapids, discovered a **Common Ground Dove** on October 19th, which is a potential first state record. Richard Peiser, of Glen Ellyn, Illinois, took lady luck and his binoculars with him on the President floating casino at Davenport October 13th. He made good use of both of them, when he spotted adult and juvenile **Sabine's Gulls**. The juvenile disappeared after a week (maybe it wasn't old enough to gamble), but the adult stayed on an additional week. These were both great birds that were seen by many.

This should be the peak year of a ten year cycle for **Northern Goshawk**, and there were five reports of that species, starting with a bird at the Saylorville Reservoir on September 21st.

During the next month or two, look for raptors. There has been an unprecedented number of **Hawk Owls** reports from Minnesota this fall, and this may be the year one gets to Iowa. (The last and only hawk owl in Iowa was at Waterloo in 1978-9).

Gyr Falcon is another raptor being seen in the northern states more often than usual this fall. And look those feeder birds over carefully for rarities.

8

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IOWA BIRDLINE

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