

Bird's-eye View



Summer
2017

ILLINOIS RIVER FIELD TRIP
SATURDAY AUGUST 19

Newsletter of The Peoria Audubon Society . . . Chapter of National Audubon since 1981
Chapter of The Peoria Academy of Science since 1930

www.peoriaaudubon.org

Contact the Peoria Audubon Society at audubon@peoriaaudubon.org

These are some of the upcoming events listed at

www.peoriaaudubon.org/calendar

Please join us for our monthly meetings at Forest Park Nature Center. Between the months of September and May, we meet the second Wednesday of the month at 7:00 PM.

Saturday, August 12, 9:00 AM-Noon- Peoria Hummingbird Festival: Sommer Park

Vernon Kleen, one of the few licensed hummingbird banders in the U.S., will be on hand to demonstrate hummingbird banding and discuss the fascinating world of hummingbirds. This free event is come-as-you-please, with banding beginning at 9 AM. Donations appreciated. Event is at Sommer Park on the west edge of Peoria: 6329 N. Koerner Road

Saturday, August 19, 7:00 AM-5:00 PM-Field Trip: Birding Tour of the Illinois River

This trip will visit waterfowl and shorebird migration hotspots along the Illinois River, including Spring Lake, Lake Chautauqua, and the Nature Conservancy's Emiquon Preserve. The trip includes transportation, lunch, and snacks. Pre-registration is required (309-686-3360) or in person at Forest Park Nature Center. \$35 fee with \$5 discount for Peoria Audubon or FPNC members. Trip will leave the nature center at 7 AM and return by 5 PM.

Wednesday, September , 7:00 PM- Membership Meeting- Backyard Bats, Illinois' Bats and Why You Should Love Them

Barbara Williams will be with us to discuss the benefits of living with bats around us. Following the lecture, weather permitting, an ultrasonic bat detector will be demonstrated.

Check the Peoria Audubon Society Facebook "Events" page for more field trip and birding walk opportunities around the Peoria Area.

A Note From Our President

My Summer With Bluebirds

Dennis Endicott

Growing up in rural southern Illinois, I always thought it was special when I saw a bluebird. Back then, I found that bluebirds were a longtime symbol of happiness, good health and hope to our Native Americans. Early settlers appreciated the brilliant color and with their presence, also helped keep down the insect populations helping crops to grow.

I also learned that they were cavity nesters, taking up residence in abandoned woodpecker cavities. As such, the limiting factor in their conservation was being able to find a place to build a nest and raise their family. On the early farms, they sometimes used secondary cavities in wooden fence posts.

Doing a little digging into the history, it turns out that from about 1920-1970, there was a major decline in the population. According to one report, the Eastern Bluebird went from being as common as the robin, to being so rare that some birders were concerned with its possible extinction. There were many reasons for the decline, including loss of habitat, indiscriminant use of pesticides, and fewer dead trees and fence posts for woodpeckers to excavate a suitable cavity. However, many researchers felt the main reason for the decline was the introduction of the House Sparrow and European Starling – both of which are extremely competitive and aggressive for nesting sites.

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In 1978, citizen scientists and birders formed the North American Bluebird Society (NABS, nbluebirdsociety.org). They designed and optimized bluebird boxes and worked to set up networks of bluebird trails. Then, educating the public on the importance of setting up and maintaining bluebird nest boxes helped the bluebird population make a remarkable recovery. Although bluebirds still need to have suitable boxes, and a dedicated public and trained volunteers, the rebound in bluebird population is a conservation success story.

With this as background, this summer I joined a team of volunteers to monitor a trail of 40 bluebird nest boxes out at the Wildlife Prairie Park. With the careful guidance of longtime bluebird monitor and protector Herb Unkrich, I had plenty of expert advice on monitoring bluebirds. But, the word monitor sounds a little passive, for at times we had to take actions assure a successful fledging event. Monitoring helps catch signs of problems early on. We checked each box 2 or 3 times per week.

One of the early lessons I learned was the importance of location to eliminate or at least minimize the problem of predators and competitors. Having the nest boxes located away from dwellings to discourage House Sparrows and using a predator guard to keep raccoons and snakes from the nest were high on the list. There are several other easy steps to help with success. For a simple, short introduction to monitoring bluebird nest boxes, there are several [NABS Fact Sheets](#) that I highly recommend. (Good excuse to use Google! There is way more information out there, but I need to keep this column short.)

In addition to providing shelter for Eastern Bluebirds, we also provided an opportunity for Tree Swallows. We also had House Wrens nest in some of the boxes. With House Wrens, it was something of a love/hate relationship. I love House Wrens, but I hated it when they attacked Bluebird nests. With many of the sites, in particular those that were adjacent to dense woods, we sometimes added a "wren guard" onto the box to discourage them from overtaking an active bluebird nest. These devices created a more torturous path that the bird would need to take to enter the nest box. The bluebirds didn't mind, whereas House Wrens were discouraged. Note that we delegated a number of additional nest boxes just for the wrens – we just wanted to keep them away from the bluebirds. House Sparrows and Starlings could also be problematic, but with careful selection of nest box locations they were not as big a problem.

One of the aspects I had not considered when working with a team of bluebird monitors, was the importance of keeping in touch and record keeping. There are several members of my team (actually, I feel that I am part of *their* team) that I have never met in person, yet from email updates, I feel I know them as personal friends. In addition to our leader, Herb, special recognition goes to Dianna, who maintains an Excel spreadsheet detailing dates and number of eggs, date hatched, expected fledge dates, and other essential information on each nest box. Having frequent spreadsheet updates helped all of stay coordinated and focused on what our tasks were.

This season, as of July 13, although a few nests are still active and have eggs and nestlings not yet counted, we have successfully fledged 101 Eastern Bluebirds and 32 Tree Swallows (along with a bunch of House Wrens) at the Wildlife Prairie Park.

My thanks and deep appreciation to our entire team: Herb Unkrich, Dianna Carothers, Leanna Kijanowski, Jean Palomares, Mike Herman, Maury Wallace, Sandy Swearingian, Pat Stauhammer, and the staff at Wildlife Prairie Park: Calli Smith and Adrienne Bauer.

How to Make Your eBird Checklists More Valuable

Pete Fenner

As the eBird database grows, it is becoming ever more valuable. Your observations are making a huge difference in the understanding of birds at many levels. Scientists are now analyzing your data to find new patterns in bird distribution, abundance and population trends. Although every record submitted to eBird is valuable, only observations with effort data can be used in these more rigorous analyses, so we would like to promote several bird survey techniques that we consider most valuable in this regard. Make the most of your birding by conducting traveling counts, stationary counts and area counts in a more meaningful way. In this feature we'll give examples of how to make your observations count for bird conservation!

Recording All Species: The first step is to make sure you record all the species that you detected on your outing. The most valuable checklists are those where you answer yes to the question "Are you submitting a complete checklist of the birds you were able to identify" found on every checklist page. We know that no one will detect every bird, and we also know that no one can identify every bird seen on all occasions. This question simply aims to see if you are reporting all the birds you encountered to the best of your ability. This way, when we run an analysis, we know the reason you didn't report any European Starlings was because you didn't identify or encounter any—not because you simply don't like them! The important thing is that you only report complete checklists when they are in fact complete, not just because you feel the data should be included in this dataset. We would much rather have lists that are incomplete than ones that are omitting sightings but marked as complete.

Ways to Count: eBird offers four different methodology choices. We have ranked these from most to least valuable in terms of analysis. It should be stated that any count where you have associated effort information greatly trumps simple "Incidental Observations."

Traveling Counts have proven to be the most effective type of observation for modeling bird populations at large scales. By doing these counts birders often detect a good proportion of the birds in a given habitat. It is critical, however, that your traveling counts not be too long. Our analysts are able to effectively use traveling counts that are ≤5 miles. Most birding that is conducted on foot easily falls within this window, but traveling counts by car can often be longer. Please consider breaking up your long traveling counts into shorter distance ones. It's best if these shorter counts are in a relatively consistent habitat, or does not pass through habitats that are too different. For example, a logical point to break a longer route into segments would be a transition between forest and farmland, as the birds found in these two habitat types are vastly different. Doing so would make information associated with each location — such as vegetation information from satellite images — more informative. Plot your location at the center of the area traveled, not at the start point or end point. It's okay to stop and spend time searching flocks of birds more thoroughly on traveling counts, as we are not assuming that you are traveling at a constant speed. You're birding after all! Note: when back-tracking on a trail, record the distance traveled only in one direction, but do record the total time you spent birding as you traveled out and back.

Stationary Counts are a great way to quickly sample a suite of birds in a given habitat by essentially standing in one place (don't walk more than 30 meters!) and counting everything you see and/or hear. With stationary count data we are able to link the birds you report with the habitat on the ground using remote sensing of vegetation layers. In general, shorter counts from more locations are better. But longer stationary counts are appropriate for birding events such as hawk watching and sea watching, or for counting large numbers of shorebirds, gulls, or ducks on a lake. We recommend a 5-minute stationary count at minimum. A string of 5-minute counts along a road or trail is even better! We often use a GPS for location information and then put the data into a spreadsheet, ultimately uploading it to eBird using the "[Import Data](#)" option. Also consider doing a point count in a randomly selected location near your initial stationary count (within .5 miles works well). Pairing stationary counts like this provides valuable additional information about bird occurrence in habitats less frequently visited. Birders tend to stop and conduct counts in places that they think look good for birds. By pairing these targeted areas with random ones, we have a better idea of the overall habitat in the area, and how birds are using it. Oddly, some great birds have turned up using this technique, and birders find some interesting new birding spots using this random spacing approach. Stationary counts are most informative when birds are also reasonably stationary, such as on territory. During migration and possibly winter, when birds are quieter and moving over larger regions, traveling counts may be more likely to encounter all of the birds that are in a general area. At these times of the year 10 or 20 minute stationary counts work better.

Area Counts are highly valuable because you are giving us an estimate of the area you've covered and a count of all the birds you've found within that area (fly-overs are okay!). This is desirable because it allows us to calculate density, or the number of birds/area covered. Area counts should be at least 20 minutes long, and the more thoroughly you cover a smaller area the better. Place your point at the center of the area sampled. We rank this count type as third best not because it is flawed, but because it is the least frequently selected option among eBirders.

Historical Protocol: Birders often have complete checklists of birds from their local area or trips abroad. These can be entered as Traveling or Stationary counts if reasonable estimates of start time, duration, and distance can be entered. Historical Protocol indicates that effort is uncertain, but birding was your primary purpose. This is most appropriate for, as the name would suggest, entering your lists from the past before you collected the effort data for Traveling or Stationary counts. Historical Protocol should be used as infrequently as possible, and is applicable when birding was your primary purpose (separating it from Incidental Observations), but you have no associated time or distance data.

Incidental Observation: Too many birders choose incidental observations (previously called "casual observations") simply because they don't understand the techniques above or feel that they are unqualified to provide effort information. In reality, any time you leave the house with birding as your primary objective, chances are the time you spend in the field can be categorized as a traveling, stationary or area count. Incidental Observations are to be used primarily for bird observations made when birding was not your primary purpose. For example, if you saw an Osprey flying over while checking the mail, or intermittently observed some birds in your yard while doing yard work throughout the day. The importance of using Incidental Observations only as a last resort cannot be over overstated. Data recorded without effort are of use for more limited analyses, typically mapping and seasonal distribution information.

In a Vehicle – Traveling vs. Incidental: If you are driving along en route to a birding site and see two Peregrine Falcons and a Common Buzzard out the window, what kind of a count is it? Even if you were keeping your eye out for anything you saw, it isn't possible to be detecting species with the assumptions of a traveling count – so you are logging an Incidental Observation. If you drive slowly down a road with your windows down for several minutes and count everything you see, perhaps even stopping periodically, then that is a Traveling Count. The difference between the two situations is when birding was your [primary purpose](#).

Please consider trying one of the above techniques to help make your observations more meaningful for our analyses! And for further assistance, you can find it at the "help" tab on eBird!

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Join us for the Peoria Hummingbird Festival at Sommer Park on Saturday, August 12, from 9 AM until noon. Vernon Kleen will demonstrate wild hummingbird banding, with the chance to see hummingbirds close up. This event is free and for all ages, with free activities for children. Sommer Park is located at 6329 Koerner Road, Edwards.



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