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No Time for Complacency

U.P. Winter Birding Travelogue



Our group walked nearly two miles down a well-plowed road through Hulbert Bog immersed in wildness, yet, never more than a quarter mile away from the warmth of the van.

Hey, this isn't just kid stuff! Many adults who attend our programs first discover Nature Discovery while participating for their children's sake. They soon find that they are as interested in the content as their kids, or more. For many, a realization may strike that a biologically rich world exists around them that had, heretofore, gone relatively unnoticed.

Our monthly open Sundays are geared for general audiences. A typical Sunday hosts a number of families with children, but it also attracts quite the adult following, many walking through the door *sans* kids-in-tow. They attend strictly for their own expansion on the topic at hand.

Throughout the year I also lead birding outings specifically for small groups of adults. Participants meet at Nature Discovery, then I drive the group to a target Michigan destination for the day, overnight, or over a weekend. The cost for these outings is far cheaper than those set by a touring company, and, since we typically set a maximum of participants at four or five individuals, the experience ends up being much more personable, stress-free, and fun! Case in point...

Michigan's Upper Peninsula hosts a surprising number of winter birds that are difficult-to-impossible to find in the southern half of the Lower Peninsula. So, over this past Martin Luther King Weekend, we offered a trip in which four participants enrolled. We spent most of our time from Sault Ste. Marie, southward then westward, as far as Newberry.

The full Chevy Venture departed early Friday afternoon in time to cross Mackinac Bridge with about an hour of remaining daylight. An extra half hour drive got us to our intended target, the Rudyard exit, with a little daylight remaining. This area is automatic for Snowy Owl sightings every winter.

Our vehicle crept down an empty, icy backroad in dusky, overcast light. We would have driven right past the first one, despite its closeness, if Jan hadn't spotted it perched atop a powerline pole over the road. We piled out with binoculars for a better look. Although its body, like the stationary frame of a swivel stool, was positioned facing the field, the owl spun its head in a one-eighty, eyed us with apparent indifference, then swiveled its gaze back to the field. We marveled at how its contour melted into the dimming, gray background overhead. No wonder we almost missed it! While watching through

my binoculars, I made a sharp kissing sound. It swiveled abruptly to locate the source, apparently identified it as an impostor, then turned to face the field again. On our return to I-75 we spotted two more owls in the rapidly-encroaching darkness.

After overnighing in the Soo we returned to this area the next day. The sunshine over the fields reflected off an endless blanket of snow. In short order we spotted four more owls. While none were as close as the one the night before, we were able to stop, roll down windows, and even get out to view the birds through binoculars for extended periods under flawless blue skies.

Other strategic stops included the old granite powerplant on the St. Mary's River in the Soo, MSU's Dunbar Forest Experiment Station and Dafter Landfill. At these locations and along little-traveled roads in between, we viewed Bald Eagles, Rough-legged Hawks, state-threatened Sharp-tailed Grouse, a Northern Shrike, flocks of Pine and Evening Grosbeaks, Purple Finches, Common Ravens, a first year Goshawk, a Glaucous Gull from the Arctic, and others.

We were hoping, to encounter a flock of Bohemian Waxwings – alas, to no avail. Larger and chunkier than the familiar Cedar Waxwing downstate, these birds drift down from Canada in most winters, and, like the Cedar, search in somewhat unpredictable fashion for berry-producing trees and shrubs. They rarely wander further south than the northern Lower Peninsula. On any winter U.P. birding trek, as we and they move independently of each other, a hefty dose of luck is required to intercept a flock at a specific point in space and time. In fact, we had come up empty on our last three winter U.P. trips.

Hulburt Bog is conveniently located just off of M-28 about thirty-five miles west of I-75. Winter birders know it as one of only a handful of spots in the Eastern U.P. to encounter the Gray Jay, a bold, boreal forest species that routinely approaches *Homo sapiens* because of a learned association with food. Visiting birders - pockets stocked with sunflower or peanuts - know that there is a chance they can tempt a close encounter, perhaps even a bird-in-hand. Loose flocks roam and forage throughout the forested bog, and so, only occasionally do their meanderings intersect the straight, well-plowed, but little-traveled road that bisects the habitat. For anybody planning to drive the road at a given hour, the likelihood of meeting one of these flocks is hit-and-miss. However, the more common chickadees here have followed the lead of the Gray Jays so often, that, with a little patience they also come to a seed-bearing hand.



Participant Donna Posont is visually-impaired, yet, she was excited to join us on the weekend adventure. Nearly two miles of unobstructed straightaway allowed for unencumbered walking while she absorbed the sounds, smells and touches of the northern wilds. Then, a few passing chickadees discovered that she and her friend, Judy, had seed. The mere extension of her hand incited a flush of small wings, followed by the sensation of tiny, feather-light toenails clinging to her gloveless hand.

Over a dozen chickadees flitted to and from outstretched hands to nearby tree limbs where they adeptly tore open hulls to consume the meat before returning to a hand of their choosing. They soon reached a level of comfort whereby they would land and cling to almost any portion of our cumulative surface area – heads, shoulders, arms, legs, chests, and even to our cameras



A Snowy Owl stationed atop a U.P. powerline pole.

Photo © Barb Meiner

and cell phones as we snapped photos. We were reluctant to put the seed away. We didn't want to be the ones to end to the encounter, so we waited for the birds to let us know they had had enough. The feeding persisted for nearly an hour (!), but the activity eventually waned. One or two at a time, they disappeared down the road and into the thicket. Donna immediately proclaimed the experience - to no one's surprise - the highlight of her trip.

She later shared this: Indeed, it was a highlight of the trip and even of my life, and I am still sharing that with people. It was not just the conversation of my travel companions, but the experience of engaging other senses. Exploring the habitat, hearing the fluttering of the wings, experiencing the cold and snow, being thrilled with the touch of chickadee feet on the finger, and knowing the trust of the chickadee to perch and grab a seed, are all even more exciting than shared words. Thank you for making it possible.

For better or worse, unpredictable instances arise on these trips. Most are positive in nature, like spotting a fox strolling across a snowy field. Others, not so fortunate. As we entered the vehicle to head toward Tahquamenon Falls I depressed the brake pedal and felt it sink directly to the floor with almost no resistance. The "low brake fluid" light began to flash. With no prior indication a brake line had sprung a leak. We carefully drove, then downshifted into a gas station in Newberry. I purchased more brake fluid, filled the reservoir and we continued on to the state park, careful to use the brake as little as possible.

After viewing the falls (a spectacular sight amidst a wintery canvas) we drove into Paradise to spend Sunday night. Whitefish Point had been on the agenda for our final morning, but the leaky brake line necessitated alternate plans. After spending the evening in my motel room exploring car repair service options, nothing of which existed in Paradise, I found Frank's Automotive Repair back in Newberry. I called the shop first thing in the morning and explained our dilemma. They were down to a single mechanic that day, and he would be tied up with another repair through the morning, but they could take us early in the afternoon. I topped off the brake fluid and we managed to drive the thirty-eight miles from Paradise to Newberry using the brake only once – to turn and pull into their lot.

When we arrived, Becky, the woman staffing the office, took my phone number and said she would give me a call when they were ready to take the vehicle. In the meantime she suggested that the group could hang out at Zellar's Restaurant, about a half mile down the road. As we carefully maneuvered to pull onto the street a flock of about fifty medium-sized birds suddenly flew into sight over the vehicle. Were those Bohemian Waxwings? We watched them fly across the street then descend beyond the rooftops of a residential neighborhood. Excitement welled, and I goaded our disabled ride in cautious pursuit.

Two blocks west and one block north the prize was revealed in a side-yard crabapple. The Bohemians fed and rested in the bare, berried branches against an azure curtain of sky while conversing in shrill trills. The distinctive notes were not as highly pitched as those of the smaller, slimmer, more familiar Cedar Waxwings (https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Bohemian_Waxwing/sounds vs. https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Cedar_Waxwing/sounds). Everyone exited the car and slowly approached the busy tree. The birds appeared oblivious to our presence. Camera and cell phone shutters clicked with gusto. They obliged for a good ten minutes before deciding it was about time to shove off. A few birds at a time lifted from the crabapple to alight among the thin, topmost twigs of a tall maple in the next yard. Within a minute every flock member swayed and trilled among its mates high overhead. On some cue invisible to us they took off in a synchronized flurry of wings - across the street, over the rooftops and out of sight.



The experience was as close-up and prolonged as any of us would have ordered, *and* the species was a “lifer” for all four participants. Donna could even add it to her impressive, special auditory life list, now at well over one hundred species.

We entered the restaurant and seated ourselves still simmering with excitement. Upon hearing of our automotive dilemma our waitress, Sue, welcomed us to hang out as long as necessary. Gregg and I transferred photos from our cameras to our computer screens to edit and show to the others. Local patrons at another table saw what we were doing and engaged in some of the conversation and photo sharing, too. Time flew, and the call came earlier than expected. I left the group at the restaurant. The vehicle was on the lift within minutes. The mechanic quickly located the leak, spliced in a new segment and had it ready to roll within an hour. The total cost, only sixty-seven dollars!?

As often happens in life, a negative event, given time, generates a positive one. None of us could have predicted that we would be re-crossing Mackinac Bridge right on schedule, despite the unscheduled detour. We almost certainly would have been re-entering the Lower Peninsula *without* a Bohemian Waxwing sighting had it not been for the car trouble. On our drive home the irony was lost on no one. The circumstance pushed us toward doors that would otherwise never have been approached. On the other sides we encountered nice people, nice service, and a really nice flock of birds amid a sunny, bright U.P. afternoon. Memories for a lifetime, so much so, I’d be remiss not to say...



Participant, Gregg Landick snapped this Bohemian Waxwing close-up in Newberry.

“Want a meal in Newberry? Pull up a chair at Zellar’s. Need a car repaired in Newberry? Frank’s will take care of it. Want to see Bohemian Waxwings in Newberry? Keep looking up!”

We’ve got two birding day trips scheduled specifically for adults in the coming weeks. Give one a try. You may find yourself, like many of our patrons, coming back for more.

-Jim McGrath

LCC Saturday GATE Youth Classes...

will be taught by Carol later this month. The classes run for five weeks, February 18 through March 18.

Toy Stories: The Science of Toys (for grades 2 & 3; 9am to 12pm)

Science with Experiments – Advanced (for grades 4-6; 1 to 4pm)

To enroll or for more information go to www.lcc.edu/seriousfun and select Fall/Spring GATE.

Catch Us on Coffee Break Tuesday, February 7

Jim is scheduled to appear on Thursday, February 7 at 9:15am, discussing and playing recordings of bird songs heard outside in late winter. The show airs weekdays from 9 to 10am on 89.7 FM. Listen live online at lcc.edu/radio/onair/ or watch it live (or later in the day at 6pm) online at lcc.edu/tv/watch. We’ll post a reminder on Facebook.



Open Hours

Sunday, February 12

1 to 5pm; \$5 admission

2pm Presentation

Birding by Ear *Late Winter Edition*

The Tufted Titmouse and a dozen other winter resident songbirds ratchet up their breeding songs in February.

Photo © Steve Sage



© Steve Sage 2010

At 2pm, ***Birding by Ear – Late Winter Edition***, will be presented. Cued by our lengthening days, chickadees, titmice, cardinals and many other winter resident songbirds have ratcheted up the volume, intensity, and frequency of their breeding songs. Learning to identify birds by sight is a useful skill, however, when you are able to step outside and “bird by ear,” you graduate to a level of avian awareness that blows away identification by sight alone! February may be the best month to start. A manageable number of common species are singing their breeding songs now. As migrants return, the number of songs out your window increases steadily. By May, a boggling 40 or more may be heard on a country lot! Powerpoint slides and audio recordings are used to familiarize participants with who is calling now. At the presentation’s conclusion we’ll step outside to identify singers and elicit some responses with recordings. Bring your binoculars!

Don’t forget! Our **Michigan Reptiles & Amphibians Interactive Zoo** is open to all ages for visitation before, during and after the presentation. Great photo ops!

Maple River Winter Birding Day *Wednesday, February 15; 7am to 1pm*

Join an intimate guided trip for adults in our minivan to Maple River State Game Area north of St. Johns. Snow Buntings, Shrikes, Bald Eagles, Rough-legged Hawks, Great Horned Owl Nests and more await us. Around noon we will return to the Lansing area, have lunch at a restaurant while reviewing the day’s finds on checklists provided. Enrollment is limited to five. Advance registration required. FEE: \$45, includes all transportation to and from Nature Discovery. Arrangements may also be made to pick up /drop off at your door or another convenient location.

Although skittish when approached, American Kestrels are automatic on winter trips to the Maple River area.

Photo © Steve Sage



© Steve Sage



Friday, February 17 Kensington Field Trip 9am to 3pm

For elementary students and older. Hand-feeding birds at this metropark, just east of Brighton, is the highlight of this field trip that begins and ends in Nature Discovery's classroom. We'll take pictures of all participants with bird-in-hand. Bring binoculars if you have them, dress warmly and pack a bag lunch for the road! Advance enrollment required. FEE: \$65/student.

Michigan Wildlife Day Camp Monday, February 20 9am to 3pm

For students K & older. Join us for one or two days of in-your-face nature! Indoor activities include lots of interaction with our snakes, turtles, frogs, salamanders and lizards, as we handle, feed, and learn about them along the way. Keep your own bird checklist of species seen at the feeders and in the woods out back. We'll walk off-trail in search of a hidden insect that spends the winter in snowy fields (as long as a woodpecker doesn't find it!). Each student can take one home and watch for it to emerge from its hiding place in the spring. A hot lunch, snacks and plenty of hot chocolate are provided. Advance enrollment required. FEE: \$55/student.



Trumpeter Swan pair. Photo © Steve Sage.

Lake Erie Birding Day Saturday, February 25 7am to 5pm

Join an intimately-sized group of adults on this full-day, late-winter excursion. The winter landscapes of Great Lakes shorelines are magnets to a surprising array of Canadian species that call this "South." Lake Erie is no exception. All three species of swans found in Michigan can often be seen together here over the winter. In addition to scoping a host of diving ducks and other fowl on the open water, we'll explore adjacent habitats for roosting northern migrant owls, such as Long-eared and Saw-whet. Many other birds in store, too. Stops include Lake Erie Metropark, Point Mouillee State Game Area and other locations along the way. A checklist is provided to allow participants to keep track of species encountered throughout the day. Depart 7am; return about 5pm. FEE: \$70, includes all transportation. Registration required.

No Time for Complacency

This isn't about politics, but truth, in the intended sense of the word...

For the record, Nature Discovery does *not* recognize Donald Trump as a legitimate president of the United States. A narcissistic personality is empowered by the complacency of those around him. Speak out if you value a peaceful, healthy and sustainable country and planet for *all*.

https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/26/science/doomsday-clock-countdown-2017.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FGlobal%20Warming&action=click&contentCollection=science®ion=stream&module=stream_unit&version=latest&contentPlacement=10&pgtype=collection&r=0

<http://www.climatecentral.org/news/epa-climate-web-pages-change-21133>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-climate-change-rebellion-michael-mann-global-warming-scientists-a7556696.html>

-JM



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