



WingTips

A Publication of the Lake/Cook Chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society ♦ August 2019

On the Fly

From May 17-19, Lake/Cook Chapter hosted the statewide 2019 Illinois Audubon Society Spring Gathering.

With nearly 150 attendees, 25 field trips yielding 159 bird species, stellar presentations from local Hawk Watch founder Vic Berardi and Great Lakes advocate Cameron Davis, and a raffle/silent auction that raised funds for chapter activities, the 'Birding on the Big Lake' weekend was a resounding success. All thanks go to chapter members who donated the time, goods, ideas and enthusiasm that made everything go smoothly. It was a massive effort that delivered a good time for all.

– Rena Cohen, Chapter President

Lake/Cook Donates 10 Binoculars to Introduce Local Children to Nature

When Lake/Cook members Maureen Marsh and Mark Vaughan began leading bird walks for BackYard Nature Center, a local nonprofit dedicating to connecting children and adults with the natural world, Vaughan started to scour garage sales for \$5 and \$10 binoculars to supplement the few pairs available through the organization. The effort helped, but more binocs were needed to reduce sharing and ensure a good outdoor experience.

Lake/Cook recently pitched in by purchasing and donating 10 new child-friendly 8x26 binoculars selected for their light weight, small size, wide field of view and ease of focus. The new field glasses are now being put to good use.



First Program of the Season Aug. 27: Texas' Top Birds with Josh Engel

Texas is the nation's second biggest state by both area and bird list with more than 540 species. (The state has two listings in the book *Fifty Places to Go Birding Before You Die*.) Red Hill Birding's Josh Engel will kick off our 2019-2020 season by taking us on a virtual tour of the state's best birding, from the migration hotspots and wetlands of the Gulf Coast to the Mexican border, Rio Grande Valley, beautiful Hill Country, and west Texas' deserts and mountains. Josh took his first birding trip to Texas when he was 14 and now leads birding tours there every year.



Black-capped Vireo

The program – *Texas: Birding the Lone Star State* - is at 7 pm on Tuesday, Aug. 27 at Heller Nature Center, 2821 Ridge Road, Highland Park. All 2019-2020 programs and field trips are listed in the enclosed brochure and at www.lakecookaudubon.org.



Both Marsh and Vaughan lead BackYard Nature Center trips for children at Skokie Lagoons. On the water, when they set up spotting scopes and instruct participants to use their binoculars to find the birds on their own, they hear 'wows' when children see a Belted Kingfisher, Great Blue Heron or Great Egret swallow a fish half their size. On the trail, they have pointed out species such as Baltimore Oriole, Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Indigo Bunting in a single field trip. "The kids were in awe of the birds' color," Vaughan says. A few lucky participants got to see a hard-to-find Cerulean Warbler on the same outing.

For Marsh, one of the best rewards has been overhearing comments such as "I thought this was going to be boring but it's really cool!" "That's the point. We want to get them off their phones and laptops and help them develop an appreciation for nature," she notes. "Birds are a wonderful gateway to environmental awareness."



Cowbird Trapping Being Abandoned for Kirtland's Warbler Management

For anyone who has ever visited the summer nesting grounds of the endangered Kirtland's Warbler in Michigan, one of the indelible images is of the room-sized cages used to trap and eventually kill Brown-headed Cowbirds to prevent them from laying eggs in the warbler nests. For the past 40 years, this strategy has been a linchpin in the effort to reverse a precipitous decline in the Kirtland's Warbler population that had left only 200 male birds in the wild by 1971, in part because 70% of their nests were parasitized by cowbirds to the detriment of warbler chicks.

That is no longer the case. In 2018, according to a new study by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center and Utah State University, cowbirds parasitized only 1% of Kirtland's Warbler nests in their core Michigan breeding range despite the fact that cowbird traps had been gradually removed during the previous three nesting seasons in a test to determine whether cowbird trapping was still needed.



Researchers attributed the reduced parasitism to a decline in the cowbird population in Michigan caused both by the trapping and killing of 158,555 cowbirds from 1972 to 2014 and by increased forestation that has reduced cowbird foraging habitat in agricultural fields and other open areas. They concluded that the cowbird control program can be at least temporarily suspended, freeing funds for other conservation efforts and reducing reliance on expensive human intervention to protect one of our rarest songbirds.

Meanwhile, the Kirtland's Warbler population in Michigan has rebounded to 2,300 breeding males, and the species is being considered for removal from the U.S. Endangered Species List. If delisting occurs and cowbird trapping stops, cowbird parasitism will continue to be monitored, and trapping will resume if it becomes necessary.

It's important to remember, however, that cowbirds were only one threat to this warbler's survival. The bird's nesting habitat of 5- to 23-year-old jack pine forest had virtually disappeared, and has been planted and managed by Michigan DNR and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for 40 years. Maintaining that habitat will be required to prevent another Kirtland's crash.



Go West, Lake/Cook Birders: July 2020 Utah Trip Now Open

Five days of summer birding in Utah can yield up to 150 species, including standouts like Flammulated Owl, Cassia Crossbill, Black Swift, Lewis's Woodpecker and the incredible Phalarope migration spectacle on the Great Salt Lake. Other highlights are American Dipper, Western Tanager, Lazuli Bunting, Common Poorwill, American Three-Toed Woodpecker, Williamson's and Red-naped Sapsucker, Pine Grosbeak, Black Rosy-Finch, Sage Thrasher, Broad-Tailed and Calliope Hummingbird, Clark's Nutcracker and many more.

Join Lake/Cook chapter on a 'Best of Utah Summer' trip next July 8-12 led by Utah guide Tim Avery and ex-Utah resident turned Chicago birder Jeff Bilsky. We'll visit desert, lake and mountain habitat in Utah, Idaho and Wyoming. Maximum attendance is 14. Price is \$1399 (double occupancy) plus airfare. For details, email renabird3@gmail.com. And hurry: these trips fill quickly!



Big Year Birding Adventures with Lynn Barber at Notebaert Sept. 19

Lynn Barber, a patent attorney and author of "Extreme Birder: One Woman's Big Year" as well as "Birds in Trouble," will talk about her big year experiences in Texas and Alaska at Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum on Thursday, Sept. 19. The program is free but space is limited. Reserve your spot at naturemuseum.org.



Welcome New Members

Joan Andler, Highland Park
Jane Berman, Buffalo Grove
Alice Brandon, Chicago
Jamie Burning, Niles
Kristen Cart, Antioch
Linda Catomer, Mount Prospect
James Clemer, Chicago
Suzanne Deese, Tinley Park
Tom Doig, Dixon
Dan Ellig, Arlington Heights
George Foster, Winthrop Harbor
George Garties, Chicago
Ned Hale, Evanston
Tamima Itani, Evanston
John Knott, Lake Bluff
Jon Lippitz, Glencoe
Ann Livingston, Mundelein
Lee Marin, Chicago
John Marion, Deer Park

Ruth Meyer, Joliet
Melinda Milenkovich, Highland Park
Tom & Debra Maz, Mount Prospect
Jeanie Murray, Highland Park
Marilyn Palmer, Gurnee
Rita & Bruce Renwick, Joliet
Laurel Ross, Chicago
Lorra Rudman, Lincolnshire
Beatriz Sparks, Niles
Barbara Sucherman, Highland Park
Jean Tookey, Des Plaines
Yazmin Vallez, Waukegan
Roberta Winter, Skokie
Robert Yapple, Zion
Abe Yashar, Chicago



Songbird Problem-Solving Abilities In Urban & Rural Environments



Researchers theorize that rapid urban expansion is changing the cognitive abilities of wildlife. Here De Paul University Master's student Kayce Miller, a Lake/Cook Chapter grant recipient, describes her work on urban versus rural songbird cognition.

Birds living in cities experience different challenges and opportunities than those living in less populated areas. City living can be difficult for birds because of less space for natural nesting sites, buildings that need to be avoided, and increased noise. However, there is also opportunity in city living because of new food sources that can be exploited such as birdfeeders, litter and garbage cans.

Researchers have been investigating whether birds living in urban areas may be smarter than their country counterparts. It is thought that birds that are better problem-solvers ("smarter") may be more likely to successfully find food, survive and reproduce. Since urban environments have a lot of change and unpredictability, problem-solving is especially important.

For my master's project, I am interested in finding out if there is a difference in the problem-solving ability in songbirds living in urban and rural environments. I am also curious if there is a difference in the problem-solving ability of birds living in forests (with fewer human interactions) and residential areas (with more human interactions).

For my experiment, I used 20 study locations. That included 10 in urban areas and 10 in rural areas, with 5 forest preserves

and 5 backyards in each. I built a platform bird feeder with 8 small cups. I then added a chicken wire enclosure with small

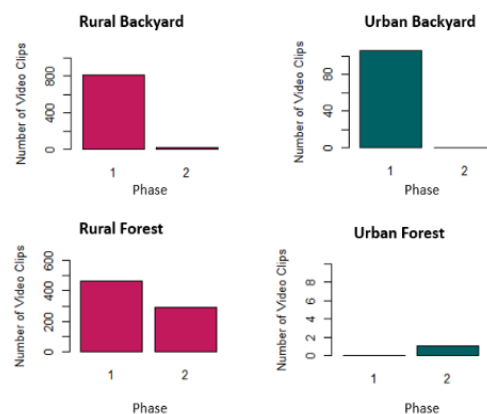


openings to keep out squirrels, raccoons, large birds and other unwanted participants. For each study location, I put the feeder under a tree and attached a motion-activated camera on the tree to record the activities of visitors.

Each video recorded for 60 seconds.

My study ran for 9 weeks. The first 2 weeks were used to attract birds, so I used the feeder with no lids on the cups. The last 7 weeks of the study forced the birds to work for food by opening a lid, as shown in the preceding image of a black-capped chickadee.

Of 18,092 videos I collected during my study, 2,767 contained birds. Birds were active at feeders in rural locations but appeared at only one urban backyard feeder. One reason may be that, despite our best efforts to exclude non-bird intruders, many urban bird feeders were quickly occupied by raccoons at urban forests and squirrels at urban backyards.



Number of video clips of birds visiting the feeder at each location type during phase 1 (no lid) and phase 2 (lid)

The feeders in rural backyards attracted mostly house sparrows, house finches and northern cardinals, while those in rural forests drew black-capped chickadees almost exclusively. These birds were present in high abundance during the first two weeks (free food!). The backyard birds stopped coming to the feeder once they had to work for the food, perhaps because of easier-to-get food options such as those in neighboring yards.

In rural forests, black-capped chickadees continued to show up at the feeder for the duration of the study. They not only learned to open the lids in the feeder to get food but also became faster problem-solvers. In the first 2 weeks of problem-solving, the average amount of time it took for a chickadee to open a lid was 7 seconds. By the end of the study, average solve time was just 4 seconds.

It's possible that city birds may have the potential to be smarter than the country birds, or vice-versa. But in our study – one of the rare studies on bird problem-solving in the wild – we found that the country bird was the only one willing to participate and persist to work for food.



Love in the Dunes: Piping Plovers Nest at Montrose

Great Lakes sandy-bluff beaches are one of only three habitats in the country to attract nesting Piping Plovers, small shorebirds that are federally endangered. In June, a pair of these sand-colored bundles of cuteness began nesting in the dunes at Montrose Point. It was not only a first for Montrose, but also a milestone in the recovery of the Great Lakes Piping Plovers from a low of just 13 pairs in the early 1980s to approximately 70 pairs today.

Working with the Chicago Park District, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Illinois Department of Natural Resources roped off the nesting area and placed a cage around the nest to protect the eggs from predators and other dangers. In addition, more than 150 volunteer monitors stood guard to maximize the chances of success.

The birds nested twice, both times laying four eggs. The first eggs were removed to protect them from rising water and sent to Lincoln Park Zoo for safekeeping, but the eggs failed to develop. Three of the four eggs from the second clutch hatched successfully. One of the chicks died, but two had survived as of this writing and were expected to fly the coop (that is, the beach) shortly.

Monty, Rose and their offspring made headlines across the country, prompted the cancellation of a music festival

that had been scheduled at Montrose, and brought hundreds of birders to the beach to witness the drama.

IDNR biologist Brad Semel, volunteer coordinator and Lake/Cook member Tamima Itani, and two volunteer 'Piperwatchers' will dig deeper into the story at Lake/Cook's September 17 meeting.



Photo by Tamima Itani

Meanwhile in Maine, a record 89 pairs of Piping Plovers nested along the coast this summer and had fledged 165 chicks by early August. That represented a 29% increase over 2018. There are roughly 2,000 nesting pairs on the East Coast from the Carolinas to Newfoundland, including more than 700 in Massachusetts.