

September 2023

Bird Notes

Newsletter of the Grand Traverse Audubon Club

grandtraverseaudubon.org

find us on Facebook and Instagram #gtaudubon

Editor: Kirk Waterstripe newsletter@grandtraverseaudubon.org

A friend wrote a poem called "The Birder's Lament" about birding in the fall as breeding species head south. This is not a time to lament, but a time to get out there! The birds are migrating lazily, and that affords a great opportunity to watch, and to learn.

On the Calendar

Our regular meetings are usually the fourth Thursday of the month at the Boardman River Nature Center on Cass Road at 7:00 pm. Everyone is welcome to attend!

Sept. 28, 2023 – Monthly Meeting: Birds and Art

Club member Maryellen Newport, who teaches ecology at the Interlochen Arts Academy, will explain to us how she uses the arts to teach the students about birds and other wildlife. AND we will all get to create our own bird pin by sketching on shrink art film. Bring a field guide to help you draw, if you wish.

Oct. 21, 2023 – Annual Dinner Meeting

It's our big night! We'll meet at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 1050 Peninsula Drive in Traverse City (across from Bryant Park) at 6:00 pm. The evening will start with a potluck dinner, followed by a short business meeting during which we'll elect Club officers for 2024. Once the business is done, we'll move on to an evening of education and fun, with our own version of What Bird Is That?, the ABA's online bird identification show.



Official GTA club logo by Tom Ford

Upcoming Field Trips

Sept. – Oct.

Sunday Morning Bird Walks. The last Sunday of each month will be an evening outing. Watch your email for details.

September 16

Jaeger Watch with Benzie Audubon

October 14

October Big Day with Grand Traverse Conservation District

November 18

Christmas Bird Count orientation and practice

Nov. 16, 2023 – Monthly Meeting: Using eBird and Discord

One of our regional birding experts, Brian Allen, will explain how these tools help birders and bird conservation. In addition, he'll be sharing the nuances of these platforms that create opportunities to enhance your and others' birding experiences.

Upcoming Field Trips

Sunday Morning Bird Outings

We're back! Each Sunday from now through the end of October, Kirk Waterstripe will lead a group at a location in Grand Traverse or Leelanau County. If you're a beginning birder, or if you want to polish your skills, these trips are for you! Shorebirds at Boardman lake will be featured, as well as fall migrants at various locations.

Locations and times will be announced in BirdAlert emails, so watch your inbox.



Sept. 16 (Saturday) – Jaeger Watch at Platte River Point

Most years, a few jaegers (gull-like seabirds) are seen near Chicago. We'll join our friends from Benzie Audubon to see if these rare travelers cruise by the Platte River. Meet at the USNPS parking lot at **8:00 AM**. A National Park Service pass is required for entry. If the jaegers disappoint, we still hope to see some seasonal shorebirds. At the very least, we'll have a nice day on the beach with friends!

Oct. 14 – October Big Day

Come to the Boardman River Nature Center at 9:00 AM to participate in a joint venture between Grand Traverse Audubon Club and the Grand Traverse Conservation District of the October Big Day. You'll be greeted by GT Audubon member Kathie Wiley and a facilitator with the GT Conservation District. The October Big Day is an annual bird census conducted throughout the world by volunteers like you. We'll be submitting observations and supporting conservation worldwide. You'll help count birds and learn how the data is entered online. We'll be walking around the

Birding Calendar

September

Early in the month, watch for vagrant flycatchers. Migration intensity picks up this month, with more songbirds drifting through. Watch for sparrows and more warblers in "confusing" fall plumages. The first of the migrating raptors come south too, with Osprey and Broad-winged Hawks among the early migrants.

October

Waterfowl are beginning to move south, so check lakes and the bays of Lake Michigan. Watch for bluebirds and other thrushes. Juncos will start to appear in the woods, then at feeders. Make note of the last date you see various species around your home or feeders.

November

Early November has been called Rarity Week, so keep your eyes open for anything. Rafts of ducks and grebes frequent the Lake Michigan bays. Late raptors like Red-tails and Rough-legs are in the fields. You might find an early Snowy Owl by the end of the month.

Board River Nature Center grounds and along the Natural Education Reserve, which is part of the Boardman/Ottawa River Trail. 9:00 AM to 11:00 AM.

Registration is required for this event:

[October Big Day Birding Event Registration](#)

Contact: Kathie Wiley / treasurer@grandtraverseaudubon.org

Nov. 18 - Christmas Bird Count Practice

Would you like to participate in a Christmas Bird Count but you're not sure if your skills are up to the challenge? Want to know more about what happens out there in the cold? Kirk Waterstripe, compiler of the Lake Leelanau Count, is organizing an orientation and practice session on November 18th. We'll learn how to gather good data, and travel around a count area as a group, honing our skills. We'll also talk about how to participate as a feeder counter. Watch for meeting location details in a BirdAlert email, and in the November *Bird Notes*.

Your Favorite Patch

Here's a place to share your treasures! In each issue, we'll feature a user-submitted favorite birding spot.

Rugg Pond Natural Area (44.783853, -85.200986)

Overview: Located in Kalkaska County on Valley Road about 5 miles northwest of the city of Kalkaska. This pond was formed by construction of a dam in 1904 at the confluence of the Rapid River and Little Rapid River for the purpose of generating electricity for the city of Kalkaska. The power plant has long been removed and the property conveyed to city of Kalkaska. The future of the pond and aging dam structure are unknown.

Recommendations: Open year-round with a boat launch and snow plowed parking in the winter. This hotspot is convenient for a quick stop to view the pond and adjacent hardwoods and conifers from the parking lot, or take a short walk with your scope, camera and binoculars onto the adjacent dike, enjoy the fall colors, the sounds and views of the rushing water over the dam, and relax on the two benches provided. If you have more time, follow the path to the east into the woods about 1/2 mile in total distance from the parking lot with brief vistas of the Rapid River toward the end. Afterwards, consider visiting Seven Bridges Nature Area, only 2-1/2 miles to the north on Valley Road.

Directions: From Traverse City, head east on M-72 toward Kalkaska, continue about 13 miles east of US-31, turn left onto Old M-72 NW, continue 1.7 miles then turn left onto Valley Road, go 1.4 miles to Rugg Pond Natural Area.

Accessibility: Snow plowed gravel parking at the entrance with a boat launch, and about 1/2 mile of grass and dirt trail leading across the dike and into the woods to the upper river on the east side of the pond. No stairs, unless you wish to go down the concrete steps leading to the river on each side of the dam. If you go into the woods to the east of the pond, expect uneven terrain and a downed tree or two across the path that you will need to step over. Snow- and ice-covered trails in the winter.

Restrooms: Nearest restrooms are located 5 miles away in Kalkaska.

Prepared by Robert Lawshe

To tell us about your favorite patch, preferably a little-known, seldom-birded local spot, email the editor!

Piping Plover Report

This was a recording breaking year for the Great Lakes Piping Plover! Eighty unique pairs nested in the Great Lakes, with 167 chicks fledged (2.1 per nest average). *Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore* was home to 23 broods, with 56 chicks fledged.

- From Sleeping Bear Tour Company

Mark your calendars! Christmas Bird Counts are coming!

What better way to spend a day in December than counting birds? Want to participate in the field? Want to count at your feeder? Here are the dates and compiler contact info:

Antrim Co. – Dec. 15 (Friday), contact Curt Hofer at curthofer1@gmail.com.

Grand Traverse – Dec. 16 (Saturday), contact Nate Crane at nmcrane@gmail.com

Benzie Co. – Dec. 17 (Sunday), contact nedthebirder@gmail.com

Lake Leelanau CBC – Dec. 20 (Wednesday), contact Kirk Waterstripe at 4walkinglightly@gmail.com or (231)883-2858

Watch for more about Christmas Bird Counting in the November *Bird Notes*!

Be-a-Better-Birder Tip

Know what birds to expect in the areas you frequent. This will help sort what's most likely to be there from the unlikely. At the same time, know what's possible as far as rarities.

Editor's Perch

Bridges

Several years ago, I remember feeling uneasy when we started hearing about the TART trail's planned expansion around Boardman Lake. They wanted to bridge the cove to the west of Logan's Landing, and I think I pictured a bridge that barely cleared the water, low enough that a swan would have to duck (pun intended) to pass under it. Similarly, the Hartman-Hammond Road bypass came up recently, and a major point of concern was how the road would cross the Boardman River and its floodplain, an important corridor for wildlife in the river valley. Both these unknowns caused a great deal of consternation and rejection.

Fast-forward to August 2023. The TART bridge is in place, clearing the water by several feet. A swan can pass underneath without bowing its head. Walker and bicyclist traffic on the bridge is heavy at times, and tripods for spotting scopes get in the way. On the first bird walk of Fall 2023, the bridge provided amazing up-close views of a Stilt Sandpiper, a Green Heron, Chimney Swifts just above our heads, and the feeding behavior of Solitary Sandpipers. The bridge is truly a gift, affording us the chance to view birds (and the occasional Snapping Turtle) from above.

I was reminded of the many hours I spent as a young naturalist on the boardwalk at Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary in Florida. One of the best things that boardwalks do, I think, is to confine human traffic so the wildlife gets used to us and acclimates to our consistent behavior. At Corkscrew, herons perched on the boardwalk railing and tore apart their crayfish prey, snakes, otters and deer passed under, and, on one occasion, a Water Moccasin hung out on the forest floor just a few feet below us.

In addition to bringing people and wildlife together, bridges also bring people together. Disparate groups may find a link, a common interest, and use it as a tentative bridge. Our area is blessed with several groups of concerned citizens: the local land conservancies, SEEDS, NMEAC, FLOW, and others. I think it's time to extend hands to these organizations, find common interests, and get some work done. GTAC's monitoring of the Purple Martin house at the Botanic Garden is one small example. Let's come up with some others.

Do you have a conservation passion? A favorite place that's under threat of development? Are you moved to take action? Would you be willing to work with others on a Conservation Committee? This fall, I'm going to propose that the Board forms just such a committee, but it would be easier if there was a list of willing volunteers! We need monitors, Loraxes (read the book by Dr. Seuss), and bridge-builders. Let's see what we can accomplish, and what we can see from the new bridge that brings us together.

- Kirk

Membership Renewal Time is coming up! This year, you can renew with an online payment! Just download the [membership form](#) and use the PayPal option.

Fall Gardening for Birds (repeat from Sept. 2022, but it's worth remembering)

As summer wraps up, gardeners start putting their gardens to bed for the winter. Often, this involves cleaning up dead plants and applying mulch. Consider the following to help your local birds through the winter:

- Leave the dead plants standing. They provide overwintering places for insects, and therefore, bird food.
- Dead flowers from the composite family (black-eyed susans, sunflowers, daisies) are favorites for seed-eating birds.
- Leave the leaves! Left where they fall, leaves contribute to soil and provide more shelter for overwintering and larval insects.

In addition to not cleaning up your garden, consider building a brush pile. A nice big pile of limbs and branches provides cover from the cold winds, and a place to forage for seeds and ground-dwelling insects. Sparrows love them! It's a great place for your old Christmas tree.

Field Trip Reports

August 5, Houghton Lake Sewage Treatment Facility



On Saturday, August 5th, ten of us visited the Houghton Lake Sewage Ponds. The first pond yielded Wood Ducks and Mallards. We then convoyed to the adjacent mudflat just north of the pond and found a large congregation of shorebirds, including Semipalmated Sandpipers, Pectoral Sandpipers, and Killdeer among others. We then traversed to the second pond and on the way spied Belted Kingfishers as well as a Cedar Waxwing whose coloring in the sunlight was breathtakingly vibrant. At the second pond there were a variety of different ducks such as Common Goldeneye, American Wigeons, and Blue-winged Teal. We also saw Bonaparte's Gulls and several Trumpeter Swans. In addition, to our horror, astonishment, and fascination, we saw a Merlin pick off a swimming sandpiper.

On the way back up north, we stopped at the Houghton Lake Flats. There, we found several stands erected within the flats for Osprey and we were able to detect Ospreys on every single stand, including some juveniles. We also saw Wood Ducks there, a Green Heron, and several Barn Swallows. Fantastic trip with birding enthusiasts and will most likely repeat this trip in the future.

- Kathie Wiley, facilitator

Sunday Morning bird walks

We had a great start, with a rewarding morning at Logan's Landing. The geese were lifting off for their feeding grounds as we gathered, and we found several species of shorebirds. As the sun rose higher, more species made their appearance. We got to study the differences between swallows and swifts in flight and study a Stilt Sandpiper at close range. On the last Sunday of August, we spent the evening at Ellis Lake, where we had the chance to study a number of birds in silhouette as daylight faded. Every Sunday brings a surprise and a great time with friends. Hope to see you out there someday soon!

Bald Eagles vs. Golden Eagles

This time of year, Golden Eagle sightings become more likely, but young Bald Eagles are still mostly dark-colored. Both species migrate through Michigan, and immature (< 5 years old) Bald Eagles often show a mix of darker brown and whitish feathers as they age before they grow the well-known white head and tail, making them appear superficially similar to immature Golden Eagles. Here are some helpful identification tips for discerning between the two eagle species:

— Head size compared to tail length: Golden Eagles show a silhouette where the head appears noticeably smaller relative to the tail length. Meanwhile, Bald Eagles have a more proportional head size-to-tail length ratio. Even at a distance, the silhouette of a golden will show a noticeably smaller head relative to its tail length, while the bald will show a fairly noticeable head size in relation to its tail length.

— “Where is the white?”: Both immature Golden and Bald Eagles show a mix of darker brown and whitish body and flight feathers; however, in young goldens, these white feathers are restricted to the (1) base of the tail and (2) middle of the wing. If you see an eagle with white body feathers (especially in the armpits), this is an immature Bald Eagle.

— Wing Shape: The silhouette of a Golden Eagle wing “pinches” at the base (where it meets the body), causing a unique paddle-like shape to the wing profile. Meanwhile, Bald Eagle wing profiles appear more straight with less contour.

— “Ending on an upstroke”: Pay attention to the way the eagle flaps its wings. When Golden Eagles flap, they often end on the upstroke. While flight behavior can often change depending on a variety of conditions, this can often be a helpful tool when used along with others.

The Club needs you!

This club brings people together under the umbrella of our interest in birds and the natural world, but it's only as strong as the commitment of its members. Do you like this organization and its activities? Have you had an amazing experience on a field trip? Has the club brought you closer to other birders?

Then volunteer to be a leader! We're looking for people willing to serve on the Board for 2024. No experience necessary! Other Board members will help you.

Other ways to help:

Lead a field trip!

Bring snacks to a meeting!

Contribute to the Walter Hastings Fund (the money we use for conservation projects).

Membership?

Like what you're reading?
Consider joining the Club! More info is available at [Membership Information – Grand Traverse Audubon Club](#)

Spreadable Suet Reviews

Remember the recipe for homemade "suet"? The usual version was made with lard mixed with peanut butter and seeds, and was spread on pine cones or tree trunks. Oh, how far we've come. There are several products on the market that take the mess out of the process. Here are some reviews of popular brands:

[Ecobirder: Five Stars for Jim's Birdacious Bark Butter](#)

[Love at First Bite: Attracting Birds with Bark Butter | Nature Notes Blog](#)

[Amazon.com: Pine Tree Farms 9001 Tree Icing Suet Spread, 1.75-Pound : Grocery & Gourmet Food](#)

Spreadable products are a great way to diversify your food offerings. Try spreading some (with permission) on a tree you walk past every day. Consider doing this in your Christmas Bird Count territory for a couple of weeks before the count. It's a temporary feeding station.

Thanks for reading! Until the next issue, keep your binoculars clean!