

January 2024

Bird Notes

Newsletter of the Grand Traverse Audubon Club

grandtraverseaudubon.org

find us on Facebook and Instagram #gtaudubon

Editor: Kirk Waterstripe newsletter@grandtraverseaudubon.org

Happy New Year! What birding adventures are you dreaming of for 2024? What would you like the Club to offer this year?

On the Calendar

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

Jan. 25 – Monthly Meeting: Birding Adventures in Texas and Arizona

Club members Nate Crane and Matt Winkler will tell us all about their tremendous birding trip to Texas and SE Arizona. They will have plenty of stories and pictures to share.

IMPORTANT! The Board will present the budget for 2024 and you, the members, will vote on it. Please attend and make your voice heard!

Feb. 22 – Monthly Meeting: Wind Hill Farm and Bird Sanctuary

Dale Giddings of Wind Hill Farm and Bird Sanctuary in Wolverine, Michigan will explain about how he avoids using synthetic pesticides and fertilizers in his organic garden. Furthermore, he'll



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talk about the Upland Sandpipers on his farm, and his 30 nest boxes for Bluebirds and Tree Swallows.

Mar. 21 – Monthly Meeting: Waterfowl Identification

Scott Sneed will be discussing waterfowl identification and showing some of his amazing photographs. A great opportunity for anyone wanting to learn more about ducks, geese, swans, loons, and grebes.

Upcoming Field Trips

As of press time, we have no field trips planned for January or February. The long-time favorite trip to the eastern U.P. is not being offered this year.

Stay tuned for possible short-notice trips based on bird activity. Watch your email!

Christmas Bird Counts Results!

Lake Leelanau CBC – Dec. 20

It was a great year! We had 30 people participating, including five feeder-watchers. We put in a combined 59.5 hours by car, on foot, at feeders and by canoe. Together, we walked 31 miles. In all, we tallied 4903 individuals of 69 species. This breaks the old Lake Leelanau count record of 65 species. First records for the count: Black Scoter, Hermit Thrush.

New high counts:

Long-tailed Duck (168)

Red-shouldered Hawk (5)

Pileated Woodpecker (33)

American Robin (297; no longer a harbinger of spring?)

Gray Catbird (2)

White-winged Crossbill (91)

Pine Siskin (231)

Northern Cardinal (83)

- Kirk Waterstripe, Compiler

Birding Calendar

January

Watch for more winter finches and waxwings arriving. Check local harbors for uncommon gulls loafing with the usual Ring-billed and Herring Gulls. See if you can recognize individual Blue Jays.

February

The hours of daylight are getting longer. Chickadees are singing their *fee-bee* songs. Watch for courtship behaviors in the ducks that remain in areas with open water.

March

The early migrants like Red-winged Blackbirds arrive this month. Horned Larks and Snow Buntings are passing through, and the early raptors are on their way. Northern Saw-whet Owls are on their way north too.

Traverse City – Dec. 16

I made the list and checked it twice, the total on Count Day is an incredible 79 species. The previous record was 72 from last year. Count Day great birds:

Cackling Goose	Wild Turkey	Belted Kingfisher
Snow Goose	Red-shouldered Hawk	Winter Wren
Trumpeter Swan	Broad-winged Hawk	Northern Shrike
Tundra Swan	Wilson's Snipe	Northern Mockingbird
Northern Shoveler	Eurasian Collared-Dove	Gray Catbird
Green-winged Teal	Eastern Screech Owl	Snow Bunting
Long-tailed Duck	Great Horned Owl	Red-winged Blackbird
Canvasback	Belted Kingfisher	White-winged Crossbill
Red-necked Grebe	Red-headed Woodpecker	

Seen during Count Week:

Surf Scoter
Iceland Gull
Song Sparrow

Another big year that seems hard to replicate. However, there were many species missed compared to last year. Thank you to everyone who participated. Let's do it again next year!

- Nate Crane, Compiler

Be a Better Birder

Recently, I have witnessed the power of playback. Birds pop out of hiding at the sound of their own call notes. Chickadees and titmice swarm to pishing sounds. Owls make themselves known when confronted with a recorded rival. Playing recorded calls has been receiving lots of condemnation lately, but I would like to add some nuance.

In winter, when used minimally, I don't think playback or pishing distracts birds for more than a couple minutes. Birds quickly realize you are not a real threat and go back their business. When used for scientific purposes like censuses and the Christmas Bird Count, I think the information gained is worth the momentary disruption. On the Traverse City count, Gray Catbird, some American Tree Sparrows, and Eastern Screech-Owl would have gone undetected.

I would hesitate to use playback in the breeding season. The usual reasons for avoiding playback do apply. One of the few good reasons I can think of is to give new birders a look at a notoriously secretive species, like a Virginia Rail. I would play a call once or twice then give up if there is no response.

Next time you're tempted to use a recording, think carefully about it. Make sure the benefits outweigh the costs to your avian subject. If you're fairly certain the situation warrants it, pish away!

Editor's Perch

Checklists with no birds

Since the arrival of eBird in our birding lives, we've all been tempted to make a choice: to start the checklist or not. I'll freely admit that some days, I just don't feel like counting, so I don't keep a checklist. eBird has made it very easy to play the listing game, and it's tempting to skip the checklist if no new birds are likely to be added to your list(s). Once again, I'm here to make a plea for the science, and the scientists who use the data you provide.

The data we submit are used to spot trends in bird populations, so we are the front-line observers. We are the ones whose general impressions are confirmed or denied by the data we submit. Are we seeing fewer Wild Turkeys? House Sparrows? Birds in general? The checklists we enter on our adventures provide the means to say whether these impressions are real or not.

Consider this issue from the scientists' point of view. Are there fewer checklists being reported because there are fewer birds, or have the birders all taken second jobs and have no time for birding? By continuing to submit checklists, even with fewer birds, we show that we're maintaining our level of effort, and that the decline in species or numbers reported may be real.

Next time you're tempted to skip the checklist because there are so few birds, or you won't add anything to your list, resist! Hit that button and start a list! Entries with few or no birds have tremendous value to the scientists working behind the scenes to figure out population trends. Give it a reasonable effort, and if you only see a few starlings, report that. In the long term, the birds will thank you!

- Kirk W.

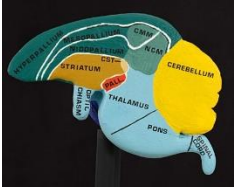
ID Corner: Crows and ravens

In the depths of winter, it may seem that corvids (crows, ravens and jays) are the only birds around. Here are a few tips for separating the two species:

When perched or on the ground, ravens are massive birds with thick bills. They might seem nearly twice the size of a crow. You might see both species together around a roadkill.

In flight, notice that a crow's tail feathers are all the same length, giving the tail the appearance of a fan. Ravens' central tail feathers are longest, and get progressively shorter toward the outside, giving their tails a more pointed, or diamond-like shape.

Notice that crows move their wings in little circles when flapping, as if they are rowing (“crows row”). Ravens flap up and down, without this forward motion. Ravens are more likely to soar, too. Also, with their larger bills and longer tail feathers, ravens appear more pointed in front and back when flying.



Bird Brains - Pellets

Pellets! You're all familiar with owls' habit of coughing up a pellet after they eat. Maybe you've found one! Did you know this practice is found in hawks, falcons, eagles, grebes, jays, herons, cormorants, shrikes, swallows, shorebirds, gulls, terns, kingfishers, and crows? Pellets contain undigestible parts of prey like exoskeletons of insects, bones, bills, fur, feathers, and scales. They are formed in the bird's gizzard, the muscular organ that grinds up the food. The pellets are regurgitated about 6-12 hours after the meal.

Pellets have been used to characterize prey species in a given area over time. These data are from a study of Barn Owl pellets in Florida. Owl pellets found in caves on islands in the South Pacific have been used to get a picture of the indigenous bird and mammal communities that existed before the arrival of non-native rats.

To find pellets, from owls at least, find a roosting area, such as a stand of conifers. If you do find one of these grayish lumps and wish to dissect it, be aware that they may contain rodent viruses and bacteria. If you would like to sterilize the pellet, you know someone with access to an autoclave!

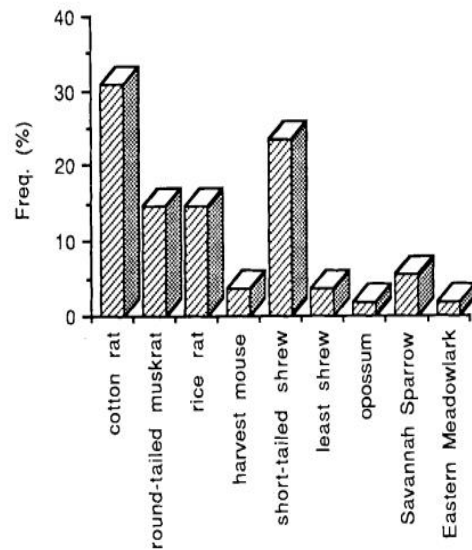
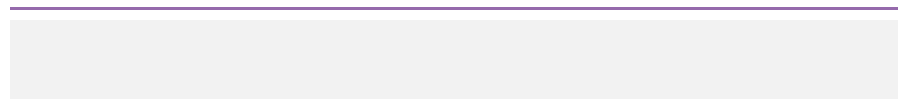


Figure 1. Percent composition of Barn Owl pellets by prey species.

Still time to renew your membership!

If you haven't renewed, here's the [link](#) to the form! Remember, you can send in a check, or you can renew using PayPal! Keep your access to the BirdAlert emails and this awesome newsletter! We'd hate to lose you!



Meet the new board members!

John Imboden (pronounced im-BO-den) - President

After finishing grad school in 1985 at The Ohio State University, I embarked on a career in investment management specializing first in commercial real estate then in U.S. stocks. Upon retiring in 2013, my wife and I moved to Leelanau County. I started birding in high school but didn't really have much time for it again until retirement so I would call myself an experienced beginner.

Tom Comfort – Mich. Audubon Society Liaison

My wife, Peg, and I have been life-long residents of Antrim County. We have been active participants in water quality preservation, water-shed preservation, natural area preservation, and numerous community involvements throughout Antrim County.

My birding knowledge has been very limited and mostly focused on the Common Loon and the Eastern Bluebird. Our preservation activities over many years have involved secure nesting opportunities, preservation of nesting sites, and extensive monitoring for these and cavity nesting birds (including Chickadees, Tree Swallows and American Kestrels).

I am currently a life-member of MI, Mn, and Nebraska Bluebird Societies. I have served on the boards of the North American Bluebird Society and the Michigan Audubon Society. I am currently a member of five chapters of the Mi. Audubon Society to share the knowledge and experiences of these other groups with the GTAC members, as the Club Liaison.

I am looking forward to learning from the vast knowledge of so many experienced GTAC members to help me learn more about the many birds we enjoy in our region.

What's ahead in 2024?

Here's a look at some things the Board is working on for 2024:

- Sunday Morning Bird Walks will be back!
- Outreach at the TADL Makerfest in April
- A breeding bird survey on Power Island in Grand Traverse Bay
- Friday evening trips for American Woodcock and Whip-poor-wills
- A Bird-a-thon fundraiser for donations to MI Young Birders Camp?
- Hawk-watching and other birding near Detroit?
- Bird banding demonstration?

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