

GRAND RAPIDS AUDUBON CLUB



the **CALLER**

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January 2023, Volume 61, No. 5 | GRAUD.org



Snowy Owl

Photo By: Doug Kelley, via Unsplash.com

NOVEMBER MEETING DETAILS

Monday, January 30 | 7:30PM | John Donnelly Conference Center, Aquinas College

Blandford Nature Center | *Wildlife Ambassador Road Show*

Enjoy Michigan wildlife? This family-friendly and free program is perfect for all animal lovers, with a close-up and educational look at a small selection of Blandford's Wildlife Ambassadors. Learn all about these non-releasable animals, why they were brought to Blandford and why they can no longer survive in the wild. Bring your curiosity and your camera/smartphone (absolutely no flash, though, please!). Because this program includes a variety of wild animal friends, we ask that you please arrive prepared to offer a quiet and calm environment for our special visitors, and adhere to all of Blandford staff's requests and recommendations. The program will begin promptly at 7:30 p.m. and we will share club announcements and business at the conclusion of the program.

A Note from the Club President | *Tricia Boot Vice President, acting President*

For 2023, I'm challenging myself to do more when it comes to birding. More species logged in eBird (my friend and I have an annual competition to see who can get the most, and I'm determined to maintain my crown). More birding knowledge (I've enrolled in two Cornell Lab Bird Academy online courses with the hopes of improving my warbler and hawk/raptor ID skills). More hours spent in the field (I'll carve out time for Grand Rapids Audubon Club field trips!).

Likewise, I've committed to the idea that this will finally be the year I participate in GRAC's annual Birdathon, a good-natured competition that also raises funds for the club.

If you've similarly resolved to spend more time engaged in an activity you love, consider some of the many ways you can be involved with GRAC. Opportunities abound, with new activities regularly added to the mix. In addition to our aforementioned field trips and Birdathon, consider bringing a friend or neighbor to a monthly membership meeting, writing an article for *the Caller* or joining a committee.

Another impactful, low-commitment and fun way to be involved is to become a GRAC ambassador. This informal new group includes members who have an interest in community outreach by way of leading walks, talks or other "appearances" on behalf of the club. Birding exploded in popularity during the pandemic, and the interest doesn't seem to be waning (a steady increase in attendance for each of our fall meetings has been a testament to that!).

With the expanded audience have come numerous requests from local organizations and businesses for GRAC members who can lend their skills to beginner-friendly events and activities for fledging birders. Examples could include speaking for 20 minutes about Michigan backyard birds at a bird-focused event at a local library, or leading a group of new birders on a short walk at an event at a nature center. Don't consider yourself a birding "expert"? No problem! Ambassadors of all skill levels are welcome; we'll ensure we match the right person with the right opportunity.

These public appearances are a great way to foster connections with our communities and encourage a love and interest in birds and the natural world. Plus, it's time spent looking at and/or talking about birds. What's not to like? This also is a low demand way to engage with the club; simply throw your name in the pool, and respond (and commit) only to opportunities that work for you. If this sounds up your alley, send me an email (vice.president@graud.org) with your name, contact information, general availability and whether you'd be interested in talks, walks or both. Or, if you are intrigued but have questions, feel free to reach out and we can chat.

I look forward to seeing what the year brings for all of us. Happy birding!

Club Bylaw Revision

The GRAC board is currently reviewing our club bylaws -last updated in January 2013- for opportunities to simplify and modernize the guidelines for operating the club. This includes removing/restructuring certain club positions and examining our processes. Once completed, the proposed refreshed bylaws will be presented to the membership for a vote of approval. Thank you to Jeff Neumann for leading this important work.

Audubon Great Lakes Affiliation Vote

Audubon Great Lakes recently shared information about becoming an officially registered club with the National Audubon Society. The board believes that confirming this affiliation will bring a wealth of resources and opportunities for the Grand Rapids Audubon Club. At the January meeting, we will present the information that was provided to us, and take a vote on the matter. Please be in attendance if you are interested in learning more.



Above: "Roger Tory Peterson, ca. 1925" | Image courtesy of the Estate of Roger Tory Peterson and the Roger Tory Peterson Institute



Right: Roger Tory Peterson (1908-1996), Snowy Owls, 1976, watercolor and gouache, 97.13 | © Estate of Roger Tory Peterson. Used by permission, courtesy of the Roger Tory Peterson Institute

Peterson: Father of the Modern Field Guide | Cynthia Maas

Before the arrival of modern binoculars, scopes and field guides, the study of watching birds was in its infancy. Humans used a shotgun approach - literally. Famous ornithologist John James Audubon was the first European to document many bird species in North America in the early 1800s. If he came across an unfamiliar bird, he would shoot the bird and then study it in depth by creating detailed illustrations of the species. This method of bird study was not a sustainable one, and continued as a norm until the early 1900s. In 1934, the first publication of *A Field Guide to the Birds* by Roger Tory Peterson changed the approach to birdwatching. By displaying key markings on the plumage of each species and introducing a classification system, his field guide enabled people to observe and identify the birds they were seeing - without damaging the population.

As father of the modern field guide, Peterson's curiosity and passion for both nature and art blended to literally change the approach to the hobby of birdwatching. Suddenly, it was accessible to identify birds and garner more interest for the growing hobby. His detailed illustrations were not the only contribution to the field, Peterson also spent a lifetime painting, filming, documenting and photographing birds and flora from all around the world.

An incredible career with the Audubon Society gave Peterson the opportunity to dedicate his life to his work with birding and conservation. His regular magazine columns, extensive world travels, and experience in the field placed him at the forefront of conservation issues of his time. The art and energy within the field sparked a popular, international environmental consciousness movement. His work went far beyond art, as he was never afraid to be outspoken about challenges as well, like habitat loss and the devastating impacts of pesticides. Confronting these widespread issues opened the door for everyday people to respond with educational outreach programs and even legislation.

Enhancing one's own perceptual skills through a field guide is simply the most straightforward way to learn more. Birding is, on some level, a self-taught skill. Peterson's many versions of *A Field Guide to the Birds* are a testament to the evolution of study within the field, but also present information in a digestible way. As technology evolves, field guides can now be accessed at the touch of a button. Everyone can be in tune with the natural world around them, and Peterson's legacy is testament to a lifetime of learning, observation, and conservation.

To learn more about the impactful life, work, and legacy of Roger Tory Peterson, visit the Roger Tory Peterson Institute online at www.rtpi.org.

Conservation Corner | Spencer High

The Foraging Four

The winter solstice brought with it a terribly cold stretch of days with inches (if not feet) of snow blanketing everything as far as the eye could see. It was a wonderful time to stay indoors, curled up next to the fire and not think about going outside... unless you're like me, and had to do a bit of necessary shoveling to save your back from aching hours later.

During these storms it seems like the entire world retreats indoors. Silence reigned supreme, and the only sound I heard was surprisingly... birds. As I wrapped up the latest hourly driveway clearing, I was astonished to see a 10 member mixed flock of birds foraging amongst the black walnut tree behind my garage. Upon examination however, I was not surprised to see that it was 'The Foraging Four' which consisted of five black-capped chickadees, one hairy woodpecker, two tufted titmice and two white-breasted nuthatches. This is a common scene in my backyard, but with all of the snow and a wind chill below zero, I would've expected them to be nestled in a roost trying to stay warm.

Up and down the tree they went - hop, flutter, stop, peck, eat, repeat. Within a matter of minutes, they had the whole tree cleared and were gone. Each of these bird species are known to cache seeds for later, but I watched several of these birds pull little insects out from between the cracks of bark. We often don't think of insects as being a popular winter meal, but insects will hide among bark and leaves, waiting for warmer days and the continuation of their life cycle. Many of our insects have developed the ability to produce alcohol within their bodies which acts as a type of antifreeze and allows them to enter diapause, the scientific term for insect hibernation. These hidden insects provide an excellent food source for many of our wildlife species all winter long; and if you're a bird foraging during a winter storm, you're going to want a nutritious meal. While I put away the shovel I was left wondering, why do they bother doing this as a mixed-species flock?

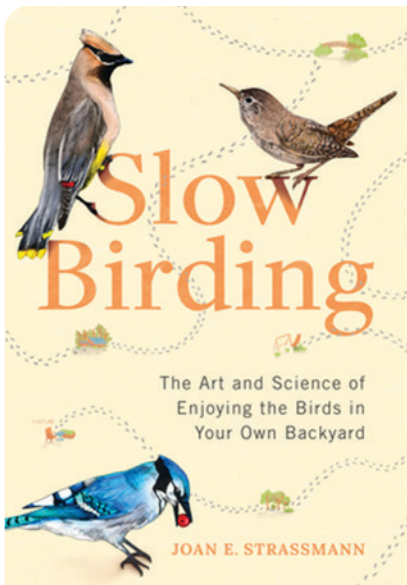
To answer this, let's take a quick tangent to the sunny African Serengeti. Mixed groups of mammals are extremely common there, and it's expected to see large herds of zebras, wildebeest and giraffes. These groups form such large groups as they know there is power in numbers to both find food and avoid potential predation at any moment. The more eyes you have looking for danger, the greater the odds that you're going to see it coming. Within these groups, each has its own unique advantages to offer the herd. Giraffes have excellent vision, and a uniquely high vantage point to see approaching predators across large distances. Wildebeest, which have terrible eyesight, sport a very sensitive sense of smell and hearing. Zebras have their herd-friendly camouflage, eyesight which is as good during the night as it is during the day, and a loud enough voice to announce everything to everyone. Each of these species work together to ensure that everyone can find a meal without expending more energy than they take in.

This same principle is exactly how the mixed flocks in our backyard are operating. While in mixed flocks, I've watched the nuthatches, which have the unique ability to walk face-first down tree bark, begin at the top of the tree keeping one eye on the ground for threats. The woodpeckers, who can only point upwards, begin near the base of the tree and keep an eye towards the sky for cooper's or sharp shinned hawks. Black-capped chickadees work through the outer branches, and their quick nature offers a persistent perimeter check. Meanwhile, tufted titmice act as the worry-warts of the group, and will alert everyone at the slightest threat that something is awry. Studies have shown that when titmice are removed from one of these flocks, the other species are much less willing to visit feeders and other exposed sources of food. Think of the titmice as the head of security within these groups.

However, their cooperation doesn't end there! All of these species are cavity nesters, and when it gets extremely cold out at night, many members of these species will communally roost together in hollow openings of dead trees and through their shared body heat, warm their roost up to 40 degrees Fahrenheit above the external temperature.

This relationship is one of my favorites to see in nature. These birds weigh less than the phone in my pocket, yet show up on our feeders all winter long, working together as a community.

Winter may be a good time to isolate yourself; but remember that, like the foraging four, you can't do everything yourself. Take some time to appreciate your own little flock today. Supporting your family, friends, and community is a great way to pass the time during these cold Michigan winters.



Slow Birding, The Art and Science of Enjoying Birds in Your Own Backyard

A review, by Emily Tornga

Joan E. Strassmann's new book *Slow Birding* is about the simple joy of observing birds that are nearest to us and is filled with fascinating science of why birds do the things they do. Did you know that American Robins find worms by sound? Or how they even do that? Or that female Juncos with more white on their tails produce more sons? Each chapter is dedicated to a common bird species that Joan observes near her St. Louis home, like Northern Cardinals, Starlings, and Cedar Waxwings. She ends each chapter with a helpful list of tips and tricks to get you started on your slow birding journey.

In a world of birding that sometimes feels obsessed with the next bird to check off a list or what rare vagrant has shown up at the local park, *Slow Birding* is an excellent counterbalance, showing us how to stop and simply appreciate all the abundance birding has to offer right in our own backyards.

Slaty-backed Gull Visiting the Muskegon Wastewater

Carol VanOeveren

On November 21, 2022 Alec Olivier and Morgan Waller discovered an adult Slaty-backed Gull amongst other gulls on the ice at Muskegon Wastewater's east lagoon near the landfill. The rarity drew many observers and hung around through at least December 13. The bird relocated for a time in and around the aeration tank area north of the lagoons on November 27.

Visit <https://ebird.org/checklist/S122806315> to view Morgan's checklist with photos taken by Alec.

Visit <https://ebird.org/checklist/S122884691> to view more photos by Tori Martel.

Visit <https://ebird.org/checklist/S123100543> to view close-up photos obtained by Daryl Bernard on November 27 at aeration tank area. Michael Boston also observed a Slaty-backed here on April 19, 2017.

Visit http://graud.org/rare_birds.html and scroll down to read about all twelve mega-rarity sightings in the four-county area in 2022.

Become a Citizen Scientist and take part in National Audubon's Climate Watch Survey

Understanding how birds are responding to climate change is essential to protecting them. We need your help to do just that by counting and documenting how their ranges are shifting. Audubon's Climate Watch program contributes to scientific analysis by providing vital data on how birds are faring with climate change. The more information we have on birds across the country, the better prepared we will be to help them.

Check out www.Audubon.org/conservation/climate-watch to learn how the work of Climate Watch volunteers is helping to reveal how birds are responding to climate change.

If you have previously participated in Climate Watch, THANK YOU! We value your time and help in this important effort. The program has been growing steadily. If you are new to Climate Watch, please join us.

Save the dates of the winter survey period taking place between January 15 - February 15, 2023 and help us count bluebirds, nuthatches or goldfinches.

Your participation would require one to two mornings of your time within the 30 day window, understanding how to use eBird is helpful but not a requirement.

You can find out more about the program by contacting Becky Kuhn at bexrecky@gmail.com, or phone (please leave a voicemail) or text 616-437-9205.



White-breasted Nuthatch

Photo By: Patrice Bouchard, via Unsplash.com

Bird Word Search | Mary Austin

E L I A U Q I U Y K D R A L L A M Z D H F Q L
L O U L O O N U C F L W O J N I B O R C K D N
H V W A D X E R E K C E P D O O W T J H C R P
A C F A W O R R A P S B G R B E Z O C E U I S
W R S L R A W L B V G E J M L C M O B R D B W
K O Z T I B X E G R E T U T U E A C C O D T A
P W X V T C L W F A A G N I E H A R Q N O A L
Q L L U G F K E I I J O C T B T Q G D F O C L
G G R A C K L E R N O O O M I Z D S L I W T O
N U T H A T C H R H G S G O R D A P C E N Z W
N P I G E O N R H H K E A U D U O A Z A L A Z
S T A R L I N G G P H E A S A N T V E L U D L
G O L D E N E Y E C R A N E Q Y I H E Z E P X
T H O B K R X S W A N H D A E H E L F F U B P
N G R O U S E E E D A K C I H C F I N C H M S
P F P N V U B L U E J A Y S I B I E H W H B Q

Find the following words in the puzzle. Words are hidden up, down, forward, backward, and diagonally.

BLUEBIRD
BLUEJAY
BUFFLEHEAD
CARDINAL
CATBIRD
CHICKADEE
COOT
CRANE
CROW
DOVE
EAGLE

EGRET
FINCH
FLICKER
GOLDENEYE
GOOSE
GRACKLE
GROUSE
GULL
HAWK
HERON
IBIS

JUNCO
LOON
MALLARD
NUTHATCH
OWL
PHEASANT
PIGEON
QUAIL
ROBIN
SCAUP
SPARROW

STARLING
SWALLOW
SWAN
TITMOUSE
WARBLER
WAXWING
WOODDUCK
WOODPECKER
WREN


Snowy Owl

This month's featured feathered friend is the Snowy Owl (*Bubo scandiacus*). First things first - let's talk birding ethics. The American Birding Association's code of ethics reminds us that birding should "help build a better future for birds." When it comes to owls, best practice is to simply do all you can to ensure they are unaware of your presence. If that means you don't see the bird, please be okay with that. If we aren't birding for the love of birds, what are we birding for? NEVER use audio playback or bait them with food to lure them in. Owls spend essentially all of their waking hours hunting just to stay alive, particularly in winter when prey is scarce - and to do this, they stay in one place for extended periods of time, unlike hawks, eagles, etc., which are constantly on the move. Any disturbance can cause these highly sensitive birds to miss a meal and put its life at risk.

Fortunately, we have ample opportunities here in West Michigan to view Snowy Owls from a respectful distance! They can be found in sprawling open natural areas such as coastlines and prairies, or similar artificially cleared landscapes like airports and agricultural fields. Plus, Snowies are diurnal (active during daylight), unlike most other owls, making them that much easier to spot from afar. It may be tedious, but I'd suggest checking every pile of snow or plastic bag in a farm field to make sure it's not actually a Snowy. While a snow pile or plastic bag is (sadly) much more likely, if you don't take a closer look, you'll always wonder...what if?

Snowy Owls are an irruptive species; that is, some years there are much larger migrations than normal, resulting in sightings much further south than usual. These irruptions were once thought to be due to scarcity of food in the Arctic in a given winter, but it turns out they are caused by an abundance of food in the previous summer, causing a Snowy Baby Boom. This stat and potential explanation blew my mind - the southernmost record of a Snowy was in Hawaii in 2011, and per Cornell's Birds of the World, "as the species is known to board ships at sea, it seems logical to conclude it used ships as a stopover during this journey." Imagine being on that boat!

Identifying Snowy Owls

FEMALE	MALE
both sexes have bright yellow eyes	
	
white base with dark barring which covers most of the body besides the head	can be a range from pure to mostly white with slight dark spotting

Illustrations by Spencer High

Description:

Snowy Owls are the largest owl in North America by weight. The males are almost pure white, and the females have darker barring throughout their body. Both sexes have bright yellow eyes

Habitat:

Summers in the arctic tundra and migrates south in the winter. Can be found in wide open agricultural fields, airports, and other areas which have similar traits to that of the tundra.

Best Time to See:

These owls are rare, but have been reported from December to early March.

Best Place to See:

Gerald R. Ford International Airport
Muskegon Wastewater Treatment Plant

ID Tips & Tricks

- Can be confused with a plastic bag.
- While females and young males have brown/black barring, it is the only mostly white (or all white) owl.
- Seen from underneath, male Short-Eared Owls (which occupy the same type of habitat) could potentially be mistaken for Snowies. Make sure to get a good look at the face - Snowy Owls do not have the high-contrast facial disk that Short-Eared Owls do.

I can't stress enough the importance of leaving Snowy Owls (and all owls) plenty of space. They are uniquely susceptible to disturbance by humans. However, if you have the opportunity to responsibly view one, it is a magical experience. They are beautiful birds; graceful and fierce, with stunning white and brown-black plumage and piercing golden eyes. Use binoculars, a spotting scope, or a super telephoto lens. And always make sure it's not a plastic bag.

UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

Millenium Park Birding Hikes | Led By: Katie Bolt, Jeanne Griffin or Kathy Haase

Hike Millennium Park to see what's hanging around. Flat 2.0 or 3.0 mile loops are planned to see whatever might show up. Many birds have been reported from this varied habitat near the river. There are ponds, swampy ponds, lowland forest and various secondary growth. This can lead to a good variety of birds. Please dress for the expected weather conditions.

January 12, 19, 26 | 9:00AM | Meet at the end of the dead-end section of Veterans Memorial Drive

Winter Field Birding | Led By: Steve Minard

This is planned as a winter trip to search for winter birds such as Snowy Owl, Northern Shrike and Snow Bunting. These can be quite nomadic and hard to find, so we'll try to cover lots of territory to look for them. We'll search fields in northern Ottawa County and Muskegon County northwest of Grand Rapids. We'll probably check some of the Crockery Creek bottom lands looking for Red-shouldered Hawk. If conditions permit, we'll try to include the Muskegon Wastewater in our search. Expect to spend most of the time in the car searching the fields for anything different. Birders of all skills are welcome.

Saturday, January 21 | 8:00 AM | Meet at the Boy Scout Headquarters west off Walker Road just north of I-96

Note: Come prepared for cold weather. You may want a snack to hold you over until lunch.

For additional information about these trips, please visit graud.org/field_trips.html

FOLLOW THE GRAND RAPIDS AUDUBON CLUB ON SOCIAL MEDIA!

Follow our feed for the latest news in and around Grand Rapids about birdwatching, the conservation community, and events to attend. Tag @grandrapidsaudubonclub in your outdoor discoveries and let us know what you see outside!



@GRANDRAPIDSAUDUBONCLUB

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5 officers + 4 elected board members

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Special Events - OPEN

Website - Fred VanOeveren

MISSION

The Grand Rapids Audubon Club brings together people who enjoy nature, especially wild birds.

We seek to protect and improve our natural environment and to advance nature education throughout West Michigan.

CONTACT

Website: graud.org

General Inquiries:

information@graud.org

Membership: membership@graud.org

Caller Editor: newsletter@graud.org

INTERESTED IN SERVING ON THE BOARD OR HELPING ON A COMMITTEE?

Contact Tricia Boot:

president@graud.org