

GRAND RAPIDS AUDUBON CLUB



the **CALLER**

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Bufflehead

Photo By: Mallery Webb

NOVEMBER MEETING DETAILS

Monday, November 28 | 7:30PM | John Donnelly Conference Center, Aquinas College

Steve Jessmore | *Birds Doing Stuff*

Join us for an enlightening, entertaining and visually stunning presentation from photographer and nature lover Steve Jessmore. Steve will share his story of being a “total bird novice,” his new-found passion of mixing his photojournalism/art/quest for professional growth to photograph “Birds Doing Stuff” and his recent and ongoing Reeds Lake Project. This will be an open dialogue with lots of opportunity to engage with the speaker.

Steve Jessmore, of Grand Rapids, MI, has been a photographer his entire career as a 35-year photojournalist working as chief photographer/Director of Photography for the Flint Journal, The Saginaw News and the Myrtle Beach Sun News. He’s won numerous Michigan, national and international photojournalism awards and has been named a five-time Michigan Photographer of the Year and Robert F. Kennedy Photojournalism awardee. He also was staff photographer for his alma mater Central Michigan University for five years.

In August 2018 Jessmore stepped away from Central Michigan University, got married and moved to Grand Rapids. He began freelancing for colleges and universities across Michigan. When his freelance work was put on hold in 2020 due to COVID-19, he struggled to stay busy, be constructive with his time and learn something new to improve his photography. That experiment led him on a path to becoming an avid outdoor photographer with a love for all wildlife-but especially birds. In 2021, two of his bird images swept the professional division of the national 2021 Audubon Photography contest, winning 1st and HM. He won another first place- The Fisher Prize for the most creative approach to photographing birds in the national contest in 2022 and one of his images graced the cover of the Audubon’s summer awards issue.

The public is invited to attend this interesting program as a guest of the Grand Rapids Audubon Club. There is no charge for admission.

In Memorium: Scott Hutchings

Adapted from MLive.com

Grand Rapids Audubon Club president Scott Hutchings passed away on October 1 at age 66. A man of many interests and talents, Scott served several terms as president and in numerous other leadership and service roles for the club in the last decade. Many will remember Scott for his upbeat attitude and willingness to pitch in and help with any club project that arose. He was particularly fond of the club’s annual spring fundraiser, the Birdathon, and also enjoyed leading field trips on occasion.

Born May 25, 1956, in Berrien Springs, Michigan, Scott lived and graduated from Berrien Springs High School. Scott graduated from Grand Valley State with a B.S. degree in Creative Writing. Scott met Lori Henry in college, fell in love, and got married on Aug. 29, 1981. Scott worked at various bookstores before finding his niche at Barnes & Noble. He worked there for 21 years, ending his career as an assistant manager. One of Scott’s passions in life was bird watching. He joined GRAC and served as president for three years. After retirement, he worked part-time at John Ball Zoo in food service. He was a member of Neoacacia Masonic Lodge #595, F.&A.M., of Columbus, Ohio, along with Peninsular Chapter #65 O.E.S. Scott was also a member of First (Park) Congregational Church, UCC in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He enjoyed reading, writing fiction, hiking, swimming, camping, canoeing, watching movies, scuba diving, and playing Dungeons & Dragons.

A memorial service was held on Oct. 10 at Matthyse Kuiper DeGraaf Funeral Home in Grandville. Those who wish may make memorial contributions to the GRAC in his memory; funds will be used for a memorial project or tribute that aligns with Scott’s love of the natural world.



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

Perfect is the enemy of good. While usually reserved for deeper philosophical discussions, the phrase is apt when considering a pursuit such as birding.

With nearly 11,000 bird species in the world--not to mention 800-plus in the United States alone, and more than 450 just in Michigan--you'll never run out of new things to see, hear or discover. You'll also probably never stop making (and, ideally, learning from) little mistakes or oversights. Sometimes, when I'm having a particularly difficult time identifying a "little brown job" and feeling a bit like a failure, I remember a story from a friend who is an accomplished ornithologist and published professor. Years ago, she was out on a research trip when she spotted a group of interesting birds perched on an electrical line across the field. After nearly an hour of consulting her binoculars and several field guides she finally realized the fascinating new species were ... starlings. And really, who among us birders hasn't been tricked by snags, leaves, branches or the occasional plastic bag? I can't count how many times I've been certain I've had a new lifer on my hands, only to realize I'm tracking a poorly-lit red-tailed hawk or an immature robin (seriously; how many times must I be humbled by that particular one?).

When people ask me what's the most important thing to have in order to be a good birder, I don't think about expensive optics, a passport or professional-level skill. Instead, I'd point to qualities such as patience, curiosity, a sense of humor and a healthy dose of humility.

Each of us has something to learn or improve (and usually, I'm reminded of how far I have to go when the fall warblers move through). It's what first drew me to the Grand Rapids Audubon Club; an opportunity to absorb knowledge from like-minded folks. Field trips, the Christmas Bird Count, the Caller, website, monthly nature programs and even just casual post-meeting conversations are all great opportunities to pick up and share information and build our own birding knowledge bases. Here's to never expecting perfection, but to never stop striving for good. Or at least, "good enough."

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!



Short-eared Owl

Kent County Christmas Count

Saturday, December 31, 2022

Led By: Tom Leggett

Join us for the annual Kent County Christmas Count. Birders of all skills are needed to help us cover our 15-mile circle. This combines fun winter birding with the biggest and oldest citizen science event. Watch the Grand Rapids Audubon Club Facebook and website for details, including our meeting place. Plan to be out in your area by sunrise.

Prepare for cold weather and slippery, snow-covered roads. Watch website for details.

Note: You may want to bring a snack and beverage along to keep you going during the day.

Apply today for the Harry F. Stiles Memorial Scholarship

The Harry F. Stiles Memorial Scholarship is named in honor of Harry F. Stiles, an individual who loved the out-of-doors. Mr. Stiles was an expert photographer and in his retirement devoted his time to the study of nature in Michigan. As Grand Rapids Audubon Club (GRAC) Board President from 1954 to 1955, he established the scholarship with enrollment to the National Audubon Camps in mind.

GRAC continues to award a scholarship in keeping with the ideals advocated by Mr. Stiles. The scholarship is awarded to promote and support nature-related educational opportunities. The scholarship is awarded for up to \$200.00 for an award period. There are two award periods in a fiscal year: 7/1 - 12/31 and 1/1 - 6/30. If a \$200.00 scholarship is not awarded for the first period, up to a \$400.00 scholarship can be awarded for the second award period.

The scholarship is to be used for enrollment in environmental, biology, or science/nature programs, workshops, or courses. Individuals of all ages are encouraged to apply. When more than one adult is being considered for a scholarship, first priority is given to GRAC members.

Scholarship recipients are asked to provide a summary of their nature program, workshop, or course experience in a 15-minute talk at a general membership meeting, article for the Caller newsletter, or other sharing of the experience that is determined appropriate by the Scholarship Committee Chairperson.

More details and applications can be found online at GRAUD.org. For questions, please contact Katie Bolt at ksbphd51@gmail.com.



Conservation Corner | Spencer High

Leave the Leaves

Fall is officially here. My yard is covered in Sycamore, Walnut, Cottonwood, and Redbud leaves. The oak trees are still holding onto their fiery red, but most of my neighborhood has once again unveiled its woody skeleton. My garden has gone dormant, returning its energy back into its root systems, and everything but a few fall Asters have fully gone to seed. This cycle is one of my favorites to look at in nature. It's one of the first ways that we here in Michigan learn about the change of seasons, and I'm sure that I'm not the only one with fond memories of raking the leaves and jumping into them in my youth. It's familiar. It's comforting.

But what does the forest have to say about this cycle? From a trees perspective, they have spent 8 months absorbing nutrients from the soil beneath them and pumping that energy into their crowns producing new woody growth, unfurling their leaves, pollinating their flowers, producing seeds, and have allowed millions of other creatures to share in the soil's bounty. In a deciduous tree's economy, leaves are expensive. They are packed with water and complex cells which are extremely good at absorbing sunlight and converting that into the life-giving energy it needs to grow, but require a lot of energy to keep alive. However, now that the earth has tilted on its axis, and the sun is below the equator, these appendages aren't nearly as efficient for the trees. Due to the drop in sunlight available during the day, and the drop in temperature, it is best to let bygones be bygones and return their energy back into the more well protected woody structure of the plant.

As this self-preservation ritual takes place, water and nutrients are pulled out of the leaves. This causes the chlorophyll to slow production and die, which unmasks the carotenoids and anthocyanin that are present in the leaf, and the forest shows its painterly colors once again. After everything the tree needs to stay alive through winter is removed from the leaves, they part ways with summer and drop the leaves at their feet. These leaves, although they may appear dry and dead, are still packed full of nutrients that had been in the soil right beneath them in the spring. The tree is taking part in the process of giving back to the land, and allowing the earth to reabsorb all of the nutrients which they had selfishly taken over the growing season.

I remember one fall, I had spent hours raking the biggest leaf pile imaginable. Excitedly, I leapt into the dried bed only to emerge with several woolly bear caterpillars climbing on my jacket! That's because when these leaves fall on the forest floor (or our yards) they become a new layer in an even more complex ecosystem. Some of the creatures which live on the forest floor are year-round residents, and others are passers-by only staying for the winter. The decomposing micro-invertebrates, grubs and insects, which live there all year, help break down dead plant and animal material and turn it into rich humus. This substrate holds a large amount of moisture, and helps the seeds within it germinate and take hold when spring arrives.

Others, like the woolly bears I found, are just there for a season. After spending several weeks growing up in the canopy and feeding on leaves from the trees, these caterpillars will descend down to the forest floor and spend many months in their cocoons among the leaf litter. The leaves provide enough insulation so they don't freeze, but also provide a safe hiding place where they can avoid being eaten by foraging birds and mammals. When spring arrives, they will emerge as adult moths and begin the process of birthing a new generation.

But insects are not the only ones who are taking advantage of this safe and warm blanket in the forest. Voles, who don't hibernate, will build extensive tunnel networks throughout the leaves, and use them as a way to navigate safely from their nests to varying sources of food. These voles will remain safely hidden beneath the snow, and continue to produce litters of young throughout the winter months up until a keen-hearing fox or owl can pinpoint their location and make a meal out of them. Other predators, like birds, will kick up the leaves and try to disturb insects out of their hiding spots. One of my favorites to watch is the Eastern Towhee, whose jumping and wing-flicks look like it's practicing an elaborate dance. But when the snow is too deep, many of these birds can be found foraging among the dead plant stems of wildflowers, searching for any leftover seeds, or cold-tolerant insects hidden among them.

The cycle of plants preparing for winter is the very foundation of forest regeneration and soil health in temperate climates. Without these plants returning the nutrients they used all summer back into the land, the system is broken. The leaves, dead stems from flowers, and leftover seed heads provide vital homes and food sources for many of our wildlife species. Without these elements, many wouldn't be able to survive our Michigan winters.

So, if you are wondering how you can make your yard more of an appeal to birds this winter - skip the fall yard cleanup, and instead leave the leaves. You'll never know who is going to show up in search of a well earned meal.



Northern Cardinal

Feeding Happy and Healthy Birds

Emily Tornga

Owning a bird feeder is one of life's greatest joys. Birds not only get to fuel up at your feeding station, but you also get a great central spot to observe and photograph them. Keeping your feeder clean is of utmost importance. Feeders can be a reservoir for germs that can make birds sick, but here are a few tips to help you maintain a clean "buffet" for your birds.

Project FeederWatch, through the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, recommends that you clean your feeders every two weeks. First, scrub off any dirt or debris on the feeder with soap and water. Then, soak the feeder with a solution of nine parts water to one part bleach for 10 minutes. Rinse and dry the feeder thoroughly before putting it back up. You can also place your feeder in the dishwasher on a hot or sanitize setting. Wear gloves when touching the unwashed feeders. Bird waste can transmit disease to humans as well. Always wash your hands with soap and water after handling dirty feeders. Pro-tip: Buy two of the same feeder and always have a clean one on deck. That way you can take your time cleaning the dirty one when you take it down. If you stick to your cleaning schedule, it will be dry and ready before your next clean is due.

Keep the area below your feeder tidy by cleaning up any seed hulls or waste that has accumulated. This is fairly easy in the snow. A quick shovel of the top layer of snow should do the trick. When there is no snow, a rake or shovel can help.

Remember, prevention is the key to help stop the spread of disease at your feeders. Following these cleanliness recommendations will help keep your bird friends happy and healthy as you feed them throughout the year.

2022 Birdathon Winners | Ed Bolt

At our October 24 General Membership meeting, the GRAC Birdathon Awards for 2022 were announced and handed out. Congratulations to all participants - \$520 was raised for GRAC, while having fun! Not all winners and runners-up were able to pick up their award at the October meeting, so we will have the remaining plaques at the November 28 meeting. The plaques replace our old trophies, so you do not need to search for mantel space - a small wall space will suffice.

BIRDATHON TEAMS

For 2022, there were 6 teams / 14 individuals competing.

Birdsmiths

Jill Goodell, Deb Smith, Holly Porter, Kim Benson

Team Dickcissal

Scott Hutchings, Mike Yuan

Raven Loon & Ticks

Ed & Katie Bolt, Kathy Haas, Jeanne Griffin

Brand X

Steve Minard, David Cross

The Old Coots

Tom Leggett, Helen Leggett

Fit to Sit

Ed Bolt, Jeanne Griffin

The Birdathon Committee (Jill Goodell, Tom Leggett, Ed Bolt) is open to your input year-round. Do contact one of us if you have suggestions. **Now is not too early to start thinking - nay plotting / scheming - for Birdathon 2023!**

PRIZE CATEGORIES & AWARDS

Rock Dove Most Species in 6 Hours

Winner Brand 'X' (97 species)
Runner-up Team Dickcissal (51 species)

Wild Card Most Sightings of Target Bird (Red-tailed Hawk)

Winner Brand 'X' (3)
Runner-up The Old Coots and Fit to Sit (1)

Charity's Rarities Rarest Bird Spotted

Winner Brand 'X' (Eared Grebe)
Runner-up Team Dickcissal (Upland Sandpiper)

Big Sit / Feeder Most Species While Sitting Near a Feeder

Winner The Old Coots (34 species)

Big Sit / No Feeder Most Species Sitting w/o a Feeder

Winner Fit to Sit (21 species)

Fledgling Youngest Average Age Team

Winner Brand 'X'
(The team that had David Cross)

Big Fun Funders Most Team Money Raised

Winner Raven Loon & Ticks
Runner-up The Old Coots

Big Fun Funder Individual Most Money Contributed by an Individual

Winner Tom Leggett



Maher News and Historical Notes

Chris Baer

This Maher Audubon Sanctuary steward was nosing around in the archives and decided to put some interesting things found in the Caller.

Pre-Maher, around 1840, more than 100 native American families camped along the Coldwater River. Arrowheads have been found west of Maher before the land there was ripped for crops in the 1900s.

In 1846, 108th St. was opened as a stage route from Battle Creek to Grand Rapids. Recent history before Maher was gifted to the club in 1978, the site was visited by members who noted the bog, marshy area, cattails, and saw grass (still there) and dense woods to the west (not there). Many dead elms found (now there are many dead ash trees), the ridge was found to be very birdy, with "wild, unspoiled and natural beauty" evident everywhere.

In 1979, an inventory of plants was made by Susan Crispin, a MSU graduate of Environmental Science with collections made deposited in the Beale Darling Herbarium at MSU. This predates Dr. David Warner's list made in 2002. Our Floristic Quality Index from this list is 61.92, which is very high. Our native plant numbers are much higher than the invasive/non-native ones. Dr. Warner's noted that this property was a truly remarkable place of "botanical quality and diversity."

As the club became landowners, the Sanctuary needed a steward/chairperson to manage the work that was to come. In 1983, Al Huisjen asked Bill Sweetman to fill this position, becoming the first steward. Goals for that time included a path to the artesian well, signage for trails, path to the marle pond (the marle pond was formed by farmers removing lime for crop land). Neighbors were "welcomed for quiet observations on the trails but deer, rabbit and bird hunting were to be discontinued." Pallets as a temporary bridge crossed the creek in 1981, then in the late 1980s and early 1990s, railroad ties were brought in from CSX transportation with the help of Steve Minard. By 1990, the board walk was mostly complete thanks to work crews provided by Ray Gates, KISD Michigan Youth Corps, Helen Spore supervisor (I can just imagine Helen Spore out there directing traffic on the board walk!) Also, the Caledonia sophomore class led by John Van Orman and a work crew from the DNR. Bobwhite quail and pheasant were common birds in 1983. Ruffed grouse were first recorded in 1981. Next month, I will follow the birds from the late eighties to the present.

From 1991-1997, work bees were yearly occurrences, although glitches became a common problem. A portable toilet in 1993 was destroyed by vandals then discontinued. The bridge and bluebird boxes were regularly vandalized, and logs were put across the board walk and trail to discourage dirt bikes. (Vandals recently pushed over bird houses, threw a bench in the creek, and removed planks from the board walk). The sheriff said they would stop by Maher and the parking lot regularly to deter mischief. Signage was erected in the 1990s "Visit the Sanctuary and leave it as you found it."

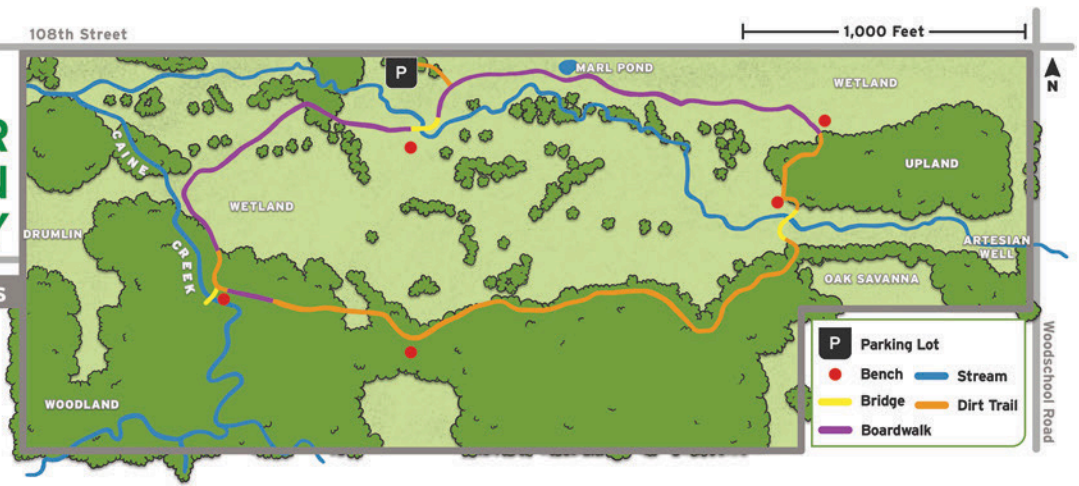
Edith Jarvi started the idea of benches along the paths and since then Doug Klein and Jim McMaster have built and put up more. The large sign (Maher Audubon Sanctuary) was erected on the slope southwest of where the sign is now, in the marsh. Ed Bolt, Jim McMaster and I moved the sign because the trees up on the slope were blocking it. Now the cattails in wet years must be trimmed to see the sign clearly. Never a dull moment.

Stewards for Maher after Bill Sweetman include Helen Spore, Steve Smith, Mary Jane Dockeray, Jim McMaster, Melanie Good, Doug Klein, and Madeline Heibel. All have been stewards for several years clearing ash trees off the trails and repairing the boardwalk sometimes with the help of the membership.

Invasive plants/shrubs have been a problem ever since the DNR encouraged landowners to plant them. Autumn olive, barberry, multiflora rose, and honey suckle continually challenge us. The boardwalk also needs repairs frequently and is being overrun by blue grass (lawn exotic) and other invasive grasses.

What is fun to do is to go to Maher regularly and see the seasonal changes of the birds and the native plants. Fall this year was stupendous. Asters, Bidens, wild Coreopsis, native thistle loved by Monarchs, blue lobelia, Joe-pye-weed and others graced the edge of the boardwalk and other places. You don't need to leave the trail or boardwalk to see the show.

Recently Jim and Susan McMaster were at Maher cutting two trees (ashes) off the boardwalk and spiffing up the entire path of limbs /branches. Please thank them next time you see them at the meeting.



Bufflehead

Ah, winter birding in Michigan. Your nose is freezing, your binoculars are fogged, and the sun is only up for, what, three hours a day? But then you get out there, and none of that matters, because, look at all those DUCKS! And my personal favorite, you could call it my “spark duck”, is the Bufflehead (*Bucephala albeola*).

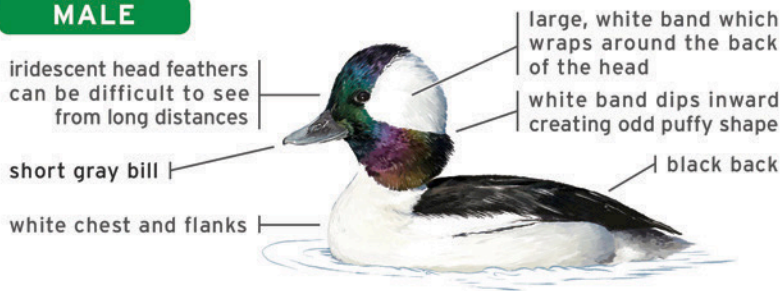
When I started birding in the fall of 2019, I assumed winter birding would consist entirely of sitting in my living room with my sliding glass door cracked open, camera trained on my feeders, hoping to get a nice Christmas card photo. Then while perusing the Merlin app in November to find out what I might see in the winter, I got my first glimpse of the rainbow-headed male, and the adorable white-cheeked female Bufflehead. I HAD to get out there and find them, so I dragged my husband to Wolf Lake State Fish Hatchery. These days, I don't even notice the cold when I go birding on a frigid winter morning - I learned quickly that where there are Buffleheads, there are many more unique and lovely species of overwintering waterfowl.

So, you might be asking: “why the name ‘Bufflehead’?” Turns out it's really what it sounds like, “buffalo” + “head,” due to the head shape. Along with the goldeneyes, they're part of the genus *Bucephala*, derived from ancient Greek and essentially meaning “bullheaded” (in the literal, physical sense, just like the English name). While the family (or rather, genus) resemblance is certainly there, Buffleheads are smaller than the goldeneyes. With their diminutive bills, and the ever-present smile that all ducks seem to have, I can't think of a cuter waterfowl species.

While Wolf Lake was a fine choice for my first Bufflehead search, they can easily be found much closer on any waterway in the winter. And while you won't find this species nesting in Michigan (they breed almost exclusively in western Canada and Alaska), I did find it interesting to learn that the cavity-nesting Buffleheads highly prefer cavities specifically excavated by Northern Flickers - another favorite bird species of mine. It seems that flicker holes are too small for other cavity-nesting duck species. Now excuse me while I book a summer trip to Alberta to see red-shafted Flickers and baby Buffleheads!

Identifying Buffleheads

MALE



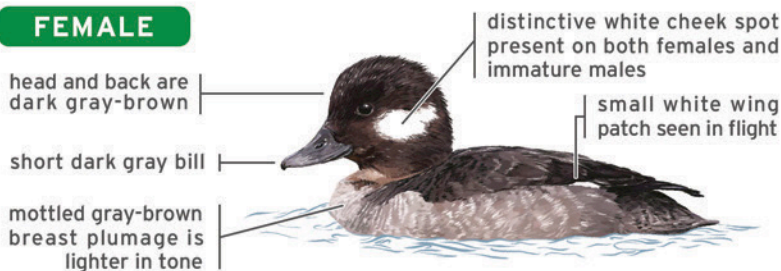
Description:

Bufflehead are very small, compact diving ducks with large, rounded heads and short, wide bills. In flight, you can identify Bufflehead by noting their small size, fast wingbeats, and pattern of rocking side-to-side as they fly.

Habitat:

Bufflehead are most widespread in migration and winter, when they move south to coasts and large bodies of water, particularly shallow saltwater bays.

FEMALE



Best Time to See:

These birds spend their summers in Canada and will be wintering in open bodies of water throughout Kent County and the rest of West Michigan.

Best Place to See:

Reeds Lake, Millenium Park, Grand Haven State Park, Muskegon Waste Water Treatment Plant, Riverside Park

Illustrations by: Spencer High

ID Tips & Tricks

- Buffleheads have black eyes instead of golden, unlike the... wait for it... goldeneyes.
- While mergansers may have a “buffalo head” appearance when they raise their crests, their bills are much longer, skinnier, and pointier than the short, cute look of Buffleheads’ bills.
- When sitting on the water, Buffleheads, both male and female, have a generally solid black or brownish-gray appearance to their backs and sides, in contrast with the male goldeneyes, which have white patches or streaks along the sides in this position.
- Be careful of mistaking a male goldeneye at a distance for a female Bufflehead, as female Buffleheads do have white cheek patches - theirs are more elongated than male goldeneyes’ though, stretching back from under the eyes across the side of the head.
- Male Buffleheads lack the distinct little white cheek patches just behind the bill that the goldeneyes have, and instead have a large white patch stretching all the way around the back of their heads from behind one eye to the other, contrasting with their black and iridescent faces and necks.

UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

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

Held every Thursday, rain or shine - Please dress accordingly! Meet at the end of the dead-end section of Veterans Memorial Drive east of Maynard. Group departs 5 minutes after scheduled start time.

November 3, 10, 17 | 9:00AM-11:00AM

Lakeshore Migrants | Led By: Steve Minard

We will plan to look for the best reported late shorebirds, winter ducks, winter gulls or winter finches along the lakeshore. Winter ducks should be in the area, and the other late migrants should still be moving south. This time of year presents an opportunity for birds that can difficult to find in our area, so we'll check the bird alerts and go with the best prospects. We are likely to start on the lake shore with Holland State Park, Oval Beach or Douglas Beach as possible targets. From Lake Michigan, we're likely to work inland with stops possible along Lake Atacama, the Kalamazoo River or the Todd Farm Unit of the Allegan State Game Area. If we are lucky, a mega-rarity will be chase able and we may travel further afield. This is planned as a morning trip, but we could extend it with a lunch stop.

Saturday, November 5 | 7:30AM-11:30AM | Meet at the McDonald's in Hudsonville. Carpool departs at 7:30AM sharp

Note: Come prepared for cold weather. A spotting scope could come in handy on this trip.

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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Scholarship - Katie Bolt

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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: info@graud.org

Membership: membership@graud.org

Caller Editor: caller@graud.org

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

Contact Tricia Boot:
president@graud.org