

Iowa

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The Voice for Iowa's Birds

Iowa's birds need the new Grasslands Conservation Act

It's well-known by both professional conservationists and most enthusiastic birders that our grassland bird populations have decreased more than 40 percent in the past three decades. Notable examples of Iowa's decrease include species such as Western Meadowlarks, Short-eared Owls, Bobolinks, Greater Prairie Chickens, Grasshopper Sparrows, and several others. The major reason is that our state's agriculture continues converting more grasslands to row crops.

Iowa Dept. of Natural Resources, county conservation boards, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, The Nature Conservancy, Pheasants Forever, and others all have done as much as possible to save remaining grasslands and restore them to native prairie, but loss of grasslands continues to out-step most preservation efforts. Now, it's possible that might change.

In early October a bi-partisan group in the U.S. House of Representatives introduced the new *North American Grasslands Conservation Act*, which, if passed by Congress, could help fund the sustaining and restoring of grasslands from coast to coast, including here in Iowa. This new bill is similar to the *North American Wetlands Conservation Act*, which in the past 35 years has helped conserve and restore more than 32 million wetland acres nationally, resulting in an increased number of waterfowl and even some shorebirds.

The Grasslands Conservation Act would create new funding that government agencies, conservation organizations, Native American tribes, and private landowners all could apply for, to conserve and restore grasslands. It is supported by more than 40 national conservation organizations, everything from Pheasants Forever to the American Bird Conservancy. However, to date there is not a substantial text in the bill, so it must first be sent to the House Natural Resources Committee to consider, create a complete draft text, then move it on to House hearings. Given this amount of work yet to be done, it almost surely will not get a hearing before Congress adjourns this December. A similar US Senate bill was authorized in a previous session, authorizing up to \$290 million annually for grassland conservation grants. The House bill is much smaller, authorizing only \$60 million annually, letting it receive bi-partisan support and having a good chance to pass in a most fiscally conservative House. But a compromised amount of funding would then have to be agreed upon between the House and Senate for final passage, possibly even more difficult given results of the recent national election.

Although many USDA programs have been basically frozen by no passage of a new 2024 Farm Bill, if the Grasslands Conservation Act can be passed all its funding would be administered by the US Fish & Wildlife Service, not the Dept. of Agriculture. This would diversify the source of funding for grassland conservation that could continue for decades. We should urge our Iowa US House and Senate members to come together for assuring this act could be passed.



Grasshopper Sparrow © Doug Harr



Iowa's private native prairies need protection



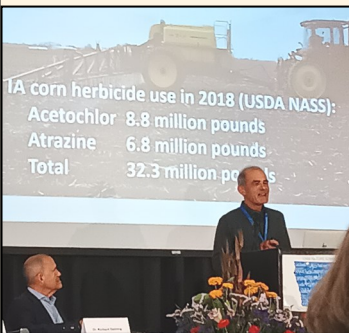
Bobolink © Doug Harr

Iowa Nature Summit's 2nd year event another great success

In November of 2023, the first *Iowa Nature Summit* was successfully held at Drake University, all created and conducted by Professor Emeritus Neil Hamilton (photo at right). Its focus was upon people, places, and projects that highlight the strength of nature and how it could affect our state's future. More than 325 lowan's—and even some from other states—participated the event.



This year, a second *Iowa Nature Summit* was held, again organized by Dr. Neil Hamilton at Drake University, with the objectives of lowans learning about conservation opportunities through nature-based education, encouraging interns, celebrating what is currently being accomplished, and advocating a healthier future for nature.



How agricultural herbicides, pesticides, nitrogen, and other chemicals must be reduced for protecting lowans from the nation's 2nd highest human cancer rates was a major discussion topic.

The event was conducted in October for the purpose of getting attendees to focus upon this November's elections. It did not discuss political parties, but rather what was called a "Vote for Nature", urging Summit participants to vote for what and who they thought might be best for our state and national environment.

As in 2023, this year's event again was funded in partnership with about 50 of Iowa's environmental organizations—everyone from the Iowa Wildlife Federation and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, to Practical Farmers of Iowa and the Whiterock Conservancy, plus even several couples and individual Iowa citizens. All organizations donating more than \$1,000 were given free attendance tickets and asked to have tables with group displays, publications, conservation stickers, and other things to share with attendees. Iowa Audubon was a partner again for this second time, offering materials and information directly from us, but also including publications and special "I Bird, I Vote" stickers provided to us by National Audubon's Upper Mississippi River regional office staff.

In conclusion, this was a tremendous Iowa Nature Summit for the second time.



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Sioux City named as our state's newest "Bird Friendly Iowa Community"



On Oct.25, Sioux City was awarded for becoming Iowa's latest city designated as a "Bird Friendly Community". Seven partner organizations, including Sioux City Councilman Matthew O'Kane, worked to exceed the minimum number of requirements for official designation. Our thanks to Loess Hills Audubon, which led the partnership, and Sioux City hopes this will not only help protect birds and their habitat, but also will increase bird tourism to the area.



Red-shouldered Hawk surveys in Pool 9

by Jon Stravers

It was good to be out along the confluence of the Upper Iowa River and the Mississippi River and hear the wild calls of a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks (RSHA) this spring. I count it as great joy to catch the flash of their red shoulders and get a glimpse of the banded tail. After 46 years of working with this species I still get a thrill when I hear them.

RSHA are a state endangered species in Iowa and they nest in large wetland forest tracts. Reports of RSHA in Iowa have been on a steady increase in the last 20 years. They were formerly common in some areas along the Mississippi River, but in recent years many of their former breeding territories along the great river have been vacant.



Iowa Audubon, along with the Friends of Pool 9, and the McGregor District of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service co-sponsored RSHA surveys in the Kains Siding/Upper Iowa River study area during the spring and

summer of 2024. Jon Stravers and team of field assistants from Driftless Area Bird Conservation conducted a total of 181 listening periods at 97 points on thirteen days within the Kains study area for evidence of Red-shouldered Hawks. We found RSHA activity on twelve occasions at eight survey points. We were able to determine the location of one active RSHA nest along the Upper Iowa River, and we found RSHA activity in three other locations within the study area. We estimate that there may be four active RSHA territories within the Kains complex that includes two along the Upper Iowa River, and two that might be associated with the forested slopes along the Fish Farm Mounds Preserve.

Our survey results in the Kains Siding study area parallel our recent years' RSHA survey findings in flood plain forest habitats of Pool 9. A decade of prolonged inundation by spring and summer rainfall has resulted in much tree mortality in these forests. We found no RSHA activity within the south-central flood plain portion of the Kains study area. These areas were documented as centers of RSHA activity in previous surveys from 1983 through 2004. We believe that the recent tree mortality has caused forest fragmentation, while high water levels have impaired hunting opportunities in affected sections of the Upper Mississippi Refuge thus negatively impacting RSHA nesting habitat.

At the same time we are encouraged that during this study in 2024 we found that RSHAs continued to occupy

territories within the Kains Siding/Upper Iowa River study area. During similar recent surveys in 2023 and 2024 in Pools 9, 10 and 11 along the Mississippi River and the lower Wisconsin River, we found no RSHA activity at any of the previously active RSHA floodplain territories. Consequently, these two RSHA territories in the Kains Siding study area represent the only known active RSHA territories that are located within the Mississippi River flood plain in the McGregor District.

We feel that continued study of these riverine associated raptors is needed to elucidate the nuances of their habitat preferences and the environmental factors that may be involved in the declines we have observed along main waterways. We intend to keep monitoring these sites in the coming years in order to better understand RSHA presence in these Mississippi River habitats.

Book Reviews

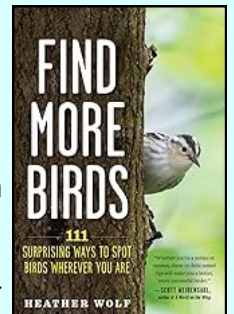
FIND MORE BIRDS: 111 SURPRISING WAYS TO SPOT BIRDS WHEREVER YOU ARE, by Heather Wolf. The Experiment, New York, NY 2023. 269 pp.

Iowa Audubon's frequent book reviews in this newsletter tend to sometimes focus upon recent scientific findings about birds, other wildlife, or even conservation's history and its future needs. Heather Wolf's new book, published late last year, is an easy-reading paperback that will help many people who are fairly new into birding learn much more about where and how to find birds, and methods to help with identification.

The book has 111 chapters, each only 2 pages long, including the author's great photos of different birds for every short chapter. Each chapter offers tips on how to do everything from "stay in one spot for at least 10 minutes" and "creep up on cattails", to "ask people with binoculars", or "look at night". These tips are short, so it's easy to read just a few tips each day or week and learn a lot about birding with very little difficulty. The chapter tips are grouped in 10 different categories, such as using technical tools like eBird, looking for birds' natural food sources, finding birds while doing something else, and finding cool birds you might never heard of.

In summary, this is a book recommended to anyone just getting started in birding and offers some things perhaps even advanced birders could learn.

...reviewed by Doug Harr





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125th Annual Christmas Bird Count

National Audubon Society's (NAS) annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) will be conducted again this year, on any dates selected from December 14, 2024 to January 5, 2025. If you have never participated in a CBC before but would like to sign up for a bird count here in Iowa, go to the Iowa Ornithologists' Union webpage and click on *DETAILS* to find Iowa count locations you might be interested in (there are many not yet listed but will be soon):

<https://iowabirds.org/Connections/CBC.aspx>

Anyone wanting to participate is not required to be an NAS member, but they can learn much more about the Audubon Christmas Bird Count, including its history, at the following website:

<https://www.audubon.org/community-science/christmas-bird-count>

Two Counties Pass Major Conservation Bonds

On November 5, residents of Johnson County and Story County both voted more than 77% to pass conservation bonds—at least 60% approval were needed for each. Johnson County now has a \$30 million bond to use for improving water quality, preserving natural areas, and improving public access to parks and trails over the next 20 years.

Story County will receive \$25 million dedicated to

funding for projects countywide, with about 36% for county parks, 32% for water and habitat, and 32% for trails and outdoor recreation.

Passage of bonds like these may now be very essential, as other government funding for conservation in most of Iowa might possibly decrease in the near future, due to recent state and federal election results.

World Migratory Bird Day 2025

On November 14, Environment for the Americas (EFTA) announced that the theme of World Migratory Bird Day (WMBD) in 2025 will be "*Shared Spaces: Creating Bird-friendly Cities and Communities*". EFTA is a Colorado-based organization that inherited International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) from the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center in 2007, and changed the IMBD name to WMBD in 2018, which now focuses much upon birds migrating all around our planet. EFTA is also a major partner in Bird City Network, which includes Bird Friendly Iowa (BFI), co-founded by Iowa Audubon in 2015. Iowa should celebrate WMBD 2025, especially in all of our BFI designated cities and counties.

