

# Minnesota BIRDING

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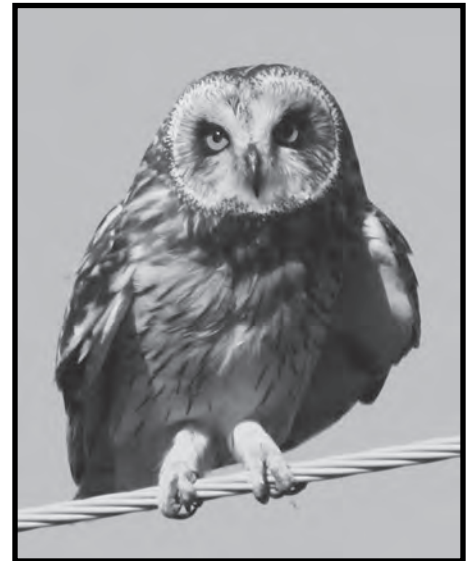
# Conservation Column: NW MN Flood Control Projects Now Open to Birdwatchers

by Heidi Hughes

Four years after the Agassiz Valley flood control project became operational, the benefits have far surpassed what the Watershed District had ever imagined. Constructed after three debilitating floods struck the city of Warren, Minnesota in 1996 and 1997, the \$10.7 million project spans four square miles and services a drainage area of 32 square miles.

While flood control has always been first and foremost, the watershed district had other goals, too. They restored wet prairies, supported bird research, and hosted more than 1,000 visitors last year. "They're coming for birding, canoeing and kayaking, photography, school visits and to hunt," said Danny Omdahl, administrator of the Middle-Snake-Tamarac Rivers Watershed District. After an Associated Press news story about wildlife viewing opportunities put the Agassiz Valley impoundment "on the map" as a nature destination in 2012, the watershed district improved access to the site and created a gravel "wildlife drive" with a parking area on top of the dike.

Agassiz Valley is just one of more than a dozen flood control projects that provide habitat for songbirds, waterfowl, raptors, shorebirds, and marsh birds — and access for the people who want to see them. An impressive list of species has been spotted in the neighborhood — owls (Boreal, Snowy, Northern Saw-whet, Northern Hawk, Great Horned, Short-eared and Long-eared), Bald and Golden eagles, Per-



egrine Falcons, waders (American Bittern, Least Bittern, Snowy and Cattle egrets), Sandhill Cranes, rails, grouse, Black-billed Magpies, Bobolinks, waterfowl, grassland sparrows, warblers, thrushes, and shrikes.

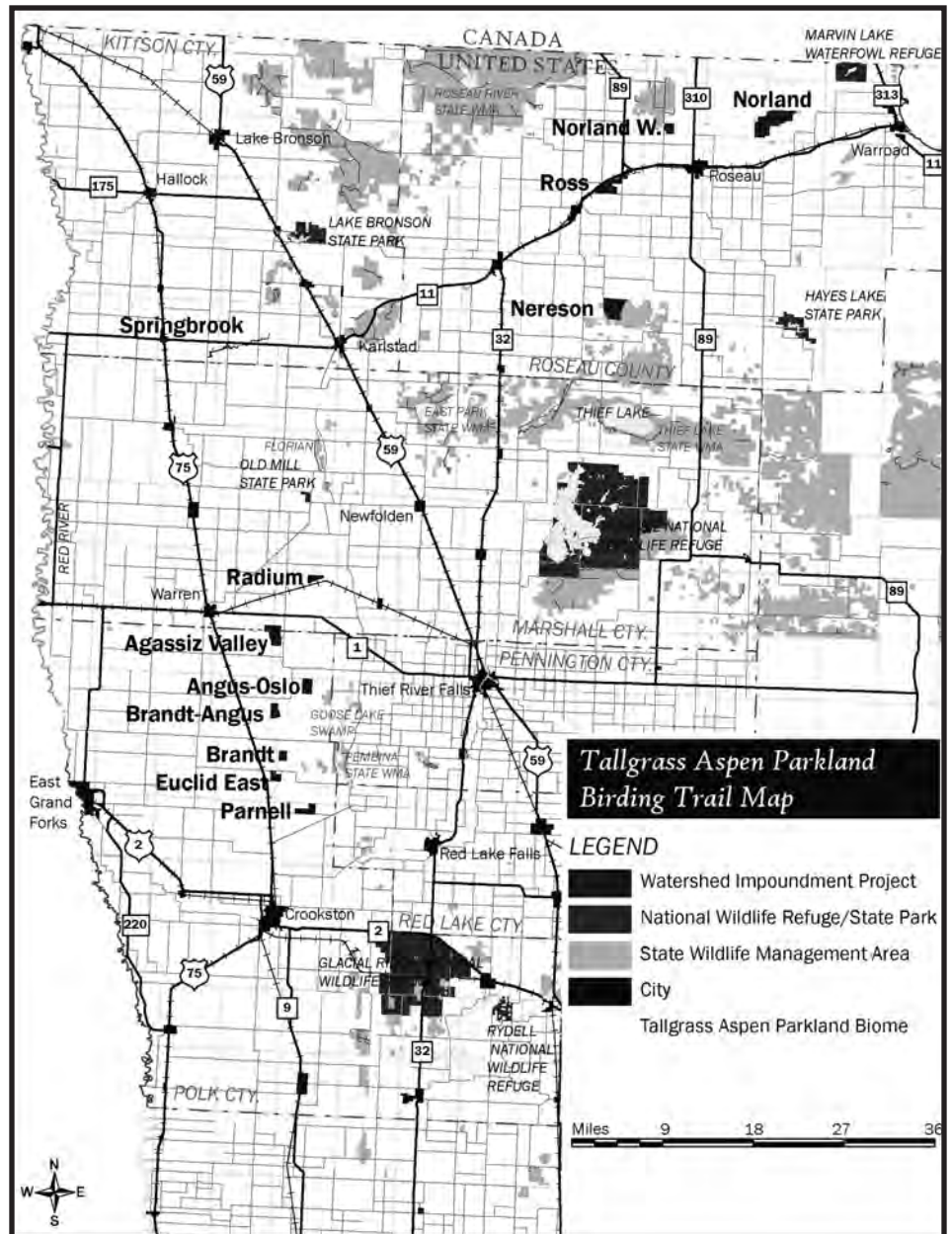
Wildlife viewing has become so popular at the impoundments that the Red Lake, Two Rivers, and Roseau River Watershed Districts plus several communities in the region are now working with the Middle-Snake-Tamarac Rivers Watershed District to connect flood control projects with a new birding trail — and to develop visitor amenities at the project sites. Funded by the local watersheds, local governments, and grants from the Northwest Minnesota Foundation and the University of Minnesota's Northwest Regional Sustainable Development Partnership, the new birding trail initiative has found support from local residents and out-of-town visitors.

The Watershed Districts invite MOU members to collaborate on this project. Here's how you can help:

1. Visit the impoundments; make lists of what you see, uplink your data to eBird, or send us your lists.
2. Provide images for interpretive, publicity, and marketing materials.
3. Help our designers; review interpretive materials and brochures for accuracy.
4. Visit communities near the impoundments; show local businesses how birders contribute to the local economy, and consider inviting a local birder to watch birds with you.
5. Co-sponsor a birding event.

For information and a map, contact the Middle-Snake-Tamarac Rivers Watershed District PO Box 154 Warren, MN, 56762, 218-745-4741 or [birdingtrail@gmail.com](mailto:birdingtrail@gmail.com).

*Heidi Hughes is an Education and Outreach Coordinator for the Middle-Snake-Tamarac Rivers Watershed District. She has been watching birds in the Warren area since 2011 and posts what she's seen on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/AgassizAudubon](http://www.facebook.com/AgassizAudubon).*



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*Common Loons, by Mary Graves*



# Savaloja Grant Recipients for 2014 Cover a Wide Spectrum

by Steve Wilson

Terry Savaloja was a well-known, respected Minnesota birder and T.S. Roberts Award recipient who died in 1992. The Savaloja Memorial Fund was established to support projects that increase our understanding of birds, promote preservation of birds and their natural habitats, or increase public interest in birds.

Every February, the MOU Savaloja Committee sifts through submitted proposals and forwards the most compelling to the MOU Board for consideration. At their March 16, 2014 meeting the MOU Board awarded grants totaling a record \$11,192, to five exceptional projects.

## **Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis, Red-headed Woodpecker Recovery Committee** (Jerry Bahls)

Those who saw this group's presentation at last fall's annual meeting will appreciate the wealth of new information coming out of this study of one of Minnesota's fastest-declining species. The recovery committee was awarded \$1,200 to hire a technician to study Red-headed Woodpeckers at Cedar Creek Ecosystem Science Reserve, one of the remaining strongholds for this imperiled species.

## **Bena High School** (Charles Grolla)

This innovative project received \$4,383 for production of a booklet of common birds in northern Minnesota. The booklet will use the Ojibwe bird names and will include stories and legends gleaned from commu-

nity elders that describe these birds and their cultural associations.

## **Harambee Elementary School, Maplewood** (Jenny Eckman)

This school was awarded \$3,815 to expand a promising pilot program into a year-long program for second graders. The coursework will use birds as an integrating theme between different disciplines normally considered in isolation. The grant will help pay for the binoculars, bird ID and activity guides, field trips, and teacher training needed to expand the program. One reason this project is so exciting is the potential for this approach to be replicated in schools across the state.

## **Minnesota River Valley Audubon Chapter, Bloomington** (Matthew Schaut, President)

MRVAC was awarded \$594 to continue their goal of increasing the birding capacity of local nature centers, this time through donation of binoculars to the Staring Lake Nature Center. Through the magic of matching, MOU's donation of six binoculars was doubled by MRVAC and doubled again by Eagle Optics for a total of 24 pairs of binoculars.

## **Willmar Public Schools** (Randy Fredrickson)

\$1,200 was awarded to purchase geolocators. The data gleaned from attaching the geolocators to wild Purple Martins will help researchers identify roost sites, migration routes, and over-wintering sites and collect longevity data for this

declining species.

Several of the above projects do double duty, helping birds while also diversifying Minnesota's birding community by recruiting or involving minorities and people of color.

These groups are currently underrepresented among Minnesota birders and are projected to grow from 9% of Minnesota's population in 2000 to 16% by 2030. Unless minorities become more involved in birding, the proportion of the population that cares about birds and their habitats will shrink. Encouraging their participation in birding will reverse this trend, and help keep MOU strong and better able to speak for all Minnesotans on bird-related issues. This initiative was possible, in part, through a special \$3,000 donation received last year. Look for details in the next newsletter about a challenge grant that will give you an opportunity to participate in expanding the Savaloja grant program.

## **Savaloja Grants, 2015**

Individuals or organizations who are undertaking projects in Minnesota like these may submit grant applications to the MOU for the 2015 grant cycle. Application information may be obtained by emailing: grants@moumn.org. The deadline for receipt of grant applications is January 31, 2015.

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## **Deadlines for Submissions to MN Birding:**

September/October: July 25

November/December: September 25





## Every Saturday from May through September: Early Birders

Organization: Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board  
Details: Takes place at Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden and Bird Sanctuary; 7:30–9:00 a.m. Free. To register or for more information call 612-370-4903.

## August 16: Henderson Hummingbird Hurrah Festival

Organization:  
Details: Hummingbird banding, garden tour, speakers, book signing sessions, children's activities, and a Hummingbird Mall with food, art, craft, specialty, and information vendors. Free. For more information, email [hendersonfeathers@gmail.com](mailto:hendersonfeathers@gmail.com) or call 612-229-5210.

## August 26: "Birdsafe — Bird-Window Collisions,"

**Joanna Eckles, Audubon Minnesota.**

Organization: Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis  
Details: Meeting held jointly with the Breckenridge

Chapter of the Izaak Walton League, Ikes' Chapter House, Brooklyn Park; 7:30 pm. For directions and more information, go to [www.breckenridgeikes.org/contacts.html](http://www.breckenridgeikes.org/contacts.html).

## Plan Ahead

### October 3–5: Sparrow Workshop

Organization: Doug Buri  
Details: Registration is open for the three-day sparrow workshop that Bob Janssen and Doug Buri host each October in Milbank, SD. Half of the workshop time is spent in classroom sessions, starting with the basics through advanced identification. The remaining time during the three days is spent on field trips to some of the best sparrow locations in the Midwest. Complete details on the web site at [www.dougburi.com/sparrow](http://www.dougburi.com/sparrow). Space is limited, so please contact Doug Buri at [dougburi@tnics.com](mailto:dougburi@tnics.com) if you want to attend this workshop.

# Program Highlight: Henderson Hummingbird Hurrah

*by Art Straub*

Birders and garden enthusiasts will gather at Bender Park in Henderson to celebrate the Ruby-throated Hummingbird as the flying jewels prepare for their annual migration through the Minnesota River Valley. The day is a time of appreciation and admiration for the marvelous feat of navigation these tiny birds accomplish each year. It will be a golden opportunity for people of all ages to observe, appreciate, and learn more about conservation and recent research regarding the wee creatures, the smallest in the bird world.

Don Mitchell will be present

to capture, band, and release them, giving one the opportunity to view the birds up close. Jim Gilbert, Stan Tekiela, and De Cansler will also be presenters regarding outdoor wonders, attracting hummingbirds to the garden, and the world of the marvelous monarch butterfly. A Hummingbird Mall with vendors and exhibitors will be present as well.

While parents are occupied at workshops, children's activities are scheduled immediately nearby. The day will close with a Chimney Swift Sit at a Henderson School chimney.

The complete itinerary, maps,

and events schedule may be found at [www.hendersonhummingbirdhurrah.com](http://www.hendersonhummingbirdhurrah.com). A chief sponsor of the celebration is the Minnesota River Valley Audubon Chapter. Henderson is approximately 45 minutes southwest of the Twin Cities and is four miles west of US Highway 169 on the Minnesota River. Bender Park is just two blocks north of state highway 19. Questions can be directed to [hendersonfeathers@gmail.com](mailto:hendersonfeathers@gmail.com).

This event is free and open to the public, no preregistration is required. Saturday, August 16, 2014, 9:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

# Minnesota Birder Bio: Vanessa Lane

*Born:* Kingston, New York

*Currently living:* Grand Forks, North Dakota

*Occupation:* Lecturer of Fisheries and Wildlife Management at University of Minnesota Crookston, although I just recently accepted a position as Assistant Professor of Wildlife Management at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton, Georgia. I will be moving to Georgia at the end of July 2014.

*Serious about birding since:* 2000

*Favorite bird or bird family:* Laridae (gulls and terns)

*Favorite places to bird in Minnesota:* Warren water impoundments and Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge. The Warren water impoundments are great because of the combination of a good suite of species, ease of access, and good visibility over a large expanse of open water and marshland. During periods of high water, it's an excellent place to view waterfowl and wading birds. During periods of low water, there are generally decent numbers of shorebirds present.

Glacial Ridge National Wildlife Refuge, I feel, is an underappreciated gem of northwestern Minnesota. It's the largest grassland restoration project that I know of and encompasses over 20,000 acres of prairie. It's host to a bunch of breeding species that are difficult to find in other regions of the state, including Wilson's Phalaropes, Marbled Godwit, Upland Sandpiper, Le Conte's Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, and Nelson's Sparrow.

*Favorite place to bird outside of Minnesota:* Jekyll Island, Georgia, is a must-see for anyone visiting the southeast. There is an inexpensive primitive campground on the island and its bird feeders are a reliable place to see the endemic Painted Bunting. Wilson's Plovers breed along the south beach. In October, the public can volunteer at the Jekyll Island Banding Station and see an amazing array of migrating birds in the hand. Jekyll Island also hosts large flocks of Black Skimmers, Royal Terns, American Oystercatchers, and other neat birds, depending upon the time of year.

*Birding style (i.e. by yourself, with others, etc):* I generally bird by myself because I have a somewhat irregular work schedule, but prefer to go birding in small groups.

It's fun sharing the excitement of finding a cool bird!

*Best advice on how to be a better birder:* Try not to rely too heavily on technology; nothing beats a good paperbound field guide, a good set of binoculars, and studying! Several times I have instantly identified birds in the field (and lifers at that!) simply because I had thoroughly read a field guide prior to going out, while people with smart phones were buried in their software and the bird in question flew away before they could identify it! Also, for those of you who are really new at birding, practice your "binocular snap" at home on your pet cat, dog, children, sibling, significant other, etc. Sometimes birds only give you a split second to get your binoculars on them, so knowing how to find the birds in your binoculars instantly is an essential skill.

In addition, always remember birding ethics. As our hobby increases in popularity, be mindful that birders can also disrupt bird behavior and reduce a bird's ability to survive. The American Birding Association has an excellent source of ethical guidelines we should always strive to follow (see here: <http://www.aba.org/about/ethics.html>). These ethics can be difficult to observe when there's a really good bird, but never forget that the bird, habitat, and other people deserve respect too. The last thing you want to do is to have unpleasant memories for something that should be a positive experience or have the bird be chased away or (even worse) die because you were too anxious to see it.

*The main attraction or joy of birding for you:* Birding is something that people of all income levels can participate in and, as an educator, this is very important to me. Regardless of where you travel in the world, there will always be birds. They are ubiquitous across regions, languages, and cultures, and typically treasured by all. The woods are never truly quiet or lonely if you have an ear for bird song!

*Interests/hobbies when you're not birding:* I breed Ball Pythons. I have 19 eggs currently in the incubator with two more clutches expected to be laid within the next month. It's always like Christmas when the eggs start pipping, because you never know what colors are going to hatch out!

*What new bird you would like to see the most:* Harpy Eagle.

# Phenology Corner: Early Fall Shorebirding

by Bob Dunlap

Amidst the birding doldrums of July and the dog days of August, birders might be tempted to shift their attention to other winged creatures. Indeed, butterflies and dragonflies abound on those hot summer days when the birdlife seems lethargic or perhaps even absent. And while such entomological pursuits can be just as fulfilling as our ornithological ones (you have a good chance of finding a first county record Ruby Meadowhawk right in your backyard!), we best not stray too far from our feathered forays!

Fortunately, fall shorebird migration in Minnesota actually begins in early July for many species, with a few southbound individuals appearing as early as late June! For these birds, the arctic breeding season lasts only a few short weeks. Once eggs have hatched and the precocial young are more or less able to survive on their own, the adults waste no time heading back down south. Should you choose to seek them, you would be wise to study the previous months' weather to predict where shorebirds might appear.

As their group name implies, these birds tend to prefer the shores of ponds, lakes, and other wetlands, but, depending on how wet or dry the summer has been, your strategy will vary. In summers with frequent rainfall, wetlands tend to fill up and offer very little habitat in the way of exposed mudflats or sandbars, and thus flooded fields might offer the most suitable habitat for shorebird stopovers. In dry years, the water levels of lakes and ponds can drop considerably, exposing a decent

amount of good shorebird habitat.

With a bit of luck, you'll happen upon a muddy field or drying wetland with some shorebird activity during the first week of July. Lesser Yellowlegs are often the first southbound migrants to be found, followed by Greater Yellowlegs, Solitary Sandpipers, Least Sandpipers, and Short-billed Dowitchers. By mid-July the adults of other species are returning, including Stilt, Baird's, Pectoral, and Semipalmated sandpipers; Wilson's Phalaropes; and Semipalmated Plovers. By the end of the month you'll likely find a mix of these species as well as a surprise or two like a Wilson's Phalarope or Sanderling. Be sure to check the drier periphery of your shorebird spot for Buff-breasted Sandpipers; this species is particularly fond of sod farms and other grassy pasture-like areas, not to mention that the best (and often only) time of the year to find this species in Minnesota is during the months of July and August.

By August, the abundance of migrant shorebirds in the state increases dramatically, with concentrations of individuals numbering well into the hundreds and even thousands at choice spots. In addition to the species already mentioned, watch for both Black-bellied Plover and American Golden-Plover, Ruddy Turnstone, and Red-necked Phalarope. Some of the rarer fall migrants — including American Avocet, Marbled and Hudsonian godwits, Willet, and even Piping Plover — are also possible during this month.

Around this time you might notice that some of the species are be-

ginning to look a bit different from what you saw of them earlier in the season. This is because of two things: 1) many of these individuals are undergoing or have already undergone a molt into nonbreeding plumage, and 2) first-year birds (i.e. birds hatched this summer) have begun to join the adults on their journey south. This can be a very confusing time for even experienced birders, as many of these species become particularly difficult to identify in these variable plumages (but if you dare to take up the challenge, there are a number of excellent field guides available to aid you in your quest).

By the end of August, birders once again have warblers and other songbirds on the mind as fall passerine migration commences. Nonetheless, shorebird migration continues in earnest well into the freezing days of mid-November! But let's save that part of the story for another time, shall we?

## New Members

Zachary Blankenheim, *Andover MN*  
Nate Freshour, *Maple Grove MN*  
Patricia Hertzell, *Shoreview MN*  
Mary Heyrman, *Rochester MN*  
Doreen Hoff, *Prinsburg MN*  
Naomi Jackson, *Minneapolis MN*  
JoAnn Morse, *New Brighton MN*  
Elijah Parker, *Zumbrota MN*  
Michael Redmond, *Minneapolis MN*  
Alison Rotel, *Minneapolis MN*  
Mark Schumacher, *Buffalo MN*  
Kathryn Urberg, *Minneapolis MN*  
Justin Watts, *Minneapolis MN*  
Dave Williams, *Winona MN*

# Results from the 2014 Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz

by Alyssa DeRubeis

The Rusty Blackbird Spring Migration Blitz (RBSMB) had its first “field” season this year across the eastern United States, Canada, and Alaska. This is a coordinated effort led by the International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (IRBWG), along with eBird, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and the Vermont Center for Ecostudies. The objectives of the survey are to 1) determine important migratory stopover sites, 2) assess consistency of use and timing at stopover locations, 3) strengthen relationships with other conservation organizations and enhance the conservation of Rusty Blackbirds, and 4) increase awareness of Rusty Blackbirds among the birding community and general public. Participation was simple: If a birder saw or heard a Rusty Blackbird between March 1 and June 15, s/he would report it to eBird.

As an incentive to get birders to submit their Rusty Blackbird observations to eBird, the RBSMB coordinators from Minnesota and Wisconsin organized a competition between the two states to see which state submitted the most checklists containing Rusty Blackbirds. The competition period was between March 15 and April 30 and all numbers are accurate as of early May.

After counting the checklists from each state, the results are in and the winner is...Wisconsin! Six-hundred and eighteen Rusty Blackbird checklists were submitted by Wisconsin, whereas Minnesota submitted 139. We may not have received the “Most Valued Player” award, but we are deserv-

ing of the “Most Improved Player” award. Rusty Blackbird checklists increased by 74% from March–April 2013 to March–April 2014 in Minnesota, whereas a 16% increase occurred in Wisconsin between the two years. In comparison, New York submitted the most Rusty Blackbird checklists (1225) and Alberta had the biggest percent increase between March–April 2013 and March–April 2014 (750%). Overall, 9894 Rusty Blackbird checklists were submitted across the United States and Canada this spring — a 45% increase from March–April 2013.

Based on available data from eBird, Minnesota appears to have had two potential hotspots for Rusty Blackbirds this spring. In an area just east of St. Cloud, 25–40% of all submitted checklists contained Rusty Blackbirds, and in an area west of Hutchinson and south of Litchfield, 10–25% of all submitted checklists contained Rusty Blackbirds. Once more precise locations for Rusty Blackbirds are determined, the information will be available at the official IRBWG website ([www.rusty-blackbird.org](http://www.rusty-blackbird.org)).

Minnesota’s RBSMB would not have been possible without all the birders that submitted Rusty Blackbird checklists. Furthermore, I would also like to thank the following:

- International Coordinator of RBSMB, Judith Scarl, for helping us co-coordinators with numerous questions and brainstorming ideas;
- My fellow state co-coordinators, Brittney Larson and Stephen

Winter, for doing an exemplary job of spreading the word and helping individual birders;

- Wisconsin state coordinator Jessica Gorzo for helping put together interstate competition; and
- Brent Ankeny for suggesting the prize idea.

No, we did not win this competition. But we improved our participation in eBird significantly — which alone is a great feat — and we contributed important data to IRBWG. And don’t worry — we will have the opportunity to beat Wisconsin in RBSMB 2015!

Questions and comments may be directed to [alderubeis@gmail.com](mailto:alderubeis@gmail.com).



*Wisconsin is receiving this Rusty Blackbird carving made by Bruce Ankeny. Photo by Brent Ankeny.*





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