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Conservation Column: City of Herman Welcomes Winged Wonders

by Randy Frederickson

It was May 25, and “late on a long day... as I walked up to the gate in Herman (sewage lagoons). I could tell there were a good number of shorebirds around and wasn’t totally taken aback when I spotted the first stilt,” recounts Doug Kieser. Doug graciously reported his findings and so began a three week vigil that allowed a small town in Western Minnesota instant stardom in the birding community and created a template of how birders and non-birders can work cooperatively to the benefit of all.

One could say the story doesn’t have a happy ending, because heavy rains and wind on the weekend of June 13–14 destroyed a nest with four eggs and caused the adults to relocate, but there were several story lines here. Most notably was the serendipitous encounter between Denny and Barb Martin (avid county listers) and Larry Brunkow, Public Works Director for the city of Herman. The Martins were at the ponds on May 27th, noted nesting behavior, and found and photographed one egg. When they advised Mr. Brunkow, a self-proclaimed casual birder who was working at the ponds, of the significance of the find, all understood the birds and nest area must be protected. “People will want to see this.” However, was the city willing to host these feathered celebrities, and associated traffic at their retention ponds? Many avid birders have had less than cordial encounters while birding. Lagoons are often heavily posted with no trespassing signs (an amusing

practice, since not even the local hellions are likely to sneak in and take a quick dip or spray paint graffiti on the resident geese). There is usually little to destroy and less to steal. Still, birders are typically smart folks and understand liabilities in our land of litigation. So how would a small town like Herman treat birders, as an inconvenience, a nuisance? Absolutely not, but as guests, just like the winged wonders people would be coming to see. What a grand philosophy.

And in so doing, what were the results? In a query posted to MOU-net and Mnbird, 47 respondents accounted for 84 visitors. Mr. Bunkow estimated 40% of Herman’s 400 residents went to see their feathered guests, following an article in the local newspaper. (Black-necked Stilts are the quintessential avian ambassador. Even non-birders can appreciate a lanky, tuxedo-clad shorebird with bright pink legs and plucked eyebrows.) But the pilgrimage of interested onlookers also included many from the surrounding area; estimates of total viewership of these birds quickly approached 200.

Who benefitted? Approximately 31% of the 47 respondents (above) purchased gas and or food in Herman. About 70% of respondents purchased such items in or near Grant county. (Data are not available for all parties.) This is just economic impact, something measurable. What about the more nebulous, like stopping in Herman or going to look at

continued on page 3

Phenology Corner: Ammodramus in Autumn

by Bob Dunlap

September and October offer a palette of birding opportunities in Minnesota. The majority of warblers and other neotropical songbirds leave in September and migrant raptors and waterfowl make big pushes south in October. Shorebirds continue their fall migration throughout these two months, becoming scarcer by the end of October. You're once again stuck with the same dilemma from a few months earlier: the birds are everywhere, but you're not sure where you want to be!

What's my suggestion, you ask? Try something different. In fact, I'll give you a few tips that may net you a couple of songbirds that you probably haven't seen yet this year. I'm referring to two birds in the genus *Ammodramus*, which comprises four species of sparrow in Minnesota: Grasshopper, Henslow's, Le Conte's, and Nelson's. While all four species can be tough for the average birder to find, they all breed in Minnesota and can be found during the summer months. Both Grasshopper and Henslow's sparrows nest in prairies throughout most of southern and western Minnesota. Both tend to perch at the tops of grasses and other prairie vegetation when singing, much to the delight of birders observing them. Le Conte's and Nelson's sparrows, however, are much more secretive. On their breeding grounds in north-central and northwest Minnesota, these birds usually perch lower in the grasses and sedges. This means that, even if you're able to hear their high-pitched songs, you still might not have the fortune of even catching a glimpse! During spring migration they're arguably even harder to find, as both species mostly pass through unnoticed during short migration windows in May.

But during fall migration, both Le Conte's and Nelson's sparrows can be reliably seen if you know when and where to look. In northern Minnesota, the birds begin moving south around mid-September. In southern Minnesota, the first Nelson's and Le Conte's usually appear by the third week of the same month. Around this time, find a nice grassland with at least some wetlands in the mix, if possible. Nelson's Sparrows tend to prefer the cattail or grass edges of marshes or shallow wetlands; Le Conte's can be found in the same habitat, but also in drier prairies. Take a walk along any trails you can find closely adjacent to the grasses, or, better yet and if you're wearing rubber

Le Conte's Sparrow, photo by Bob Dunlap



boots, walk off the trail and into the vegetation.

Although you probably won't hear them singing in the fall, all four of our *Ammodramus* species can give very high "seet" notes at this time, higher than the call notes of other sparrows that might be hunkered down in the grasses. If you hear this sound, spend some time looking in the general vicinity and keep a close eye on any sparrow that you flush, as it may be a Le Conte's or Nelson's. Both species will flush when disturbed and usually fly only a short distance to their landing spot. When flushed, the birds don't fly very high above the grasses, perhaps no higher than eye-level. Watch for their distinctive, short-tailed shapes. All other sparrows have longer tails and this field mark can become quite apparent with practice.

Color can also be key. Even if only a blurred shape is seen briefly in flight, Le Conte's Sparrows give an overall golden-yellow impression, whereas Nelson's give more of an orange-yellow smear. In comparison, Savannah Spar-

Savaloja Grant Challenge

by Steve Wilson

rows look overall pale brown in flight and Song Sparrows look darker brown. Again, this skill comes with practice. Keep watching where a sparrow lands after you flush it because eventually you'll notice the exact clump of grasses or cattails where it landed. If you didn't see the exact spot, search the immediate area by slowly scanning with your binoculars. Once you are able to spot a Le Conte's or Nelson's perched, you'll often be rewarded with nice, long looks largely unattainable at any other time of year. The last week of September is peak time for finding these two species in northern Minnesota. In southern Minnesota this peak spills into the first week of October, during which time Le Conte's can actually be abundant in choice prairies. Nelson's Sparrows are usually found in lower numbers and, by the end of the second week of October, most Nelson's have vacated the state. Le Conte's Sparrows taper into the third and sometimes even fourth week of October, at which time the majority of this species has left the state as well.

Finally, keep an eye out for any lingering Grasshopper and Henslow's sparrows. Most individuals of these two species are gone from Minnesota by mid-September, but you might flush a few stragglers while searching for their relatives in southern Minnesota. Their flushing behavior is identical to Le Conte's and Nelson's, although in flight they look grayish or duller.

So there you have it. As in all our birding endeavors, persistence pays off. Don't be disheartened if the first, second, or even third wet grassland you visit produces no *Ammodramus* species. With enough patience and a little bit of luck, you'll be the envy of all those other birders trying to sort through confusing fall warblers and first-year shorebirds!

Conservation Column, continued from page 1

a bird for the first time, or knowing people from all over the state are coming to your town because of two birds and a nest? How would that change one's perspective of sewage lagoons, of birding?

Birding is more than a hobby or passion; it's an opportunity. An opportunity to share and listen to others, to be gracious, to educate. Many have fostered these positive relationships in their communities. A goal we should all embrace.

Addendum

There was concern expressed by some about the potential negative impact of all these people visiting the stilts and nest site. Though it cannot be said all these vis-

MOU has an exciting opportunity to earn \$5,000. Between now and December 7, the day after our annual meeting, every dollar donated or received in **new** or **upgraded** memberships will be matched, up to \$5,000, thanks to a challenge match offered by one of our members. If we meet the challenge, the \$10,000 raised will go towards Savaloja grants. These grants support Minnesota projects that increase our understanding of birds, promote preservation of birds and their natural habitats, or increase public interest in birds, especially within racial and ethnic communities currently underrepresented in Minnesota's birding community.

A record \$11,192 was awarded to five outstanding projects this year. These included studies of two declining species (Red-headed Woodpecker and Purple Martin) and three projects designed to engage children with birds. The amount awarded, though, was less than half of the nearly \$25,000 requested. Every year, in fact, we can't afford to fund many of the worthwhile proposals we receive.

That's where the challenge match — and our members — come in. To help MOU take full advantage of this opportunity, use the membership/donation form on the back page (lower right section) of this newsletter or visit the MOU web page and click on the "Help MOU Raise \$10,000" link at the top of the page.

its were without consequence, it can be said the gated lagoons were an almost perfect scenario, providing the guidelines of not entering the gates, were followed. The stilts attended to their nest until weather destroyed it, and had done so, in spite of the number of spectators. No one was more disheartened about the nest failure than the people of Herman, who were wonderful stewards. The nest was built in a lagoon that had been drawn down, and after its discovery the city decided not to refill the pond. Unfortunately, 7 inches of rain causes flooding. Many nests failed this spring due to weather.

Randy Frederickson is a science teacher in Willmar and member of the MOU Conservation Committee. He does contract work for USFWS, MN Audubon and MN DNR.



Every Saturday from May through September:

Early Birders

Organization: Minneapolis Parks & 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.

September 2: Prairie Chickens:

An Iconic Species in MN, by Dr. Daniel Svedarsky

Organization: Prairie Lakes Chapter of the National Audubon Society
Details: At the Alexandria Senior Center, 414 Hawthorn Street, Alexandria, MN. 7:00–9:00 p.m.

September 2: Osprey Recovery Program Presentation

Organization: Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis
Details: Presenter — Steven Hogg, Wildlife Specialist at the Three Rivers Park District. 7:00 p.m. at the Beth El Synagogue, 5224 W. 26th Street, St. Louis Park 55416.

September 6: Fall Bird Tour

Organization: Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge
Details: Meet at Refuge Headquarters on Sherburne Co. Rd 5. 8:00–11:00 a.m. Pre-registration required. Call 763-389-3323, ext. 10. For more information, visit www.fws.gov/refuge/sherburne.

September 19–21: Hawk Ridge Weekend

Organization: Friends of Hawk Ridge, Duluth
Details: All activities at the Hawk Ridge main overlook on East Skyline Parkway are open to the public. Space for evening events, speakers, workshops, and field trips is limited. More details or online registration at www.hawkridge.org/events/hawkweekend.html or call 218-428-6209 or e-mail to mail@hawkridge.org.

September 22: For the Birds of Night

Organization: Barnes & Noble, Roseville
Details: Book signing and conversation with Clay Christensen, Jan Dunlap, Sue Leaf, Sharon Stiteler, and Stan Tekiela; 7:00–8:00 p.m. Free.

October 7: Landscaping and Pollinators Presentation

Organization: Audubon Chapter of Minneapolis
Details: Presenter — Heather Holm, author of *Pollinators of Native Plants*. 7:00 p.m. at the Brookdale Library, 6125 Shingle Creek Pkwy, Brooklyn Center, MN 55430.

October 14: Urban Bird Watching and Identification

Organization: Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board
Details: Led by Tammy Mercer; at Nokomis Recreation Center & Lake Nokomis; 1:00–2:30 p.m. Free. To register or for information call 612-668-3767.

President's Column

by Roy Zimmerman

We certainly live in contentious times. I have never seen such a divided society on so many issues. From health care to immigration to international policy, it seems that people are arguing about almost everything. And it seems that no one on any side of any issue wants to really talk and reach any kind of balanced compromise.

A subject of importance to many of us is the relentless movement of population growth and economic development against environmental conservation. Land, water, air, plants, and wildlife are all under increasing pressure. Greenhouse gases. Oil pipelines. Oil trains. Mining of fracking sand in sensitive habitats and deep fracking to get oil two miles under the earth. Neonicotinoid pesticides. ATV parks and paved bicycle trails vs. minimally developed natural spaces. Pick a cause. And now we have a new Viking stadium coming.

The design of the new Vikings stadium under con-

struction has been found by Audubon and numerous others to be very dangerous for migrating birds. The large expanses of glass are predicted to cause major bird mortality. A proposal by Audubon for bird-friendly glass has been rejected by the Vikings as of this writing (August 1, 2014). Many people have contacted the Vikings and public officials asking for reconsideration of this decision.

The MOU Board of Directors has passed the following resolution:

“The Board of Directors of the Minnesota Ornithologists’ Union, on behalf of its members, requests that the Minnesota Vikings and the NFL make every reasonable attempt to use construction materials that will minimize any adverse effects on wildlife, as also recommended by Audubon Minnesota.”

Let’s hope the final outcome of this discussion is as favorable to birds as possible.

Minnesota Birder Bio: Chad Heins

Name: Chad Heins

Born: Milwaukee, WI

Currently living: Mankato, MN

Occupation: Assistant Professor of Biology at Bethany Lutheran College

Serious about birding: Since age 14, when I decided to try identifying everything I could with the animal field guides my parents had bought for me in previous years. I kept an annual list that year and haven't stopped since.

Favorite bird or bird family: None. Annoy my family with my lack of favorites as well. In winter I really like owls; in early spring I like ducks; in May I like warblers, shorebirds, and vagrants; in fall I like hawks. My favorites change with the season and conditions.

Favorite places to bird in Minnesota: Blue Earth County (too many places to list), Sax-Zim Bog, Minnesota River Valley, Nicollet County, and Felton Prairie.

Favorite place to bird outside of Minnesota: Denali National Park, AK for wilderness birding; Milwaukee harbor in winter for Snowy Owls, gulls, and diving ducks; and Platte River in Nebraska in March, just for the sheer volume of birds.

Birding style (i.e. by yourself, with others, etc.): I like birding with other people, but need time to search for birds on my own to recharge as well. Birding for an hour is not worth it. I need 4–6 hours at a time to really have fun (and big days are just long enough).

Best advice on how to be a better birder: Spend as much time in the field as possible and while you are there train your ear. Bird songs and calls are best learned in small pieces with much effort, which helps us remember. When I first started birding, I chased a buzzing song for 15 minutes before I learned it was a Golden-winged Warbler. I learned the song of the Orange-crowned Warbler much quicker, but only after I committed to walking toward a distant Grizzly Bear to learn the source. It turns out that adrenaline also helps you remember. A trained ear will help you notice more birds and help you discern when you hear something new or out of range.

The main attraction or joy of birding for you: I love the diversity of birds and their behavior, coupled with the

change of characters in each season and the unpredictability of bird distribution during migration. It combines the challenge of identification with the spirit of exploration.

Interests/hobbies when you're not birding: Not birding? Okay, I do a little photography and gardening and like spending time with my family. I also have really fallen in love with collecting and identifying spiders to determine their distribution in Minnesota — a big knowledge gap (MN Life List: 129/453).

What new bird you would like to see the most: Isn't that like picking a favorite? Hmmm...maybe Parasitic Jaeger.

Black-throated Green Warbler, photo by Richard Phillips



MOU Awards & Recognitions Nominations Due

by *Kim R. Eckert*

It's again that time of year when the MOU Awards & Recognitions Committee is beginning to look for nominees to be recognized for their contributions to the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union. This annual tradition of recognition takes the form of presenting the Thomas S. Roberts, Brother Theodore Voelker, and Young Birder awards to the recipients at the MOU Papers Session on December 6, 2014.

Since 1963, the Thomas S. Roberts Award has traditionally been our lifetime achievement award: "For Outstanding Contributions to Minnesota Ornithology and Birding" as stated on the plaque. Previous recipients have contributed to the MOU in many different ways which were sometimes not directly related to ornithology or birding. (Also note that the policy has been that a person would only receive this award once, although apparently nothing specifically has ever stated this.)

The Brother Theodore Voelker Award is "For Special Achievement in Field Ornithology" during the past year, which would be from November 2012 through October 2013. The original intent in 1988 was that this recipient's achievement would be related to field ornithology in one of three categories: significant bird sighting(s); some-

thing written (e.g., journal article, book, or technical paper); or a field research project. In more recent years, involvements in special events, conservation, mentoring, and education have also been included in the criteria for this award.

The Young Birder Award is for someone under 25 years old contributing to knowledge of Minnesota birds or to the MOU, as it reads on the plaque: "For Contributions to Birding in Minnesota." This is our newest award, presented for the first time in 2005.

Note that the names of all previous recipients of these awards can be found on the MOU website: <http://moumn.org/awards.html>. Accordingly, please contact me if you have someone in mind for any of these awards and include his or her qualifications and contributions which you feel would make your nominee a worthy recipient. I would like to receive all nominations no later than October 15, and the committee thanks you in advance for your interest and input in these awards.

*Kim R Eckert, Chairman
MOU Awards and Recognition Committee
eckertkr@gmail.com or 218 349 5953*

New Members

Christine Herwig, *Bemidji MN*
Daniel Kneip, *Cold Spring MN*
Carol J Mork & Hillary J Freeman, *Grand Marais MN*
Jason Olson, *Blue Earth MN*
Michael Sonnek, *Mapleton MN*

Submission Deadline for MN Birding:

November/December issue: September 25



Savannah Sparrow, photo by Raymond Tervo

Faribault County Wood Stork

by Wayne Feder



Wood Stork, photo by Chad Heins

The day following a horrific storm on Friday, June 20th, I received a call from my friend Jason Olson stating that he had discovered a large white bird with black wing tips in his grove. Jason is a good naturalist, so I suspected the bird must be unusual. Whooping Crane and Wood Stork crossed my mind as I hurried to his farm near Blue Earth.

Jason and his men were repairing a storm-damaged building when he pointed out the area the bird had been seen. I walked around a metal shed and there, about 40 yards away in a small pond next to a cornfield, was a Wood Stork. I took a couple of photos from where I was, then moved a little closer and took more photos. The pictures were acceptable, despite the falling rain.

I talked again with Jason, told him what the bird was, and asked if he cared if the sighting was posted on MOU-net. I let him know that, if he concurred, he would be getting a lot of visitors. Jason smiled and immediately agreed to share the Stork with others.

I resumed my trip to Minneapolis and called my birding friend Chris Thiem who lives in Mankato. He rounded up Tom Dahlen and Chad Heins and they drove

to Blue Earth to see the bird that evening. They found the stork actively feeding in the northwest corner of the property, near where I had seen it. Through a series of communications with Chad, the sighting was posted on MOU-net.

Word spread rapidly across the birding community. As far as I know, no birder had a Wood Stork on their Minnesota list. I live only four miles from Jason's farm and stopped by several times; soon it was almost as fun seeing all the birders as it was the bird. At one time on Saturday I counted 30 birders and another time over 20. Late in the day Saturday, the stork left its secluded area along the west tree line and began foraging and wandering around the farmstead. It seemed to have no fear of humans; at one time it passed within a few feet of the amazed crowd of birders.

On Sunday the bird was seen lifting high in the air and moving to another farm grove a half-mile north of the Olson farm. Here the owner was also working in his storm-damaged grove. The bird could be observed from the road at this location while it perched in a tree and fed along the north edge of the trees. At one time a small dog attacked the stork, but was fended off by the bird.

The bird later returned to its former sanctuary along the west side of Jason's farm. On Monday, June 23rd, I received a phone call from Jason's father saying that all the visitors were beginning to disrupt their work activities. The Olsons own a prairie seed company and the farm site is used for cleaning and packing their products. He asked that their invitation be removed from MOU-net.

I returned to Jason's farm two more times that week. In both cases the stork was found in the same area along the west side of the property. I noticed that it had several lateral scratches across its beak, most likely due to its encounter with the dog, and did not appear as vigorous as it had earlier. The bird remained for most of that week before it disappeared, apparently moving on.

Although the Wood Stork was not in the best shape when it was last sighted, there is still much to celebrate here. Not only were many Minnesota birders able to add this rare species to their state list, but this is another example where a non-birding entity kindly granted permission to view a rare bird. Birders in turn were respectful when the property was no longer available for viewing. For his hospitality, Jason Olson received an MOU Certificate of Appreciation.



Minnesota Ornithologists' Union

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The Mission of the M.O.U.

We foster the study and conservation of birds by amateurs and professionals. We promote the conservation of birds and their natural habitats. We support these aims primarily by publishing and sharing information, by serving as a repository for records, by conducting field trips, by awarding grants for research, and by supporting programs that educate members and the public about birds.

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Send to: Elizabeth Bell, MOU Membership Secretary
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The Savaloja Fund supports research and other projects selected by the MOU for special attention. Your contributions help fund a better future for birds in Minnesota. You can add a contribution to your membership check.

Amount: \$ _____