



WASHTENAW
AUDUBON SOCIETY
NEWSLETTER

January/February 2012

Bounty of Gulls at December Trip to Landfill

By Roberts W. French Jr. and Monty Brown

Each December, Rob French leads a trip to the county landfill in Salem Township to find unusual gulls among the thousands of Herring and Ring-billed Gulls that forage there. Access to the landfill is closely guarded, so this trip can accommodate only roughly a dozen birders each year. (Washtenaw Audubon members are given priority.) That constraint is mitigated to some extent by the simple truth that this is not a field trip for the casual or fair-weather birder. In recent years, the trip has tended to fall on unusually cold days, and the wind on the heights of the landfill, where the group spends most of its time, can be



fierce—not to mention that scanning patiently through birds picking at garbage is just not for everyone.

Gull enthusiasts and those looking for late additions to their annual, county, regional, and other lists did not go home disappointed from the most recent of these outings, on December 3. On the contrary, they were rewarded with the highest number of gull species—six—that the trip has yielded in quite some time. In addition to Herring and Ring-billed, the group found no less than five Lesser Black-backed Gulls (three adults, 2 second-winter specimens), two Iceland Gulls (one in its first winter, and one that Rob judged to be a second-winter bird based on the bill), one Glaucous Gull (adult), and one Thayer's Gull (first-winter). Moreover, the group found what they believed to be a "Nelson's" gull, a hybrid between Herring and Glaucous (*see photos by Don Chalfont*). All in all, these were stellar results. Photographs of the second-winter Iceland Gull were later circulated to several gull



experts who concluded that while likely not a Thayer's Gull, they believed it had some characteristics that put it in a tricky "too close to call" intermediate area between Thayer's and Iceland. Look for photos on our website so you can make your own decision! Although the outing on December 3 was the warmest in several years, it was still bone-chilling. All the more impressive, therefore, was the participation of Jacco Gelderloos and Andy Dettling, who cycled out to the landfill, froze their fannies off, then cycled back home. This was all part of the remarkable Big Green Big Year that they pursued in 2011. They will discuss that "BGBY" as the featured speakers at Washtenaw Audubon's monthly meeting in March.

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Dear Friends,

As we launch into 2012, I want to start by wishing you a Happy New Year filled with good health and good birding. With a few weeks of 2012 behind us, what better time to make one last New Year's resolution, or perhaps your one and only? Let me suggest a fun, guilt-free version of this age-old tradition; a resolution that focuses on fun and fulfillment rather than discipline and deprivation!

Perhaps this will be your Big Year. If so, I wish you an exciting journey. For most of us, rest assured there are several more manageable options. You might want to study the avifauna of a new region - better yet, maybe in preparation for a wonderful birding trip. Perhaps you just want to get to more Washtenaw Audubon meetings and outings- we'd love to have you! If you're newer to birding, maybe this is a good time to learn more songs and calls and plan to get out in the field more often, despite the plethora of distractions that life throws at you. As for me, I've been encouraged by a family member to keep a county list- something I've never done before. I am looking forward to this in part because there is no measure for success or failure- it just is. The benefits seem endless: fresh air, guilt-less exercise, and most importantly, a growing understanding of the bird life in Washtenaw county.

Specifically, my plan is to carry a simple check list and log the dates and locations of my sightings. So over the course of the year, whatever time I can devote to birding, I'll be getting a glimpse of the local timing of migration, gaining a greater appreciation of the natural resources within Washtenaw county, and hopefully discovering a few gems along the way. In the future, this listing will become a personal record that I can reference to compare one year to the next and a guide of sorts- pointing me to when and where I might find a particular bird of interest. And better yet, I can enter my data into eBird, sharing my data with other birders and helping to build a local picture of bird distribution.

Don't forget to check our website (and the rest of this newsletter) for wonderful winter birding opportunities in the coming months.

Happy Birding,

Sue Johnson
President

Thank you and Congratulations! *By Sue Johnson*

On behalf of the members of the Board, I would like to extend a special thank you to those who responded with year-end gifts to Washtenaw Audubon, above and beyond their WAS memberships.

In our November/December newsletter Dea Armstrong wrote about the new donor page on our website (<http://www.washtenawaudubon.org/donate.php>). Like any non-profit, the income from memberships or annual fund drives helps defray a portion of the costs. The additional gifts from our members allows us to more generously support causes dear to us: helping our young birders attend birding camps, supporting research at local bird observatories, inviting special guest speakers, and providing outreach materials for local ecological events. *(Continued on the next page)*

Rare Bird Alerts

Michigan Bird Report

<http://birdingonthe.net/birdmail.html>

Scroll down to Michigan, Mich-listers, and SE Michigan

Field Trip Report: The Big Sit *By Monty Brown*

The Big Sit is a low-key international birding competition. Don Chalfant has participated in it now for fourteen years, almost always joined by Roger Wykes. The task is to try to identify by sight or sound as many bird species as possible while remaining in a circle of 17 feet in diameter (around 220 square feet). Don and Roger set up each year a short distance past the guard gate at Independence Lake County Park in Webster Township.

This year's Big Sit took place on October 9, and Don and Roger were joined by a sixteen other birders on an unusually warm day for that time of year. The action started early, as always, with owling well before dawn. The results were terrific, with four species heard. Some of the early birders weren't early enough to have heard Eastern Screech, Great Horned, or Saw Whet (ouch!), but six birders were already present by the time the first-ever Barred Owl recorded at this Big Sit called from across the lake. Other first-time species included Wild Turkey, Pileated Woodpecker, Swainson's Thrush, Red-eyed Vireo, and Lincoln's Sparrow. One might have figured that the warm weather and winds from the south would lead to worse-than-usual results. But in fact, the species tally for the day was 58, the second highest total recorded at this site for a Big Sit. We thank all who participated in this outing, and also give a special thank-you to the Merlin that was courteous enough to fly directly over the count area.

Thank you and Congratulations

(Continued from previous page)

In just two months, we received over \$500 in additional donations. Thank you for including Washtenaw Audubon in your 2011 charitable donations!

I would also like to extend kudos to Washtenaw Audubon past president, Ray Stocking. At the end of 2011, Ray was asked to serve on the Board of Michigan Audubon, a wise move on their part, and great news for Washtenaw Audubon. Congratulations, Ray!

Surprises on Belle Isle Trip *By Monty Brown*

A morning outing at Belle Isle on Saturday, November 19 was characterized by surprises, a couple pleasant ones and one that was disappointing. The outing was officially led by Don Burlett, president of Oakland Audubon, and it brought together nearly thirty birders from three local Audubon societies: Erie Shores, Oakland, and Washtenaw. Renowned Michigan birder Allen Chartier also came, and was a de facto co-leader for the trip. The outing itself was successful in terms of the targeted water birds, but the songbirds we searched for in the interior of the island were remarkably scarce.

The most bountiful locations for birds were the American side of the Detroit River and the lake at the eastern tip of the island, near the Nature Zoo (formerly the Nature Center). In addition to the typical gulls for the season--Bonaparte's, Herring and Ring-billed--the group found numerous duck species: Mallard, American Black, Gadwall, Canvasback, Redhead, Ring-necked, Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Red-breasted and Hooded Merganser, and Ruddy. The duck highlight was a pair of female Surf Scoters that Allen noticed at a great distance. The group was able to get extended good looks at these birds off the west end of the island.

The river had Tundra and Mute Swans and Horned Grebes; we also saw Pied-billed Grebes in the east-end lake. In addition to a few Great Blue Herons, we got to see a juvenile Black-crowned Night Heron that has been in an estuary at the south-east end of the park. It was very well camouflaged in the bare brush, except for its piercing orange eye. Don also located a lingering Osprey scanning the lake. It stayed put long enough for everyone to see it in one of the many spotting scopes people brought.

The birding in the interior woods was tough. The group split in two, with Don leading one and Allen the other, but both groups ended up seeing more or less the same few birds. There was a Red-tailed Hawk and a Cooper's Hawk, a fair number of Blue Jays, and Red-bellied, Hairy, and Downy Woodpeckers. A small offshoot of Allen's group briefly saw a Fox Sparrow, but no other sparrow of any species was found in the woods, and only White-throated Sparrows were present at the Nature Zoo feeders. Not a single Dark-eyed Junco was seen all morning, and the only chickadees, titmice, or goldfinches seen were at the feeders. One consolation as the day ended was the sight and sound of a Belted Kingfisher at close range. The total species count for the outing was 48. Not a bad total considering the scarcity of passerines.

The 65th Ann Arbor CBC – December 17, 2011

In marked contrast to last year's distinctly frosty weather preceding our CBC, the weeks leading up to this year's count were decidedly mild. By the time count day arrived, there was no snow on the ground (a first for me on a CBC, I believe) and essentially all bodies of water were ice-free. What impact this would have on our count results was unclear, but my guess was that the mild weather would either keep semi-hardy species here (making for an interesting count), or would allow birds to spread out all over our count circle (making for a difficult count). Count day would tell....

Owling parties were out in all but one count area, on a windless night under cloudy skies. Still, these seemingly ideal conditions did not result in the hoped-for owling bonanza. Many owlers commented on how hard owls were to come by, with many birds coming in to tape recordings, but not calling in response. Challenging stuff for sure; still, 26 Screech-Owls and 18 Great Horned Owls were recorded, the later well above the 10-year average. Interestingly, in my count area (F), we had the best year for owls ever with 6 Screech and 2 Great Horneds. Odd stuff when compared to the other owlers' predicament.

Possibly due to the pleasant weather, a good number of observers were out during the day. Of the 61 field observers, a whopping 13 were under 19, a very positive trend for sure. Only 2 feeder watchers turned in reports, though. Temperatures were basically steady in the upper 20s throughout the day, with a few morning flurries turning into a more steady light snow. All in all, not a bad day to be out weather-wise.

As it turned out, my second guess would be the right one. Most area leaders described their results as "mundane" or "nothing special" and the day as "uneventful." Many areas reported low species numbers, but with all tallies combined we ended up with a species count of 68 that was only slightly below the average for the period 2001-2010 (69.8); the total number of birds counted (36,570) was only 2% below the average for the same period (37,224). As always, this can be attributed to the fluctuations in the numbers of American Crows counted, which over these years has been as low as 4,800 to as high as 29,000. Note that this year's tally for American Crow falls almost smack-dab in the middle of that continuum.

Comparing this year's conditions of open water with last year's almost totally frozen water made for an interesting contrast in waterfowl reports: in 2010, 17 species were tallied, this year only 14. Clearly, the abundance of open water left our ducks and geese with plenty of habitat (likely farther north as well), thus making waterfowl relatively hard to locate. Our two swan species made for an interesting contrast: Mutes were steady compared to last year (about 50), whereas Trumpeter numbers were only half as high as last year (15 v. 33). Possibly, the mild weather allowed 'our' Trumpeters to stay in their breeding haunts (such as the Scio Church & Parker marsh), which tend to be outside of our count circle. The same may have been true for Belted Kingfishers – the lone bird reported was 80% below the 10-year average!

Daytime raptors were well-represented on this year's CBC, with a very respectable 9 species reported on count day and 1 count week species (Turkey Vulture). Falcons put on a good showing (due to lack of snow cover?), with 1 Peregrine, 2 Merlins (a record high), and 4 American Kestrels. The latter was below the 10-year average of 6, but at least we managed another year with more than 1 Kestrel reported.

Wild Turkeys continued their upward trend of late, with 3 count areas reporting a total of 62 birds – I would be willing to bet that within five years or so Turkeys will be reported from every count area in our circle! The same cannot be said for Ring-necked Pheasants – no Pheasants were tallied on this year's count for the second year in a row. Could they be going the way of the Ruffed Grouse and the Northern Bobwhite? Time will tell, but it's not boding well.

No mention this year of massive numbers of woodpeckers in our circle this year; both Downy and Red-bellied Woodpecker numbers were down quite a bit compared to last year and Hairy Woodpecker and Northern Flickers were present in average numbers. No Sapsuckers or Red-headed Woodpeckers were found, but the second-ever Pileated Woodpecker showed up (the first was in 2008). Let's hope this handsome species continues its march into our count circle!

There were few notable reports for passerines, with the 224 Eastern Bluebirds surpassing last year's record tally of 217. Most of our count's bread and butter species showed up in rather normal numbers, likely reflecting the fact that the mild weather caused birds to be spread out thinly all over the circle. Of note in a negative sense was the near-absence of the evergreen specialists (Red-breasted Nuthatch and Golden-crowned Kinglet). Only counters in Saginaw Forest turned up 2 and 1, respectively, of these normally more common species – perhaps the mild weather allowed the bulk of these birds to stay farther north?

All in all, the sum of the rather underwhelming parts of our count circle added up to a (surprisingly) average CBC. One or two record tallies, a few rather low counts, a handful of notable finds, and a handful of notable (near-) misses. A little something for everyone, then - please take a look at the summary spreadsheet on the next page. To put our results in a regional or national perspective, check out the National Audubon CBC website at <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc/hr/index.html>.

As always, a heart-felt thank you to all volunteers that helped make this year's count a smoothly run event once again – without you, counters, area leaders, and potluck/feeder watch coordinators, our count would not be as well-oiled a machine as it is. Thank you and see you all next year!

Canada Goose	2,929	Peregrine Falcon	1	Brown Creeper	4
Mute Swan	50	Merlin	2 (HC)	Carolina Wren	12
Trumpeter Swan	15	American Coot	41	Golden-crowned Kinglet	1
Gadwall	6	Ring-billed Gull	176	Eastern Bluebird	224 (HC)
American Black Duck	8	American Herring Gull	4	Hermit Thrush	2
Mallard	1,074	Rock Pigeon	1,360	American Robin	1,064
Lesser Scaup	1	Mourning Dove	309	European Starling	4,169
Ring-necked Duck	2	Eastern Screech-Owl	26	Cedar Waxwing	219
Common Goldeneye	22	Great Horned Owl	18	Yellow-rumped Warbler	11
Bufflehead	18	Belted Kingfisher	1	American Tree Sparrow	378
Hooded Merganser	11	Red-bellied Woodpecker	103	Song Sparrow	11
Common Merganser	32	Downy Woodpecker	159	Swamp Sparrow	1
Pied-billed Grebe	1	Hairy Woodpecker	32	White-throated Sparrow	32
Wild Turkey	62	Northern Flicker	34	Dark-eyed Junco	600
Great Blue Heron	6	Pileated Woodpecker	1 (US)	Snow Bunting	4
Turkey Vulture	CW	Northern Shrike	1	Northern Cardinal	396
Bald Eagle	1	Blue Jay	348	Common Grackle	1
Northern Harrier	1	American Crow	19,850	House Finch	342
Sharp-shinned Hawk	1	Horned Lark	1	Purple Finch	CW
Cooper's Hawk	19	Black-capped Chickadee	658	Pine Siskin	28
Red-tailed Hawk	94	Tufted Titmouse	207	American Goldfinch	487
Red-shouldered Hawk	1	Red-breasted Nuthatch	2	House Sparrow	726
American Kestrel	4	White-breasted Nuthatch	166	Total	36,570

CW = count week only

HC = high count

US = unusual species

Upcoming WAS Field Trips (February--April, 2012)

By Monty Brown, Field Trip Coordinator (fieldtrips@washtenawaudubon.org)

Washtenaw Audubon field trips are free and open to the public unless otherwise indicated. For more information, go to our webpage. Changes and updates will be made via our Twitter service, the birders@umich.edu listserv and/or our web page at www.washtenawaudubon.org/fieldtrips.php with updates as needed. If you have a suggestion for a field trip, please send an e-mail.

Feb 3 -- Feb 5 **Birding the Soo:** Leaders: Lathe Claflin and Gary Siegrist This is a perennially popular trip, jointly sponsored by the Jackson and Washtenaw Audubon societies. **The number of participants is limited, and registration is now full; you can get on the standby list though, by contacting Lathe (517-522-3949) or Gary (517-522-5990).** There is a \$20 charge for the trip, and individuals are also responsible for their own food and lodging costs.

Mar. 11 **Washtenaw Waterfowl :** Join Dea Armstrong for a tour of local waterfowl hotspots. This is a wonderful introduction to birding and great first field trip for a new birder! Meet at the far end of the Park-n-Ride lot at Plymouth Road and US 23 at 9:00 AM. PLEASE NOTE: THIS IS THE FIRST SUNDAY OF DAYLIGHT SAVINGS TIME, SO DO NOT FORGET TO SET YOUR CLOCKS THE NIGHT BEFORE! Please dress for the weather, assuming that it will feel much colder on the banks of the rivers and lakes that we will be visiting. Bring a drink and snack if you think you might need one. PLEASE ALSO NOTE: Sometimes local lakes are still frozen on March 11. If that is the case this year, we'll put out a notice on birders@umich.edu and on the Washtenaw Audubon field trip webpage, and we'll move the trip to the following Sunday. Finally, bring binoculars and a spotting scope if you have them, but these are not required.

March 31 **Transition of Seasons in Van Buren (Wayne County) and Superior Townships**

Leaders: Cathy Carroll and Ed Lewandowski. At this outing we will join forces with the Oakland Audubon Society to look for gulls and other species found in eastern Washtenaw and western Wayne counties in the late winter-early spring. Meet at the Tulip Tree Picnic Area of Lower Huron Metropark, just down the road in the park from Edison Lake at 8 AM. Bring a lunch or snack and be prepared for weather of any sort. Please note that a \$5 daily fee or a Metropark pass is required for all cars.

April 28 or **Salamander Search at Hudson Mills Metropark**

April 29

Please check our webpage for forthcoming details on this and other trips.

Birding Mentors Needed for Local Science Olympiad Teams.

Washtenaw Audubon Society (WAS) is pleased to announce that we are helping the Washtenaw Elementary Science Olympiad (WESO) build a new event for this year's Science Olympiad. The new event will be called "Our Feathered Friends". The WESO Science Olympiad is an alternative to traditional science fairs and is now the largest Science Olympiad in the country. We are thrilled to be a part of this event and to bring the world of birds to the program.

How does it work? Teams from individual elementary schools participate in skills/knowledge demonstrations/contests. Students prepare for these events throughout the school year. Events offered are designed to recognize the wide variety of student skills. This ensures that everyone can participate. "Coaches", (usually volunteers from students' parents) from each school and discipline help students understand the subject matter and begin teaching in early January. Preparation continues until the tournament takes place, which will be held this year on April 21st, 2012, at Pioneer High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. There will be outstanding opportunities to take students out for bird walks as the spring migration nears.

How can you can help? WAS is seeking current members who are interested in helping coach a local school. We are also seeking members who are interested in helping prepare for this event. If interested in either option, please contact Dea Armstrong (ddarm@umich.edu or 734-276-9372). Time investment should be brief.

For more information about WESO and Science Olympiad see <http://www.aaps.k12.mi.us/wesowizards.home/home>

The New Michigan Recreation Passport is Great! CHECK YES!

When you renew your license plate this time around, be sure to check YES to get a \$10 recreation passport. The passport is good for the same amount of time as your license plate and the \$10 fee gets you into all 98 state parks and recreation areas (no more need to buy those annual or day passes!). As a bonus, your money helps preserve:

- 133 state forest campgrounds
- Nearly 1,000 miles of hiking, biking and skiing trails
- Parks in your own community

A few other facts:

- The Recreation Passport replaces the state park sticker.
- Camping fees will remain in effect for state parks and in state forests.

Questions? Call 517-241-7275

http://www.michigan.gov/dnr/0,1607,7-153-10365_55798_56688-234626--,00.html

Do you like WAS? Well, do you **LIKE** WAS?

If you belong to Facebook, please go to our Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/washtenawaudubon>. If you have not "liked" us yet, please do so first. On the bottom left side of the page you will see a link that says "SHARE" - click on this. Add a personal note to your FB friends to "like" our page. I had two local friends who I never expected to like the page actually follow through. Future members??? Hit Send. Sit back and wait for the LIKES to come in. That's it.

To become a member of Washtenaw Audubon Society, please complete the form below (or a copy) and mail it with a check or money order payable to **Washtenaw Audubon Society - WAS Membership PO Box 130923, Ann Arbor, MI 48113**

_____ RENEWAL _____ NEW MEMBER

Membership Dues:

_____ ADDITIONAL DONATION \$ _____

_____ Individual/Household \$20
(with printed newsletter \$25)

Name: _____

_____ Student \$10
(emailed newsletters only)

Address: _____

_____ Senior \$10
(with printed newsletter \$15)

Phone: _____ Email: _____

_____ Patron \$50

We encourage you to join at a lower rate if the suggested rates would otherwise preclude your membership, or at a higher rate if you possess the means.

Note: WAS will only use your email address to communicate with you about WAS programs, field trips, or matters of interest to you, such as membership renewal, and emailed WAS newsletters (in color!). We will not give your email address to anyone else.

WAS Monthly Programs

WAS monthly events usually are held on the third Wednesday of the month. Programs begin at 7:30pm at U-M Matthaei Botanical Gardens, 1800 Dixboro Road, Ann Arbor. Free and open to the public. Call 677-3275 if you have questions about the program.

Please note: *beginning January 9, 2012, the Matthaei Botanical Gardens will stop charging admission to their Conservatory, and will begin charging for parking at the rate of \$1.20 an hour, enforced 7 days a week from 8am to 8pm. Members of the Matthaei Botanical Gardens and Nichols Arboretum will continue to park for free. The parking fee will bring the Garden's policies into alignment with other University of Michigan venues, and provide revenue to maintain the Gardens. Note that if you arrive at 7:15pm for a 7:30pm Washtenaw Audubon program, you will only have to pay 90 cents to park for the 45 minutes before enforcement ends at 8pm. For your convenience, the parking kiosks accept coins and bills, for which change is provided, and credit cards. Consider arriving early on some cold winter evening and basking in the warmth and tropical greenery of the Conservatory for only a nominal parking fee, before the Audubon program begins.*

Jan. 18 **Plovers, Parrots, and Primates of Uganda and Rwanda:** Reflections on natural history explorations of volcanoes, savannas, rain forests and other Rift Valley habitats in search of birds, chimps, gorillas, and the mystique of east central Africa. Join Will Weber for this nature-focused program about these two equatorial Africa countries. Will and his wife Joan are the founding owners and directors of Journeys International, an Ann Arbor-based ecotour company offering group and private nature and culture trips throughout the world.

Feb. 15 **A Year at Whitefish Point** Spend a year at Whitefish Point with Michael Kielb, who has devoted much time to this far north bit of Michigan, on the shores of Lake Superior, watching migration as the seasons change. Michael teaches biology at Eastern Michigan University, and is a board member of Whitefish Point Bird Observatory.

Mar. 21 **Superbirders of Southeast Michigan** Ride with Andy Dettling and Jacco Gelderloos as they set the standard for Green Big Years. Using only their feet and bicycles, these Iron Birders have sighted a remarkable number of bird species over the course of the calendar year, in most cases outperforming those birding wimps who have used automobiles in previous big year attempts. Hear their tales of death-defying rides in pre-dawn hours, in rain, snow, and heavy traffic as they work their Big Green Big Years, known as BGBYs! (Pronounced "Bigbee.")

Washtenaw Audubon Society

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