



# The Meadowlark Messenger

ChampaignCountyAudubon.org

Champaign County Audubon Society • A Chapter of the National Audubon Society

## *Location of the Month: River Bend Forest Preserve*

*By Colin Dobson, CCAS President*

Located only twenty minutes northwest of Champaign and only five minutes southwest of Mahomet, River Bend Forest Preserve is a large public property that is owned by the Champaign County Forest Preserve District. The large quarry lakes, mixed with shrubland habitat along the entrance road, and bottomland forests that border the western and northern portions of the park, make this an ideal spot to see a wide array of species. River Bend is particularly worth a visit in February and March because waterfowl like to congregate here during the coldest periods or during spring migration, as the lakes at this property are one of the only locations providing deep water habitat in Champaign County.

Recently, plenty of uncommon species for Champaign County have been found here, including both Trumpeter and Tundra Swans, as well as plenty of ducks including Common Merganser! The two best locations to view the water are from the main boat ramp at the end of the entrance road and through trees along the north side of Mid American



*Bufflehead is one of more expected diving duck species at Riverbend from late fall to early spring!  
Photo by Colin Dobson.*

Road, although more water can be viewed by a short walk east on the trail from the east side of the main parking area. April is a great month to search for a couple Common Loons that can be found on the lakes as well, typically in full breeding plumage! The shrubland and the bottomland forests can be particularly birdy for warblers and sparrows during migration. Pay attention to what is in front of you, an American Woodcock or two have been flushed off of trails along here before (their abundance peaks in March and April)!

*View past programs on our YouTube channel. Access details and more information can be found on our website:  
[www.champaigncountyaudubon.org/birdwalks-and-programs](http://www.champaigncountyaudubon.org/birdwalks-and-programs)*

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Champaign County Audubon publishes *The Meadowlark Messenger* nine times per year. **Comments regarding the newsletter, or articles for submission, are welcome.**

**Contact us!**

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*Winter Wren. Photo by Jeff Bryant.*

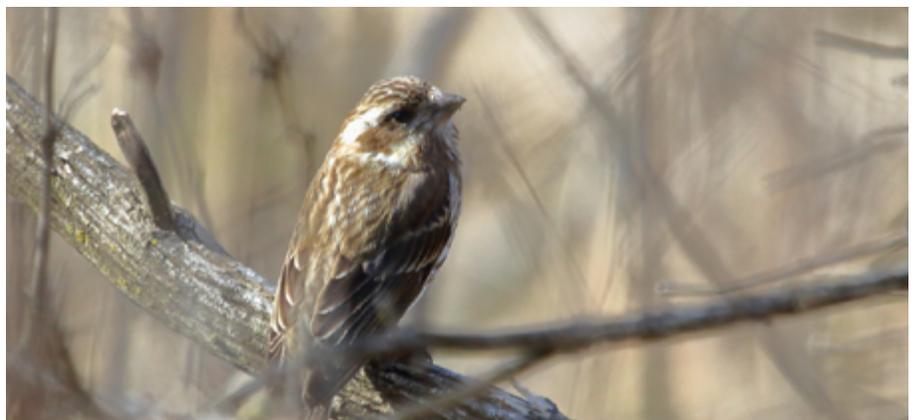
**Field Notes**

*Colin Dobson, CCAS President*

The 2023 Champaign County Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was held on December 16, 2023. The weather for the count was less than ideal, besides warmer temperatures in the low 40s, rain and wind all day made counting birds quite a challenge. Overall, 70 species were found in the count circle by 23 participants!

The most noteworthy species were 2 American Black Ducks, 11 species of waterfowl, Winter Wren, 2 Orange-crowned Warblers, and large numbers of both Purple Finches and Pine Siskins. There were plenty of great count week species, species that were seen within three days before or after the count day but were not found during the count. These include Great Egret, Turkey Vulture, and even a Baltimore Oriole the next day at a feeder in St. Joseph.

Thanks again to those that participated this year; we are looking forward to next year's CBC! Do not forget about the Great Backyard Bird Count February 16 to 19 (<https://www.birdcount.org/>) or the Spring Bird Count that will be May 4. Stay tuned to our newsletter and social media for upcoming events!



*Purple Finch. Photo by Jeff Bryant.*

## Bird of the Month

*Roger Digges, CCAS Vice President*

This month's bird is one which you can find anywhere in the United States, except the Southwest, and anywhere in Canada, except the far north. It is a bird that is usually easy to find if you spend enough time around trees and, even better, is very easy to attract to your yard so long as there are trees relatively close, and you provide appropriate food.

The **Downy Woodpecker** is the smallest member of its family in North America, a little larger than a sparrow. You can hear their short descending staccato call or their sharp "pik"

as they forage for insects inside wood or tree bark. Like most woodpeckers, they have an undulating flight pattern and tend to cling upright in trees or stems, bracing against them with their stiff tail feathers. Downies have a black and white striped head, white underparts and back, and black on the upper part of its wings, which are marked with white

spots further down. Like many birds, this woodpecker is somewhat sexually dimorphic. The male has a bright red spot on the nape of its head, which the female lacks that spot.

Before we look at downy woodpecker's nesting habits and how to attract them to your yard, I should tell you that, like last month's Cooper's Hawk, this bird has a look-alike. Only unlike the Sharp-shinned Hawk, which was smaller than the Cooper's, the Hairy Woodpecker is larger than the downy, about half again as big.

This may not help you with separating the two, as it's hard to compare the size of birds when they are some distance away. While there are subtle differences, I use the relative length of the beak as a good marker. The beak of a Downy Woodpecker is relatively small; it is considerably shorter than the distance between the

base of its beak and the back of its head. The hairy has a longer, narrower bill, about as long as the distance between the its base and the back of the hairy's head. Since downies are much more common than hairies, I usually assume the black and white woodpecker I see is a downy, unless it looks large or its bill seems huge.

When it's nesting time, both male and female spend 1 to 3 weeks excavating a round hole about 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter and 6 to 12 inches deep at the entrance and that widens further down to make room for the incubating birds and their eggs. Male and female take turns on the nest for around 2 weeks after the female lays 3 to 8 white eggs. They also take turns feeding the nestlings in the nearly 3 weeks it takes their young to

be able to fly and begin to forage for themselves.

Downy Woodpeckers are attracted to feeders that provide them suet or black oil sunflower seeds. Planting trees or large shrubs in your yard allows them to forage for their own food. Like all woodpeckers, downies are not songbirds, although

both sexes make their rapid whinnying call during the breeding season. Like most woodpeckers, they "drum" on any resonating surface, a tree, a utility pole, wooden shingles, or even metal flashing. To prevent them from damaging your house, you can hang something flashy or noisy like wind chimes, pinwheels, or reflective streamers. You can cover their favorite area with bird netting. In the nearly 40 years I've been feeding birds, I've never had a problem with woodpeckers, but I know a few people who have.

[Partners in Flight](#) estimate that there are 13 million Downy Woodpeckers in North America. The North America Breeding Bird Census shows that their numbers are stable. So, put out some suet or black oil sunflower seed and enjoy this energetic little woodpecker. Or go for a walk in a woodland.



*Downy Woodpecker. Photo by Jeff Bryant.*

## Citizen Science—36th Annual Bald Eagle Survey

*Roger Digges, CCAS Vice President*

In 1782, the United States Congress adopted the Bald Eagle as our national bird. At that time, an estimated 100,000 pairs of bald eagles nested in the area now occupied by the continental United States. But over time, many eagles were shot as predators, their waterways polluted, and the mature trees they nest in cut down. Despite efforts to protect our national bird, when the pesticide DDT came into wide use, eagles ingested it along with their prey, which caused female birds to lay eggs with shells so thin that they were crushed before they hatched. Eventually there were only 417 nesting pairs in the entire contiguous 48 states, just 3 in Illinois.

With the banning of DDT and the protection of rivers and river corridors, today Bald Eagles nest in all of Illinois's 102 counties. Illinois also plays host to about 3,000 of these magnificent birds, which overwinter in Illinois. We know this, in part, because of the work of hundreds of citizen scientists who have surveyed the birds every winter since 1979, when the National Wildlife Survey conducted the first midwinter eagle survey. The NWS passed the torch to the United States Geological Survey in 1997, and the US Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) accepted the responsibility of coordinating, analyzing, and reporting the survey results in 2007. Here in Illinois, the Illinois Audubon Society recruits volunteers, assigns survey routes, and reports results to USACE.

The Champaign County Audubon Society's own Helen Parker

surveyed the Illinois River from Havana to Beardstown for a number of years until she stepped down after the 2017 survey. My favorite birding



*Bald Eagle. Photo by Jeff Bryant.*

partner (also my life partner for going on 48 years) and I have been counted eagles on that route now for the past seven years. During that time, we have found as many as 55 and as few as 9 birds on our surveys.

On a relative balmy Sunday morning, January 7, 2024, Cathy Digges and I set off from Urbana to drive to the beginning of our route at the Havana riverfront on the Illinois River. We were concerned that the warm weather had prevented any ice from forming on the river, which would have concentrated the eagles and make them easier to count. The warm weather would also make roads in certain areas too muddy to get through. December and early January rains may have caused Anderson Lake to overtop the levee we used to drive to a usually quite productive lane along the river.

By this time, we had become veteran eagle surveyors. We knew that the vast majority of white spots in the trees along the river and its backwaters were not the heads of bald eagles, but clumps of snow or the scar left by a newly broken branch. We had also learned that finding immature birds, especially on a murky day like this one, against the backdrop of dark tree trunks required both of us scanning the river corridor from one bend to the next, then scanning it again. We had discovered by trial and error that

many sections of the river are inaccessible, due lack of roads or presence of private property between us and the river corridor. (Fortunately, state and federal agencies also survey using boats to cover those areas. We had made a list of where it was possible to access the river and which accesses were the most productive.

We began at the visitors' center at the north end of Havana, walked out on its dock to scan the trees upstream, drove slowly along Riverside Park and Market Street, and parked in the lot at the end of the park. Eagles were few and far between, but we did see a close flyover.

Leaving Havana, we headed down Illinois 78 for the side channel river access for the tiny community of Bath (population 279).

*(continued on page 5)*

**Welcome, New Members!**

*Solomon Hammond, Paul Thomason, Yixiao Liu*

**Welcome, New Member Donor!**

*Jeanette Lorme*

**Thank You, Renewing Members!**

*Jenny Applequist, Dwaine and Chris Keller, Todd Kinney, Brock Martin, Peggy Patten, Allan Penwell, Katherine Ryan, Zev Steinrock, Judy Strange, Grant Thomas, Alison Williams, Christine Winkless*

**Thank You, Renewing Member Donors!**

*Carla Barnwell, Van and Kathy Bowersox, David Busboom, Gene Campbell, Nancy Dietrich, Roger and Cathy Digges, Joyce Eisold, Beverly and Peter Fagan, Beverly Foote, Eric Freyfogle, Anthony Gawienowski, Robin Hall, Rich Howard, Chad Hyman, Aubrey Ishii, Ellen Jacobsen-Isserman, Douglas Jackson, Elisabeth Jenicek, Patricia Knowles, Derek Liebert, Mike and Jane McCulley, Ken Mulle, Gabriel Nardie, Susan Pollock, Belinda Porter, Brock Price, Melissa*

*Records, Kathryn Rice-Trumble, Julia Saville, Grace Schoedel, Dawn Schultz, Arthur Sievers, Marilyn and Larry Silkwood, Charlie Smyth, Mary K. Solecki, Zachary Sutton, David Thomas, Kay Thompson, Ted Veselsky, Rachel Vinsel, Sandra Volk, Shirley Walker, Ruth Wene, Mary Ellen Weullner, Joseph Williams, Laura Zick-Bottorff*

**Special Donation**

*Thank you to Janet Jokela for a generous donation.*



*Northern Harrier. Photo by Jeff Bryant.*

*(continued from page 4)*

Last year we had found 7 eagles there and heard them vocalizing loudly. This year the riverfront was silent, not an eagle to be heard or seen, until, as we pulled out, an immature bird flew over and perched across the river. Thank you very much.

We were then off to the Sanganois Fish and Wildlife Area. On the way, we saw flocks of Trumpeter Swans gleaning the fields and a Northern Harrier paralleling our car. The fish and wildlife area was almost completely ice-free, which is rare. On our way towards River Swale, which involves a dicey journey on a one-lane gravel drive with water on both sides, we saw eagles both as we drove in and out. At the swale, we walked the dike until the cold drove us back to our car. Another harrier flew within feet of us along the dike, and far off in the distance, we could make out a brilliant white spot which really was a mature eagle. We took a chance on a muddy road off “the main drag” and were rewarded not only with another eagle, but also our third harrier, as well as a Great Horned Owl in flight.

In Beardstown we had an opportunity to show eagles to a disappointed couple shivering on the riverwalk. Without binoculars (and suitable clothing), they had found no eagles. Within minutes, we glassed both a mature bird and an immature bird. We called them back and gave them a closeup view with our binoculars, the first time the woman had ever seen one.

Heading back to Havana on Illinois 100, we took roads from Frederick and Browning to access points on the river, finding eagles at both. A local man parked at Browning talked to us about the history of flooding on the river. While he was interested in the eagles we were seeing, he seemed to be much more interested in the tow pushing barges past us.

At the Anderson Lake Public Hunting Area, as we drove across the one lane dike between Anderson and Stuckey Lake, we saw a pair of eagles sharing a tree. We expected to see more when we got to the narrow lane between the river and the lake, as we have a few other years. But, alas, no eagles this year. However, on the way out, we found two large flocks of Ruddy Ducks on the lake, one all females or immature, the other all males. Not sure why.

How many eagles did we find? 17 mature birds (white heads, white tails), 6 immature birds, and 1 that it was too hard to tell in the dark overcast. We thought it a good day, considering the mild weather.

This is one of many ways that citizen scientists can help professionals assess the overall health of various bird populations. Watch our newsletter and website for ways you might be able to help.

## Coming Events

### Great Backyard Bird Count

February 16–19, 2024

The 27th annual Great Backyard Bird Count starts Feb 16! Whether you're a budding birdwatcher or a bird-count veteran, you can use your ID skills to help scientists protect birds and the places they need. #GBBC. For more information: <https://www.audubon.org/news/flock-together-great-backyard-bird-count>.

### Volunteer Event: Invasive Woody Removal

Monday, February 19, 2024

10:00 am–12:00 pm

Forest Preserve at Homer Lake, meet at Interpretive Center

CCFPD will be removing invasive species, such as autumn olive, honeysuckle, and Callery pear. Weather pending, they will likely have a burn pile so wear clothes that you don't mind getting a little smoky and follow the arrow signs once you enter the preserve. CCFPD will supply all the tools. For more information: <https://ccfpd.org/events/details/volunteer-event-invasive-woody-removal-2>. Check the March newsletter for another event CCFPD is setting up specifically for CCAS members to volunteer.

### CCAS Board Meeting

Monday, February 19, 2024, 7:00 pm

All CCAS members are welcome to attend board meetings; if you are interested in how to join, please email [mail@champaigncountyaudubon.org](mailto:mail@champaigncountyaudubon.org).

### Sunday Morning Bird Walks

Sundays, March 3–May 26

7:30–9:30 am

Anita Purves Nature Center, Urbana

All ages and skill levels welcome. Meet in the parking lot at Anita Purves Nature Center, where we'll begin our walk in the surrounding park areas. Need binoculars? No problem; we have extra pairs that can be borrowed during our bird walks.



Hairy Woodpecker.  
Photo by Jeff Bryant.



## Future Programs

Our program committee is working on some exciting events for the coming months. We hope to see you at our programs, which will resume in March. If you would like to volunteer to serve on a committee with CCAS, help guide program content or activities, review grant applications, or submit content for our newsletter, please contact us at [mail@champaigncountyaudubon.org](mailto:mail@champaigncountyaudubon.org).

### Eastern Population of the Whooping Cranes

Thursday, March 7

7:00 pm, Zoom (details to come)

Stephanie Schmidt from the International Crane Foundation will make a presentation on this population of Whooping Cranes.

### Kendeigh Grant Presentations

Thursday, April 4

7:00 pm; Zoom (details to come)

Recipients of our 2023 grant awards will present their research projects. Join to learn about the research we are helping to fund.

# Join Champaign County Audubon Society!

*Yes, I'd like to become a member!*

When you join the Champaign County Audubon Society, 100% of your dues and donations support our efforts (and they're tax deductible!).

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ CCAS Membership (\$15 due each January).

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ Additional donation to CCAS

\$ \_\_\_\_\_ **TOTAL**

### *Or Join Online!*

Save time by contributing via your mobile device or computer! [Visit our website to join or donate online.](#)

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CCAS members will be automatically enrolled to receive our newsletter by email; check this box if you would prefer to receive a **paper** copy.

Check this box if you would be interested in learning about volunteer opportunities with us.

Checks should be made payable to CCAS. Send this form and your payment to: CCAS Membership Chair, P.O. Box 882, Urbana, IL 61803-0882.

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### *Our Mission:*

*Promote interest, enjoyment, and understanding of all aspects of our natural environment, and actively encourage the protection of wildlife and native habitats.*

## Join National Audubon Society

When you join National Audubon Society you receive one year of Audubon magazine. You also have the option to receive local birding and community events delivered to your inbox from CCAS.

- **New members:** Go online to <http://bit.ly/nas-g50> or call 1-844-428-3826. Please tell them Champaign County Audubon Society sent you using our chapter code "G50."
- **Renewing members:** Go online to <http://bit.ly/renew-nas> or call 1-844-428-3826.



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