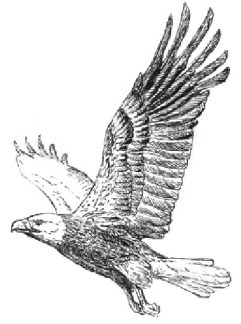




# MISSISSIPPI CURRENTS

Newsletter of the Quad City Audubon Society



## UPCOMING EVENTS

*All activities open to the public.*

Vol. 32, No 4

Winter 2021

Please observe COVID-19 protocols during membership meetings and field trips. Thank you for your help in these constantly evolving times.

**Membership Meeting - Thursday - December 9, 2021 - Pie Night!** For this in-person meeting at Butterworth Center at 7:00 pm, we will hold an election of officers for vacant positions (Secretary and 1 Board position). In addition to those individuals who have agreed to run, (Tim Murphy for Secretary, Forrest Stonedahl for Board member), we will take nominations from the floor. Following the elections, we will have a brief program on environmental issues affecting birds in our community, followed by pie and refreshments with additional discussions and greetings. Bring a pie if desired.

### The Christmas Bird Counts

**Clinton/Savanna - Tuesday - December 14, 2021.** Straddling the Mississippi River between Clinton, Iowa and Savanna, Illinois, there's room for participation in either state. Contact Kelly McKay at 309-2354661.

**Eastern Knox County - Tuesday - December 14, 2021.** This circle includes Oneida, Altona, Oak Run, Appleton, Dahinda, Victoria, Truro and Centerville in Knox County Illinois. Contact Jim Mountjoy at jmountjo@knox.edu if you would like to participate.

**Princeton/Camanche - Wednesday - December 15, 2021.** Including Princeton, Folletts, Shafton, Low Moor, McCausland and Camanche, Iowa, and Cordova, Illinois. Contact Kelly McKay at 309-235-4661 to learn more.

**Louisa Y - Thursday - December 16, 2021.** Get in on the ground floor with this new Christmas Bird Count Circle in Louisa County, Iowa. Includes the city of Columbus Junction, The Nature Conservancy Maytag Access along the Cedar River, Cone Marsh, Eden Prairie, Chinkapin Bluffs and Cairo Woods. Contact compiler Laura Semken at 319-523-8381 or lsemken@louisacountyia.gov.

**Burlington - Saturday - December 18, 2021.** Settled on Burlington Iowa, this circle includes territory along the Mississippi River in Henderson County Illinois and Des Moines County, Iowa. Contact Chuck Fuller at cfuller989@gmail.com for more information.

**Davenport (Quad Cities) - Sunday - December 19, 2021.** Covering the Iowa and Illinois Quad Cities. Contact Kelly McKay for more information. 309-235-4661.

**VanPetten - Tuesday - December 21, 2021.** Sterling/Rock Falls, Illinois, including some of the Rock River, stretching out south and east from Whiteside to Lee County, including some of Green River State Wildlife Management Area. Call Kelly McKay at 309-235-4661.

**Western Mercer County - Wednesday - December 22, 2021.** Escape the busy city in this very rural count circle. Keithsburg, Joy, New Boston, Mannon and Milersburg in Illinois, crossing the Mississippi into a piece of Louisa County, Iowa. Contact Kelly McKay at 309-235-4661 to learn more.

**Muscatine - Thursday - December 23, 2021.** Bird Muscatine and Muscatine County, Iowa, and western Rock Island County, Illinois. Contact Kelly McKay to learn more.

**Andalusia/Buffalo - Friday - December 24, 2021.** Beat the crowds and get your last minute Christmas Birding done just outside of the Quad Cities. Andalusia, Taylor Ridge, Edgington, Reynolds and Hamlet in Illinois and Buffalo, Iowa. Contact Kelly McKay for more information. 309-235-4661.

**Buchanan County - Saturday - December 25, 2021.** Give the gift of birding and start a new tradition! Do a Christmas Bird Count on Christmas Day! This circle is just a short drive north of Cedar Rapids, split by the beautiful Wapsipinicon River as it meanders from Independence through Quasqueton and beyond. Contact Kelly McKay at 309-235-4661 to get in on the action!

**Bald Bluff - Sunday - December 26, 2021.** Think rural! This count covers much of northern Henderson and a portion of western Warren County, Illinois, with a sliver across the river in Iowa. Oquawka, Rozetta, Little York and Big River State Forest. Contact Jason Monson at jmonson75@hotmail.com for more information.

**Eastern Mercer County - Sunday - January 2, 2022.** Matherville, Viola, New Windsor, Alpha, Ophiem, Sherrard, Cable, Swedona, Fyre Lake. Ring in the New Year with some new birds! Contact Jason Monson at jmonson75@hotmail.com.

**Northwest Clayton County - Monday - January 3, 2021.** Elkader, St. Olaf, Farmersburg, Gunder. All in scenic northeastern Iowa! Go north. I mean **north**, and see what all the fuss is about on this beautiful rural count. We've got the whole place to ourselves up there! Contact Kelly McKay at 309-235-4661.

**Southeast Clayton County - Tuesday - January 4, 2021.** It's not Wisconsin, but you can see it from there! Bird beautiful Clayton County Iowa. Guttenberg, Garnavillo, Elkport, Osterdock. You could be closing out the season in some beautiful country. Call Kelly McKay to get hooked. 309-235-4661.

**Bald Eagle Days - January 7th - 9th, 2022, QCCA Expo Center, Rock Island.** Quad City Audubon will assist the public with viewing Bald Eagles near Arsenal Island during Bald Eagle Days. If you would like to volunteer with Bald Eagle spotting and assisting the public, please contact Jody Millar at jmillar@mchsi.com.

On the web at [www.quadcityaudubon.org](http://www.quadcityaudubon.org), and available on Facebook.

*All membership meetings are held at the Butterworth Center, 1105 8th Street, Moline.*



Audubon

The Quad City Audubon Society is a Chapter of National Audubon Society

## OFFICERS

### President

Jody Millar-2022

### Vice President

Brian Peer-2022

### Treasurer

Bernadene Bowles-2022

### Secretary

Tim Murphy-2021

## BOARD MEMBERS

Cathy White-2022

Bob Bryant-2022

Janelle Swanberg-2021

Rueben Segura-2022

Adrianna McBride-2022

## COMMITTEE CHAIRS

### Conservation

Bob Bryant

### Field Trips

Board Members

### Membership

Tim Murphy

### Newsletter

Jason Monson

jmonson75@hotmail.com

### Publicity

Vacant

Mississippi Currents is published quarterly

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Quad City

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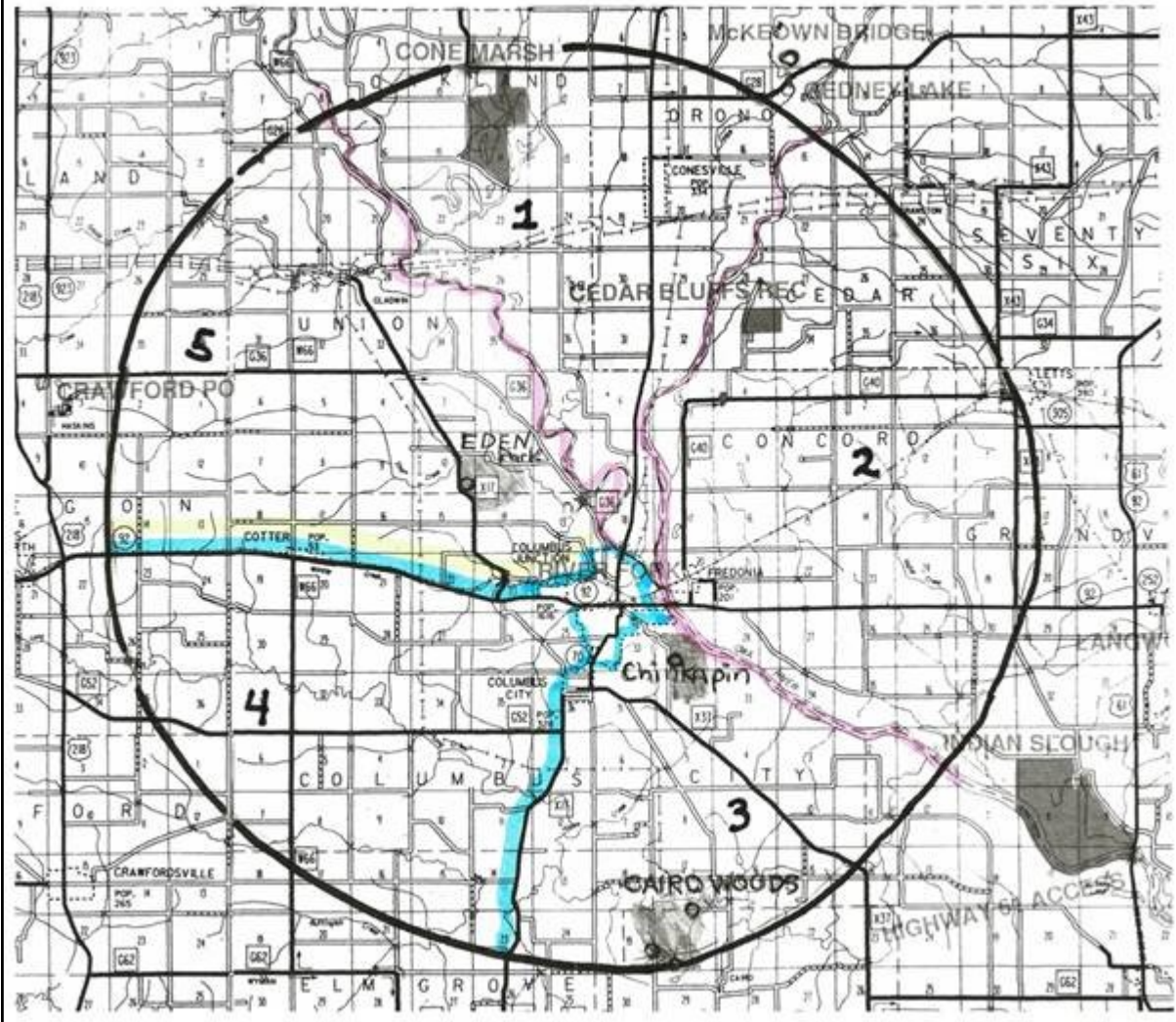
www.quadcityaudubon.org

Direct all general emails to:

qcaudubon@gmail.com

## New Christmas Bird Count Comes to Iowa!

A new Christmas Bird Count route has been established in Louisa County called Louisa Y for the first Thursday of the count. This year it will be held during daylight hours, **Thursday, December 16**. The center point is just north of Columbus Junction and the circle includes towns, woodlands, prairies, and farmland, including the Nature Conservancy Maytag Access along the Cedar River, Cone Marsh, Eden Prairie, Chinkapin Bluffs and Cairo Woods. There are 5 routes within the circle to choose from. If you are interested in being a route leader or participant, please contact Laura Semken at 319-523-8381 or [lsemken@louisacountyia.gov](mailto:lsemken@louisacountyia.gov). All experience levels welcome!



## December Membership Meeting, Officer and Board Elections, and Let's Not Forget: Pie Night!

The Quad City Audubon Society will hold an in-person meeting at 7:00 p.m. on Thursday, December 9th at the Butterworth Center, 1105 - 8th Street in Moline. This is our annual "Pie Night" at which we share pies from those who care to bring one, and enjoy a time of food and fellowship.

Prior to that, a brief business meeting will be held, at which we will vote to fill two QCAS positions. The nominating committee reports the following nominations for two-year terms: Tim Murphy for Secretary, and Forrest Stonedahl for a term on the Board. Our by-laws also provide for nominations from the floor.

After the short business meeting, QCAS Board Member Bob Bryant will present a short program entitled "The State of our Parks". We will then retreat to the dining area for pie and hot beverages. As required by current Illinois law, masks and social distancing will be required. We encourage all members of QCAS to attend this important and fun meeting; we welcome visitors as well.

- Janelle Swanberg

## *Avis Funeralis*

On a nearly summer-warm September day recently, I was driving through southern Rock Island County on the way to my daughter's cross country meet when I happened upon a deceased owl in the middle of the highway. I took care to avoid hitting it, and my eyes were drawn to my side mirror as the owl grew smaller and smaller while I tried to continue on. It only took a few seconds before I felt compelled to "return to the scene" and at least move it to a more respectful place away from traffic.

I turned around and drove back, exited hastily to avoid creating a traffic problem and moved the owl into the grassy shoulder. A quick examination revealed it to be a Barred Owl. My wife exercised some of her expertise and determined it was a male (based on its size). She examined the wings, feet, tail feathers, eyes, beak and so on, and I felt like she was the coroner, sizing up what had happened to him in a few seconds of observation. Cause and manner of death: blunt force trauma, as I had suspected, likely struck by a car. Based on her examination of his molt, a "second year" bird (hatched last year). His crop was not particularly full, and it wouldn't be much of a stretch to imagine he died, hungry, hunting the roadway for his next meal.

As I returned to my vehicle, I couldn't help but pause. I've travelled this particular stretch of highway hundreds of times probably, and I'd never given a thought to the possibility of a Barred Owl using this area to hunt, rest or raise a family. I scanned the countryside. Plenty of farm fields, but a patch of trees here, a wood lot there, another, larger forested acreage just a mile east. A scattering of houses along the road. All just the visual equivalent of "white noise" on my frequent travels as I hurtle in climate-controlled indifference, listening to the radio, watching for traffic, talking on the phone. I consider myself a pretty serious birder, scanning for birds almost involuntarily when I travel. How could I be so unplugged from the natural world? To what degree am I unobservant, that I wouldn't even think about the life and times of a Barred Owl out here? I pulled away, continuing on my human business, surprised by the emotional response I felt in just a few minutes of being in this bird's presence.

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Only a couple of weeks later, the US Fish and Wildlife Service announced 23 species of plants and animals, officially, extinct. Of the animals, 11 were birds, including the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Once the largest woodpecker in the United States, the last commonly agreed upon sighting was in Louisiana in 1944. Twenty-three years later, they were listed as endangered. A little more than 50 years later, gone. I have a soft spot for woodpeckers in general. Woody woodpecker cartoons from my childhood. Downy and Hairy and Red-bellies in the trees in my yard as I grew up. My wife's first *real* work as a field biologist, fresh out of college, took us from the Northwoods of Wisconsin to western Montana, where she would spend the next three years monitoring Black-backed and Three-toed Woodpeckers in the recently burned areas of Lolo National Forest.

Imagine them. Great big woodpeckers, like the Pileated still seen in the floodplains along the Mississippi River today. Ivory billed, hammering on some tree in the south, big as you please. I searched the internet, finding black and white photos, and a short video of a pair, going in and out of their nesting cavity in 1935, footage from an expedition into the 81,000-acre Singer Tract in Louisiana. The video had an almost otherworldly quality to it. Perhaps the halting frame rate, coupled with the black and white, relegated these birds to some other unattainable time. Like Charlie Chaplin in one of his silent films, or 1933's King Kong. Black and white is for things in the past, things that are gone. I listened to the few audio recordings of their voices, now absent in the wild. That declaration of extinction, the loss of that call, I would never see these birds alive; only a taxidermist's handiwork maybe. This wasn't like my interest in dinosaurs in Mrs. Bertrand's class in first grade; those T. Rexes and Brontosaurus, no one had seen more than their bones. Their skin, scales, the sound of their roaring, that was all just filled in by my 6-year-old imagination. You could still maybe find someone alive today who has *seen* an Ivory-bill, heard them call in some far-off southern swamp, wondered at them furiously drumming on a tree, excavating a nest in a shower of wood chips. They were just here, weren't they?

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I'll stop short of calling it obsessed. I was preoccupied, perhaps unhealthily so. I was drawn to another extinction. Still far from the dinosaurs, but departed decades prior to the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Another bird. The Passenger Pigeon. I reached out to fellow birder, Bill Bertrand (his wife, Ila, that first grade teacher so long ago). I knew he had a connection to the Essley-Noble Museum in Aledo, and in there, I knew, was a Passenger Pigeon.

It had been years since my youngest had walked several blocks with her classmates from her elementary school to Essley-Noble on a field trip, but I'd went with her and remembered it. A pair of glass cases, teeming with stuffed birds, and inside, right there in my hometown, a Passenger Pigeon. Bill told me the birds and cases had been donated from the personal collection of a successful businessman from Aledo. These cases, this long extinct Passenger Pigeon, had been on display in my own school, Northside Junior High! Through sixth, seventh and eighth grades, how many times had I walked by this piece of history? For years, thousands of students walked the halls, inches from this lone pigeon. Had any of us known? Could I have known? I had no memory of the Passenger, or the cases, from those days in the late 80s. Only now, a middle-aged father, was I prepared to appreciate what was on display in that case. Even considering myself a conservation-minded man, I had to be jolted from the insulation of my own indifference and ignorance.

Descriptions of the Passenger Pigeons at the height of their abundance abound. Speculated to be the most abundant bird on the planet at the time, John James Audubon reportedly watched a flock pass over for 3 days, estimating the birds to number in the hundreds of millions. The global population was estimated at 3 billion. Nesting colonies were reported to be several miles wide and could reach forty miles in length. The droppings from these colonies were sufficient to kill the forest understorey below. It makes me think of today's dynamic, bending flocks of European Starlings, crossing the sky in autumn like some giant living ribbon. It seems impossible that so many birds could disappear in just a generation or two.

And yet, here we are. Now, only the stuffed Passenger Pigeon at a museum is available for viewing. No long trip, good day or Big Year will ever yield even a single living Passenger. Martha, the last known living one, died in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo over 100 years ago. From 3 billion or so in the early 1800s, to zero by 1914. From the combined populations of China, India and the United States, to nothing, in a single human lifetime.

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In September, I never imagined that dead Barred Owl would start me down this rabbit hole of thought. He surprised me that day, when I felt a twinge of emotion at the thought of him as an individual. Perhaps its that lack of individuality that contributes to our dismissal of animals as being unequal. That owl was already a quarter to a fifth of the way through its expected life span. The avian equivalent of an early twentysomething. Not yet a parent, but with so much potential. If I'd driven down the highway and found a 20-year-old man face down in the road that day, I would have stopped without hesitation. Blocked the road. Called 911. Checked for signs of life. That's another human being. I wouldn't have been concerned about what kind of life he had lived, whether he was a good person or bad. I might never know *his* name. If he belonged in this neighborhood or not. It would have just been a priority. Drop everything and try to help. Somehow, though, with this owl, the son of some nameless pair of Barred Owls, hatched in 2020, there was a question. I had to consider if it had been enough of a living thing to deserve a respectable final resting place.

Over the course of the 40 or so days between moving a dead owl out of the road, and pausing to examine a stuffed Passenger Pigeon in a local museum, I went from mourning the loss of a living thing, to being strangely grateful that his passing could hold some meaning. This unexpected fatality on a hot September day triggered a journey with a still unforeseen destination. My hope is that I've reached a new level of appreciation that I couldn't have guessed I hadn't already achieved. I hope that there is still time for me to pass that appreciation on to my girls, friends and even strangers. I hope that this will slow me down, make me roll down the windows, and really *see* what's going on just outside. I don't want my children, or anyone else's, to have to reserve themselves to old black and white photos, grainy videos, or echoes of the real thing.

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*I owe several people a "thank you" for this article coming together the way it did. First, and foremost, my wife, Cathleen. Not only did she take the time to give a post-mortem to a smelly Barred Owl cadaver with no warning, she's been with me for almost all of my birding journey and put up with my incessant questions. Secondly, Bill Bertrand (Illinois Department of Natural Resources – retired) and Shannon Boynton, of the Essley-Noble Museum in Aledo. Both of them contributed to my historical understanding of the Passenger Pigeon specimen that has been under my nose since sixth grade. Finally, my mom, Commie Lemon, who helped sparked that childhood interest in the natural world. For encouraging me to run in the woods as a young boy, being so kind to every animal she ever met, and naming the Downy Woodpeckers in the front yard. John and Kay. Every year, it was John and Kay. She was really on to something.*

- Jason Monson

## Local Results from the 2021 National Midwinter Bald Eagle Count – Should We be Concerned About the Continuing Decline of Bald Eagles Wintering Along the Upper Mississippi River?

By  
Kelly J. McKay

The National Midwinter Bald Eagle Count, compiled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, censuses Bald Eagles across the United States during the first half of January each year. For more than two decades, I have participated on this count by censusing eagles along seven distinct routes spanning 80.5 miles of the Upper Mississippi River from Lock and Dam 13 in Clinton, Iowa to Keithsburg, Illinois. Additionally, I also survey 1.0 mile of the Rock River at the confluence with the Mississippi. As a result, my participation involves surveying 81.5 river miles within the local area. Data from this project also represents the Illinois State Midwinter Bald Eagle Count coordinated by the Illinois Audubon Society, as well as the Iowa State Midwinter Bald Eagle Count coordinated by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources.

The early winter of 2021 (December through early January) was unseasonably mild. Consequently, the Mississippi River had an extraordinarily low amount of ice cover well into Wisconsin during the count period. In fact, ice cover throughout my seven survey routes (81.5 river miles) averaged only 4%, with no route experiencing more than 10% ice cover.

In 2021, I completed my survey routes over a three-day period (13, 18, and 19 January). Within the local area, only 698 Bald Eagles were censused. Of these, 382 (54.7%) were recorded in Illinois, while the remaining 316 (45.3%) were observed in Iowa. The 2021 local wintering population experienced a 23% decline from last year, 45% fewer than 2019, and a 68% reduction from 2018! Wintering eagle populations along the Upper Mississippi River do fluctuate widely from year to year. However, the average number of birds being recorded locally has been steadily declining over the last two decades. For example, from 2000-2009 these local routes averaged 2,439 eagles/year. This average declined to 1,420 eagles/year between 2010-2019!

An unknown amount of this significant reduction in locally wintering eagles can possibly be attributed to changing eagle usage of the landscape, rather than an actual decline in the overall population. I am referring to a trend which has been occurring throughout the Midwest for well over a decade – where substantial numbers of Bald Eagles appear to be wintering further inland away from the Mississippi River. These birds have been undoubtedly utilizing various inland food resources (e.g. winter or hunter-killed deer, gut piles from the hunting season, road-kills, and dead wildlife/livestock). If an increasing number of wintering Bald Eagles are no longer concentrating along the major riverways of the Midwest, survey routes which predominately census along these rivers will be encountering an overall smaller proportion of the birds actually present within the region. This could negatively impact our ability to accurately monitor regional Bald Eagle population trends. The obvious question is “why are more eagles wintering away from rivers?”

Although based only on anecdotal information, the answer to this question may be linked to an apparent significant reduction of “winter-killed” Gizzard Shad, which forms the overwhelming primary food resource for wintering Bald Eagles on the Mississippi River. Over the same period that we have observed more eagle using inland areas, myself and other eagle researchers have noted a substantial decline in the amount of “winter-killed” Gizzard Shad within the Mississippi River as well as some of its tributaries. Historically, enormous numbers of this oxygen-sensitive fish are “winter-killed” each year as a result of fluctuating dissolved oxygen levels in the river which is largely influenced by variations in ice cover. This abundance of “winter-killed” shad, provides a reliable and readily available food resource which has supported the large Midwestern wintering population of Bald Eagles for nearly a century. If the abundance of this food resource is declining it may be creating food shortages, of an unknown magnitude, for eagles on the river. This could explain why more eagles are moving inland during the winter months. If something is reducing shad populations on the Upper Mississippi River, this could certainly begin to negatively impact Bald Eagle populations wintering in the Midwest, by reducing winter survival. If Bald Eagle populations were to be negatively affected, I would expect to see a manifestation of this to be lower proportions of immature birds in the population.

During the 2021 local Midwinter Count, 445 eagles (63.8%) were adults and 14 (2.0%) were unaged. The remaining 239 birds (34.2%) were immatures. Although slightly higher than the proportion of young birds encountered in recent years, the proportion of immature individuals observed in 2021 was still somewhat lower than the 20-year average from 2000-2019 (38.5%). Furthermore, the proportion of young eagles comprising the local wintering population has decreased in recent years from the 40-45% that occurred during much of the 1990’s and early 2000’s.

Once again, I want to strongly urge state and/or federal resource agencies to start researching and addressing this complicated and potentially serious issue involving wintering Bald Eagle populations and distribution, as well as the availability of Gizzard Shad, throughout the Midwestern landscape. Although this amazing raptor survived the dark days of the DDT era and has exhibited a strong recovery, other potentially serious problems still persist and loom on the horizon. This further emphasizes the importance of data generated by the National Midwinter Count, in order to closely monitor the populations of our fragile yet resilient national bird.

### Hampton Biologist Kelly J. McKay Receives 2021 Eddy Award for Stewardship from River Action

John James Audubon, move over, we have Kelly McKay to take your place. He identifies bird species all over the US and has done more Christmas Bird Counts than anyone in the nation. He worries that we are not setting aside enough habitat. Using 40 years of data, he is able to quantify some alarming trends about our most familiar and beloved bird, the Bald Eagle. As a child, he met Elton Fawks, the champion of eagles who helped make the DDT connection. Kelly was fortunate to live close to Illiniwek Park and to learn from Fawks who became his life-long mentor as he moved into the career field of biology. Today, he gives lectures, tours, writes academic papers, and continues his research on birds of the Mississippi River.

- Kathy Wine  
Executive Director: River Action

### Membership Application

☐ I would like to join as a new member of the National Audubon Society and my local chapter. Please send me *Audubon Magazine*, *Mississippi Currents*, and my membership card. Enclosed is my check for \$35 payable to National Audubon Society. (include **Chapter # H63** on your check)

**OR**

I would like to join only as a member of Quad City Audubon ☐ in lieu of National Audubon. Please send me *Mississippi Currents*. Enclosed is my check for \$10 payable to Quad City Audubon.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

Send to: Quad City Audubon Society  
P.O. Box 81  
Bettendorf, IA 52722  
[www.quadcityaudubon.org](http://www.quadcityaudubon.org)

### Mission Statement

The Quad City Audubon Society is dedicated to the enjoyment of birds; a better understanding of the natural world; stewardship of natural areas and habitats; fellowship; improvement of community awareness of environmental issues; and education of youth for the benefit of future generations.

Thanks to those who contributed to this issue of *Mississippi Currents*. The next deadline is March 15th, 2022. Submissions are gladly accepted. Send to:

Jason Monson  
(309) 221-1177  
[jmonson75@hotmail.com](mailto:jmonson75@hotmail.com)

Visit us online at:  
**[www.quadcityaudubon.org](http://www.quadcityaudubon.org)**



A special "thank you" goes out to Dan Dalton of Matherville, for allowing me to show off his photograph of a Red-tailed Hawk, taken in rural New Windsor.