



MISSISSIPPI CURRENTS

Newsletter of the Quad City Audubon Society



UPCOMING EVENTS *All activities open to the public.*

Vol. 35, No 2

Summer 2024

Membership Meetings TBA . Will resume in September and will be announced in our Fall Newsletter and updated on our web page as they are organized.

Summer/Fall 2024 Field Trips

Sunday June 2, Field Trip Mississippi Palisades States Park and Lost Mound Wildlife Refuge, Savanna, Illinois. Meet at Shuler's Grove Park, Rapids City at 6 a.m. for carpooling. This is an all-day field trip that will include a stop for lunch. This field trip features late waterfowl, breeding warblers, forest and grassland birds. For questions, contact qcaudubon@gmail.com.

Saturday August 10: August birding can be very difficult as this is prior to migration and resident birds are very quiet. Shorebirds migration however is in full swing. However, there is no reliable shorebird habitat in the Quad City region. Prior to August 10 we will post the field trip destination, time and target birds/activities.

Sunday, September 15 8:00am - 11:00am, Quad City Audubon Society Field Trip, Black Hawk State Historic Site, Rock Island II. Could be very good for fall migrating warblers. Meet at the Black Hawk Statue south of the Lodge at 8:00m. Further information, Tim Murphy 309-764-9779.

Saturday, October 12 8:00am - 11:00am, Quad City Audubon Society Field Trip, Loud Thunder County Park for migrating and resident songbirds. Meet at Sunset Park Rock Island in the north parking lot near the boat ramps at 8:00am. For further information contact Tim Murphy 309-764-9779.

Sunday, November 9, 8:00am -2:00pm. Quad City Audubon Society Field Trip Rapids City to Spring Lake for migrating waterfowl. Considered a full day field trip. Meet for carpooling at Shulers Shady Grove Boat Ramp, Rapids City at 8:00am. For further information contact Tim Murphy at 309-764-9779



Audubon

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

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Mississippi Currents is

published quarterly

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Quad City
Audubon Society

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Dorrance Park Field Trip: 05-11-24

Tim Murphy

The morning was clear, calm and a bit cool when Christine, Ralph, Susa, Forrest, Katalia and myself met at 7:00am to look for migrants in Dorrance Park, Port Byron, IL. Typically, May 11 should be about the peak of warbler migration but the birds have seemed to come through earlier than normal and the trees were nearly fully leafed out. We were prepared for some challenges.

Tennessee Warblers were seemingly singing everywhere but were very difficult to find. However, an Eastern Bluebird, Indigo Bunting and Baltimore Oriole were much more cooperative. Warbling and Red-eyed Vireo, Great-crested Flycatchers and American Redstart, Rose-breasted Grosbeak were among the more common birds singing as we birded the forest edge. Of course the more common birds, Red-winged Blackbird, Cowbird, Cardinal, Goldfinch, and House Wren were nearly ubiquitous.

Of course we were after warblers and Merlin was stating there were many that we never located including Blackpoll, Wilson's, black and White, and Yellow. Though we did find Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, and heard a number of Eastern Wood Pewees.

We decided to walk to the northern edge of the park to follow the gravel road onto the trail head. It actually seemed quieter here except for the ever present singing Tennessee. We heard Scarlet Tanager and once again located Indigo Bunting, and Red-headed Woodpecker and a Chestnut-sided Warbler.

The original plan was for us to leave Dorrance Park and to bird Illiniwek, but we decided to try out the forest proper as opposed to the woodland edge in Dorrance and we stayed. Here we were able to get a good look at a singing Tennessee Warbler, a more fleeting glimpse of a male Scarlet Tanager and a very cooperative female, Swainson's Thrush and another Chestnut-sided. We felt certain we were hearing Magnolia Warbler but did not call it without a visual ID.

The bird of the day was a fairly aggressive Kentucky Warbler who evidently had set up shop near the trail. He called and perched just above head level and all were able to get a good look. This bird indicated one of the "failings" of Merlin the app used by many to identify bird calls. Though the bird was calling loudly and often, Merlin did not indicate a call of any kind. In the meantime, the app identifies birds that I certainly did not hear. In another instance Chestnut-sided Warbler was indicated as singing on some phones but not on others. Our lesson using Merlin continues to be use for assistance but independently verify.

Overall we spent about 4 hours in Dorrance Park. It is a lovely and accessible woodland. The weather was exceptional and while a bit skimpy on birds, we certainly always had something to look for. For the morning we had 43 species.

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 August 15th, 2024. Submissions are gladly accepted. Send to: Jason Monson, (309) 221-1177, jmonson75@hotmail.com

Visit us online at:
www.quadcityaudubon.org.



At right, Chestnut-sided Warbler. Photograph courtesy of Susa Stonedahl.

Sandhill Cranes in Eastern Nebraska

Jason Monson – Editor: Mississippi Currents

In mid-March, my family and I made a six-hour drive to eastern Nebraska to experience spring Sandhill Crane migration there. A few months earlier, I'd booked a morning blind tour for all of us through Crane Trust, a non-profit whose mission is to protect and maintain the Big Bend area of the Platte River so that it continues to function as a life-support system for Whooping Cranes, Sandhill Cranes and other migratory bird species. We stayed overnight in Wood River, Nebraska, the night before, to make the 5:45 a.m. meeting time as painless as possible.

Friday morning, we slipped into the cold pre-dawn morning and made the short drive to the Crane Trust Nature and Visitor Center. There, we met with roughly 40 other like-minded crane enthusiasts. Staff at the Center gave a short presentation on the mission of the Crane Trust, along with some ground rules for the morning. Collectively, we all drove a short distance and crept in the dark down to the blinds. We shuffled along quietly, a stiff breeze cutting at us. The murmur of Sandhill Cranes could already be heard. Once inside, we waited as the darkness gave way to eventual dawn.

As the light crept over the horizon, the sandbars in the Platte River grew more visible, and it became obvious that we weren't just seeing the sandbars, but thousands of Sandhill Cranes standing together in the river awaiting daylight. As the sun began to appear in the east, the cranes took flight. In pairs, and threes and fours, sometimes dozens at a time, the birds would fly off, moving out to the fields and wetlands adjacent to us to feed. Eventually, a slow-moving plane flew over the Platte River, making its way toward us. We learned this plane was conducting the morning crane count. The week we were in Wood River, it was estimated that the Central Platte River Valley held approximately 400,000 cranes.

According to the plane-bound crane counters, there was a Whooping Crane spotted on the river, although we never saw it. After the cranes had dispersed to their feeding grounds, we made our way back to our vehicles and then the visitor center. As expected, the center had a gift shop with books, art, apparel and the like. Origami cranes were abundant, including a tower of the folded paper birds easily ten feet tall.

As we drove away from the visitor center, and back onto the interstate, cranes sightings were constant. Blankets of the birds could be seen in the fields, with cranes numbering hundreds at a time. It was an experience well worth the time and expense, that I would recommend to any wildlife enthusiast. To learn more about the Crane Trust's work, including scheduling a tour or just visiting the area, visit cranetrust.org.



Costa Rica

Tim Murphy

A couple of years ago I fully retired. Like many I suppose, Covid kind of pushed me into the decision. Work was disrupted, there was a worry about exposure to the disease, pre-vaccination and it seemed as if it was the correct time to see if I could manage financially. Plus, I wanted to travel with at least some emphasis on birding and my first trip was to the Rio Grande Valley and Corpus Christi area.

This year I decided to take the big leap and booked a Roads Scholar birding trip to Costa Rica. The point of this article is to inform people of how the trip went in the event someone would like to go as well.

Though the trip was billed as a birding southern Costa Rica it certainly did not cover very much of the country. Costa Rica is a narrow country bisected by mountains and we only covered the Pacific side of the mountain range. We spent ten nights in the country and birded 9 days. A lot of time was spent traveling from lodging to lodging though we birded as we traveled.

We had a group of 12 fairly elderly people. I am 70 and was probably about average age. No one was an expert birder, though one of our members had studied the Costa Rican Field Guide for a year and I would suggest she was very competent. No one had an obsession to see the maximum number of birds possible and thus we did not feel driven to maximize our life list.

Our guide was exceptionally knowledgeable, excellent at bird ID, very skilled at finding birds and very much wanted everyone in the party to see every bird. To that extent he carried a spotting scope. Most often when a bird was located he would find it in the scope, the group would line up and we would all have a few seconds to view the bird before it decided to move. As the group took turns our guide would often shine a laser pointer in the direction of the bird and then give precise directions as to where the bird was in relationship to the pointer. This gave those off scope a good chance to find the bird in binoculars.

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Mercer County Spring Bird Count – Bill Bertrand

Our unofficial target for the Mercer County Spring Bird Count was set by Pete Petersen, five decades ago, at 150 species. It's a great target, but infrequently achieved – only 9 years out of our 53 counts. The best year was 2005 with 162 species. The average and median number for the five plus decades of the count is 130. This year we had 140 species, i.e. better than average, with two highlights – King Rail and Common Loon.

In 1995, thirty SBCs ago, Pete reported the first Bald Eagle for the Mercer SBC – a single immature. I had to ask Pete for documentation, for the record to be accepted. In this year's count we reported 61 Bald Eagles – no documentation required. There have been other species changes over the past 30 years of the count, but few quite as dramatic.

Comparing two five-year periods, 1990-94 and 2020-24, 30 years later, there appear some definite changes. Eurasian Collared-Dove were not found 1990-94, but totaled **62** over the 2020-24 period. Sandhill Crane were not seen 1990-94 but **9** were seen, 2020-24. Pelicans numbered 25 in only one earlier year of 1994, but totaled **434**, 2020-24. Only 1 Eurasian Tree Sparrow was found 1990-94, but they added up to **475**, 2020-24. Turkey Vultures numbered 167, 1990-94, and **683**, 2020-24.

However, some species are trending the opposite direction in our counts. Mallards numbered 195 through the 1990-94 counts, but only **51** in 2020-24. Northern Bobwhites totaled 97 in earlier counts, but only **14**, 2020-24. Great Blue Heron numbered 380 in 1990-94 counts, but only **61**, 2020-24. Horned Larks numbered 342, 1990-94, but only **49**, 2020-24. Common Grackles numbered 2,200, 1990-94, but only **553**, 2020-24. House Sparrows numbered 1,912 1990-94, but only **1,075**, 2020-24.

There are a variety of factors behind these perceived population changes. Reduction or elimination of certain pesticides from the food chain have undoubtedly helped eagles, pelicans, and vultures. The non-native Eurasian collared-dove and tree sparrow are simply continuing their expansion. Habitat loss and climate change are probable factors in decreasing numbers seen in certain species. The 2022 50th Anniversary SBC report noted over an 1,000% increase in Bald Eagle, Eurasian Collared-Dove, American White Pelican and Sandhill Crane numbers; and 848% increase in Turkey Vultures over the past 50 years statewide. The same report noted an 83% loss trend in numbers of House Sparrow, 77% loss for Northern Bobwhite, 76% for Common Grackle, and 75% for Horned Lark. It would seem that several of the changes we've seen in Mercer County are reflective of statewide trends.

Pictured at right:

*Eurasian Collared Dove,
Buffalo Prairie,
Rock Island County, Illinois.*

Photograph by Caidel Monson.

Hampton Biologist Receives Eddy Award

River Action presented several Eddy Awards at their annual Fish and Fire Fundraiser on May 2nd. Hampton Biologist Kelly McKay received an Eddy in the category of Education for his continued work with the Building Better Birders and Citizen Scientists Workshops. This program, which began in 2020, has presented 175 free workshops in 50 counties across Iowa. Since its inception, Building Better Birders has reached 5,348 participants and turned 1,617 of them into citizen scientists. Congratulations!



2024 Illinois Spring Bird Count: Rock Island County

Tim Murphy: President, Quad City Audubon

The weather could not have been more comfortable for the Illinois Spring Bird Count. The overnight low was 50 degrees, the high temperatures were in the upper 70's with light winds and clear skies. In short very comfortable for May 4. One negative was that many trees were largely leafed out creating some challenges. The field parties had 137 species of birds which is really close to average. (low 122, high 152).

For most of our observers, the day was a bit challenging, especially regarding warblers. In my yard Friday had been a very good warbler day but evidently they migrated out Friday night and were not replaced by a new batch. One might also say that migration was a bit early as some birds such as Yellow-rumped and Palm Warbler which are usually common May 4 were very absent, while Tennessee Warblers (77) were everywhere. Also likely resident birds were common including Redstarts (124) Northern Parula (20) Yellow-throated (11) and Prothonotary (22) Warblers set records for the most seen on a Spring Count (I have been keeping records since 1986 and when referring to a record this only includes 1986 to present).

Overall though we did good with warblers as we had 23 species with the team of Pat, Al and Elizabeth accounting for 18 species. We also did fairly well with waterfowl having 8 species. Our downfall overall was shorebirds. There is simply no shorebird habitat in Rock Island County without flooding and we only had 4 species.

Other high numbers of some note included: 2 late Bufflehead, 13 Ring-necked Pheasants, (most since 1996), Red-bellied Woodpeckers (75, Eastern Wood Pewee (10), Warbling Vireo (74). Record highs included Great-crested Flycatcher 63 (previous record was 33), Purple Martin (178 thanks to the Corps of Engineers boxes at lock and dam 16) Cedar Waxwing (47) Blue-gray Gnatcatcher (100) Indigo Bunting (82), Eurasian Tree Sparrow (43) and Red-eyed Vireo (41). Raptors were well represented with single Osprey, Red-shouldered Hawk and Broad-winged Hawk sighted. Finally, Pelicans (783) and Cormorants (1140) appeared in much greater numbers than previous years.

We had a near record low of Mallards with 38 reported.

We had good participation this year with 9 field parties and 14 participants. Thanks to Charlie, Steve, Pat, Al, Elizabeth, Jeanne, Chris, David, Janelle, Walt, JoAnn, Cathy and Judy. Of course we could always use more participants and one could monitor their feeder or neighborhood. Hopefully we will see everyone next year.

Cone Marsh Field Trip

Tim Murphy

On Sunday April 14, Cathy Konrad, Bruce Hillberg, Karen Moore and myself traveled to Cone Marsh, southwest of Muscatine to look for waterfowl and shorebirds. Cone Marsh is one of the preeminent waterfowl areas in Eastern Iowa as a stopping point for migrating waterfowl. It also offers several points of viewing into the marsh.

There was an ominous condition though in that I had noticed that Nahant Marsh which two weeks earlier had been full of ducks was now nearly empty. There was a good chance that migration had already occurred.

True enough our first view of Cone Marsh yielded a couple of Wood Ducks, Canada Geese, several Northern Shovelers and mostly empty water. However, as we worked our way around the marsh we continued to pick up species including more upland birds such as Pheasant and Brown Thrasher, Song Sparrow, and Goldfinch.

We approached the main part of the marsh and our numbers improved greatly with a good number of Blue-winged Teal, Gadwall, Ring-necked Duck, Green-winged Teal, Mallard, Bonaparte's Gull, Pied-billed Grebe and a Lesser Scaup. Our only identifiable shorebird approached, a Lesser Yellowlegs.

As we continued to circle the marsh we heard the different calls of the Eastern and Western Meadowlark. We completed our trip on an overlook of the marsh and could observe Trumpeter Swans, Greater White-fronted Geese, Snow Geese and Pelicans.

We went home through Illinois and stopped at Lock and Dam 16 long enough to observe that a fairly large number of Purple Martins were occupying houses there.

For the day we had 52 species, a kind of disappointing number. We did have some good looks at waterfowl and the weather was beautiful.

From My Perch

I have been knocking around Quad City Audubon since the mid 1980's. At that time Quad City Audubon was largely a three legged stool. We had field trips monthly, we participated in bird counts and we had monthly membership meetings. It seemed to serve us well. We had a loyal membership group probably numbering in the 30's or so that reliably came to meetings and a much smaller group that came on field trips and an even smaller group that participated in bird counts so truthfully much of our activities revolved around our monthly meetings. They have long been held the second Thursday of the month in Butterworth Center. The meetings included a short business meeting, a program (at that time it was a slide show) and a social hour where baked goods and coffee/tea were served by volunteer members. I saw a lot of informative programs over the years and a whole bunch of great slides of a variety of animals including birds.

However, the membership meeting has been dying for a while. First we stopped serving refreshments. (those providing them began to feel that not enough people were taking a turn). Plus, our membership aged and in fact many aged out and they were not replaced by younger members. The Audubon Board wondered if maybe we had too many meetings and they were held at bad times of year so we went from 9 meetings to 6 and stayed away from November, January and February in an effort to avoid bad weather. We changed our meeting from 7:00 pm to 6:00pm thinking an earlier time would be better. We now also offer our presentations on zoom as well as in person. Advertising became more difficult as society moved from getting club news from the paper and turned to social media. As clubs such as Audubon dwindled, speakers became harder to locate. At one time speakers kind of made a circuit of loosely networked clubs and agencies more often used presentations as part of outreach. Those options have seemed to vanish.

Covid of course really seemed to change people's habits and now we find ourselves in our current position. We beat the bushes for a speaker, we advertise as best we know how on social media and we might have 3 people show up for our meeting and another 3 viewing on zoom. The three legged stool seems to exist no more. The Board is going to be faced with decisions and our path forward is not clear. I believe that environmental voices in the community is important. I am hoping that through our interest in birds we foster a desire to preserve and protect the natural environments that we have left. I personally hesitate to abandon the membership meetings as they offer an opportunity for some face to face contact and dialogue.

But to continue to do this we need help. Especially it seems to me we could use some volunteers with some social media savvy to help us raise our community profile, and to help us tweak or change our programming. If you would like to help us do so please feel free to contact me or send us a note to our email address, qcaudubon@gmail.com.

Tim Murphy

Costa Rica

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Much of our birding was done in dense forests and unmoving birds can be hard to locate without some help. Our guide also used recordings to attract many birds (An increasingly rare occurrence in the United States as many consider it unethical to disturb/agitate birds in this way).

We traveled on a very nice 24 passenger motor coach so nearly everyone had a comfortable window seat. In addition to having a knowledge of birds our guide, a native a Costa Rica, had a great breadth of knowledge about the culture, politics, economy and history of the country and as we traveled he lectured in some detail on a variety of germane subjects.

Roads Scholar provided an exceptional travel experience. Everything can be included in the price of your tour. All meals, lodging, tips and transportation. The only expense would be souvenirs, food and drink, outside meals and alcohol.

All meals were exceptionally well prepared, way larger than any one person would normally eat. Sometimes we had buffet style eating, other times a menu type of choice. We had a lot to eat.

We stayed at very nice resorts and one botanical field station, that held a tropical plant arboretum. Accommodations were very comfortable, though one resort in the tropical rain forest did not have A/C but with the ceiling fans everyone seemed to sleep comfortably.

Though the group was not birding obsessed, we did a lot of it. Typically, we would meet at 6:00 a.m. and bird the grounds of the resort for an hour, have breakfast and then bird the local area or board the bus to travel to the next resort. As we traveled we would stop at places our guide knew to locate more birds. We stayed two nights at each of 4 resorts. We birded dry forest, a bit of a riverine ecosystem, a bit of the seashore and the tropical rain forest. On day 3 we began to ascend into the mountains and went from 80 plus degrees and 90 percent humidity to very delightful weather. We had a couple of hours of rain during one day. We were there at the end of the dry season but much of Costa Rica had been short of rain for a while. We spent our last morning birding at 13,000 feet. It was supposed to be the cloud forest but it was essentially clear for us

As we traveled between resorts we would eat lunch at a restaurant en route. All of the restaurants were incredible for their location, scenic views, plantings and of course birds.

We never felt unsafe. Of course we were in a tourist bubble. The only mixing we would do with the general population was when we would stop at a grocery store in order to allow the participants to purchase snacks or alcohol or other drinks.

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Costa Rica
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Overall as a group we saw 246 species of birds. This is not to say that the forests of Costa Rica are dripping with birds. I was actually surprised to see how empty the forest was much of the time. Still with the skill of our guide we found most of our target species. This included Scarlet Macaw, Resplendent Quetzal, Lessor and Turquoise Browed Mot Mot, and flycatchers galore.

Basically it was a great time with a very professionally guided group. My only regret. I brought a spotting scope which was barely used and I could have simply brought hiking low cut shoes instead of boots. I would have had a lot more room to bring back coffee if I had known that.



Upper left: Turquoise-browed Mot Mot

Upper right: Rufous-tailed Jacamar

Lower left: Scarlet Macaw

All photographs courtesy of Tim Murphy