UPCOMING EVENTS
All activities open to the public.

March 12th, 2020, 7:00 p.m., Thursday - Membership Meeting, The Butterworth Center. Our speaker this month is Martha Smith from the University of Illinois Extension Service. Her program is titled “Flowers in the Air”. She will share information about plants to add to your outdoor spaces that will attract both birds and butterflies.

March 14th, 2020, Field Trip - Spring Lake and Lock & Dam 13, 7:00 a.m., Saturday. Meet at Shuler’s Shady Grove Park/1st Avenue boat ramp parking lot, Rapid City, Illinois for this half to full day field trip.

April 9th, 2020, 7:00 p.m., Thursday - Membership Meeting, The Butterworth Center. Our speaker this month is our own Dr. Brian Peer of Western Illinois University. His program is titled “The Prothonotary Warbler: Jewel of the Quad City Swamps”. He will share information from research he and his students have been conducting on these beautiful birds in the Quad Cities area.

April 18th, 2020, 7:00 a.m., Saturday - Field Trip - Cone Marsh. Meet at the Marquette Street boat ramp just a few blocks west of the Centennial Bridge, Davenport, Iowa, for this full day field trip.

May 9th, 2020, Saturday. Illinois Spring Bird Count. Join us for this annual survey of spring birds in our area. We need volunteers in Rock Island and Mercer County, Illinois to cover field parties. Contact Tim Murphy to participate: 309-764-9779.

May 14th, 2020, 7:00 p.m., Thursday - Membership Meeting, The Butterworth Center. To be announced. Follow up on our web site in a few weeks for program specifics.

May 16th, 2020, 7:00 a.m., Saturday - Field Trip, Illiniwek Forest Preserve, Hampton, Illinois, and Dorrance Park, Port Byron, Illinois. Meet on the bluff side of Illiniwek Park for this half day field trip.

June 7th, 2020, 6:00 a.m., Saturday - Field Trip, Palisades Park, Savanna, Illinois, and Fulton Sand Prairie. Meet at Shuler’s Shady Grove Park/1st Avenue boat ramp parking lot for this full day field trip.

On the web at www.quadcityaudubon.org, and visit us on Facebook.

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

The Quad City Audubon Board has voted to change the frequency of *Mississippi Currents* to quarterly, with issues in the Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter. Issues should be appearing in your mailbox in early March, June, September and December, respectively.

The Board has also voted to eliminate the printed newsletter. For the remainder of 2020, the newsletter will continue to be mailed out in printed form. Beginning in 2021, *Mississippi Currents* will transition to an electronic only format. The newsletter has been available on our website (www.quadcitaudubon.org) for years, and will remain there.

Iowa Association of Naturalists/Iowa Conservation Education Council Awards

Hampton biologist Kelly J. McKay teamed up with Clinton County Conservation’s Mark Roberts and Chuck Jacobsen to receive the “Ding” Darling Environmental Education Award for Clinton County’s Building Better Birders Cruises. Last year’s “Beginner Birder Cruises” conducted four summer tours during the breeding season and four autumn tours during fall migration. In spite of severe flooding of the Mississippi River in 2019, 58 participants attended these two and a half to 4 hour programs and identified 120 bird species. After identifying birds on these cruises, many participants became active citizen scientists and joined area Christmas Bird Counts and the Nahant Marsh BioBlitz Project.

McKay is also the recipient of the IAN/ICEC 2019 Outstanding Volunteer Award. Kelly has volunteered for numerous organizations such as Nahant Marsh, Big Sand Mound, Audubon, and several other wildlife advocacy groups. McKay is a member of the Big Sand Mound Advisory Board. The Big Sand Mound Preserve is a 510 acre preserve south of Muscatine consisting of sand prairies, wetlands, and woodlands, which is home to prickly pear cactus, yellow mud turtles, eastern hognose snakes and over 400 species of plants.

Congratulations, Kelly, on receiving both of these awards!

February Field Trip Report

The Quad City Audubon Society February Field Trip was held on Saturday the 8th at Smith's Island and Lock and Dam 14 on the Iowa side of the Mississippi River. The six attendees included Susa and Forrest Stonedahl, Cathy White, Brian Peer, Sharif Ragheb, and Janelle Swanberg. The day was sunny and fairly warm, with the temperatures ranging from 25 to 31 degrees during the morning. We garnered 21 species for the trip, with the highlight being a cackling goose in the river off the Mound Street parking adjacent to the East Village in Davenport. We also ventured upriver to the Green Gables Marina just south of LeClaire, where we had very good looks at common goldeneyes, canvasbacks, and common mergansers. The goldeneyes were cocking their heads back in courting displays, always a fun thing to witness. A lesser scaup was found there as well. As expected, several bald eagles were present, and a vocal Carolina wren was heard on Smith's Island. We did not inspect the gulls resting on the ice just off Smith's Island, so there may have been additional species there. We all agreed it was good in the middle of winter to get out and walk in the bracing air, as a day in early February could certainly have held colder weather in store. We will look forward to seeing migrating waterfowl during the March field trip upriver.

- Janelle Swanberg
Summary of the 2019-2020 Local Christmas Bird Counts
By

Volunteers from around the area helped us complete 9 Christmas Bird Counts in the Quad Cities area. Cold temperatures in the fall likely pushed many birds out of the area prior to count season, although diversity was mostly normal for the area. Here is a summary of our local counts.

On opening day of the season, December 14th, nine participants in 5 field parties turned out for the Eastern Mercer County Christmas Bird Count. While the circle is essentially land-locked, Fyre Lake and the Edwards River were able to hold some waterfowl including Snow Geese, Canada Geese and a new species for this count, Lesser Scaup. While increasing winds over the course of the day seemed to keep the birds sitting tight, our volunteers were able to spot some interesting birds including a Northern Shrike and Loggerhead Shrike. We counted 5,813 birds across 61 species.

The Davenport Christmas Bird Count was held on Sunday, December 15th. In terms of diversity and abundance, this turned out to be a very productive count. Twenty-four volunteers in 8 field parties and 4 feeder watchers counted 31,731 birds across 87 species. Some notable highlights from the count include: 1 Eastern Phoebe, 1 Brewer’s Blackbird, 1 Eastern Towhee, 1 Ruby-crowned Kinglet, 11 Hermit Thrush, and 1 Lesser black-backed Gull.

Thirteen participants in 5 field parties and a single feeder watcher teamed up to search for birds on December 18th during the Princeton-Camanche Christmas Bird Count. This circle straddles the Mississippi River in Iowa and Illinois, and the Wapsipicon River in Iowa, and includes some quality habitat in the Princeton Wildlife Management Area. Birders in this count circle were able to spot some interesting birds this year, including: 2 Blue-winged Teal, 1 American White Pelican, 4 Field Sparrows, 239 Trumpeter Swans, and 3 Sandhill Cranes. 9,195 individual birds were counted across 71 species.

The following day, on December 19th, 2 feeder watchers and 16 observers in 6 field parties participated in the Clinton-Savanna Christmas Bird Count a few miles upstream. 7,970 birds in 80 species were counted, including: singles of Eastern Phoebe, Eastern Towhee and Field sparrow, 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglets, 3 Black Scoters, and 715 Tundra Swans.

On December 22nd, 8 volunteers in 4 field parties travelled to rural Henderson County Illinois for the 7th Bald Bluff Christmas Bird Count. This habitat rich circle always produces some interesting birds, and this year was no exception. Some notable finds from this year include: 5 American Coots (a first for this count circle), 1 Red-shouldered Hawk, 8 Long-eared Owls, 10 Northern Saw-whet Owls, 2 Northern Mockingbirds, 1 Fox Sparrow, and 2 Merlins. We counted 8,158 birds across 77 species that day.

Five field parties with 12 observers joined forces for the Western Mercer County CBC on December 23rd. Another very rural count with plenty of potential, participants observed over 11,000 individual birds across 77 species. Some notables from that day include: 1 Northern Saw-whet Owl, 1 Long-eared Owl, 1 Eastern Towhee, 1 Ruby-crowned Kinglet, 1 Merlin, 15 Hermit Thrush, and over 5,300 mallards.

Christmas came early for 13 observers in 4 field parties who participated in the Andalusia-Buffalo Christmas Bird Count on December 24th. Across 80 species, an impressive 17,743 birds were counted! Birders were treated to some great birds that day, including a single White-winged Scoter, 3,703 Greater White-fronted Geese, 4 Wood Ducks, 3 Red-shouldered Hawks, 3 Eastern Meadowlark, 4 Long-eared Owls, and 3 Killdeer.

The day after Christmas, 5 feeder watchers and 14 observers in 5 field parties participated in the Muscatine Christmas Bird Count. Sixty-eight species and 7,289 individual birds were counted that day. Notable observations for the day include: 1 Eastern Towhee, 1 Merlin, 1 Short-eared Owl, 2 Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and 3 Northern Harriers.

On January 2nd, 2020, Van Petten, the final local Christmas Bird Count of the season was held. Ten observers in 4 field parties joined forces to cover this count circle situated around Sterling – Rock Falls. Participants observed 4,334 individual birds across 64 species. Noteworthy birds included: 1 Lesser Black-backed Gull, 2 Brewer’s Blackbirds, 1 Wood Duck, 3 Golden-crowned Kinglets, and 1 Marsh Wren.

The compilers would like to thank all of you who participated this year, and those of you who have joined us in years past. We appreciate the help offered from our many friends and associates who come out in often poor weather to brave questionable roads and count birds with us. Thank you for helping us make this such a continually successful citizen science program! We look forward to seeing you again next winter.
Local Results from the 2020 National Midwinter Bald Eagle Count
Are Fewer Eagles A Cause For Concern?

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.

Following an unseasonably cold November, the early winter of 2020 (December through early January) was noticeably mild. As a result, the Mississippi River had very little ice cover well into Wisconsin during the count period. In fact, ice cover among my survey routes ranged from a low of 1% over the three southern-most routes (i.e. Fairport, Iowa to Keithsburg, Illinois), to a high of 28% on the northern-most route (i.e. Lock 13 to Lock 14). Consequently, ice cover over the entire 81.5 miles surveyed locally was only 11%.

As usual, it took three days to complete my seven survey routes in 2020 (12-14 January). Throughout the local area, 912 Bald Eagles were censused. Of these, 345 (37.8%) were observed in Iowa, while the remaining 567 (62.2%) were recorded in Illinois. The 2020 wintering population was nearly 350 fewer than last year and almost 1300 fewer than in 2018. Local wintering eagle populations 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!

All known amount of this significant reduction in eagle numbers locally can be possibly 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 more than 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 certainly complicate 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 Gizzard Shad (the primary food source for wintering Bald Eagles on the Mississippi River). Over the same period that we have observed more eagle use of 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 may be influenced by variations in ice cover, among other factors. 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 may explain why more eagles are moving inland during the winter? If something is reducing shad populations on the Upper Mississippi River, this could 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.

The 2020 Midwinter Count locally yielded some potentially troubling results pertaining to observed eagle age ratios. Of the 912 birds recorded, 670 (73.5%) were adults and 14 (1.5%) were of unknown age. Consequently, only 228 birds (25.0%) were immatures. Although it is impossible to say, with any degree of confidence, that the proportion of young individuals in the Midwestern Bald Eagle population is decreasing, based on a single year of data from just the immediate local area. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the percentage of immature eagles encountered this winter (25.0%) was substantially lower than any other year over the last two decades! In fact from 2000-2019, the proportion of immature eagles wintering locally averaged 38.5%. Additional years of data over a larger geographic area will allow us to determine if a problem exists, as well as its magnitude.

At the risk of repeating myself year after year, I again want to strongly urge state and/or federal resource agencies to start researching and addressing this potentially serious issue. Although our national bird 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 this spectacular “king of the river.”

Bald Eagle Photograph: Veronica Starcevich
I’m back. For those of you who don’t know me, I edited *Mississippi Currents* for several years, starting back in 2009. I took a hiatus a few years ago, for various reasons, and I’m happy to return.

I got into this “gig” of putting the newsletter together to scratch the writing itch, which I’ve had since my teens. Quad City Audubon’s newsletter gives me a small bullhorn to voice my concerns about the state of affairs in the world of conservation, and remind our readership of the joys of birds, and just being outdoors in general.

Chances are, being outside means something a little different to each of you. For some, it may be a favorite park in your neighborhood, or memories of long ago family vacations, watching a beloved wildlife show on television when you were younger, or sharing the identification of birds at your feeders with your grandchildren. It touches us all in different ways.

For me, it stretches across my life. Running in the pasture looking for animal tracks when I was little. Northern Cardinals and Blue Jays in my yard when I was growing up. My mom, naming the Downy Woodpeckers at her feeders. The smell of evergreen trees when my wife and I first met. Fishing in Minnesota with my in-laws, with Loons calling in the distance. We’ve all got them; sights and sounds and smells attached to memories that connect us to the natural world.

I invite you to share yours with us, and make some more. Quad City Audubon Society is all about birds and the natural world. Come join us at a membership meeting and share your thoughts and feelings. Enjoy a program. Join us on a field trip. Send us a picture of birds at your feeder for inclusion in the newsletter, and tell us YOUR story about why you love the natural world.

- Jason Monson
  Newsletter Editor

Illinois drivers! You can share your love of the natural world and help support State Parks throughout Illinois by purchasing these sharp looking license plates at your local Secretary of State Office the next time you renew your registration sticker. The plates, feature our state bird, the Northern Cardinal, and our state prairie grass, Big Bluestem. The sale of each set of plates generates funds for the Illinois Department of Natural Resources State Park Trust Fund, which is used to maintain and preserve state parks throughout Illinois.
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.quadcitcaudubon.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 May 15th, 2020. Submissions are gladly accepted. Send to:

Jason Monson
1781 180th Street
Reynolds, IL 61279
(309) 221-1177
jmonson75@hotmail.com

Visit us online at: www.quadcitcaudubon.org.