

## **THIS ISSUE**

**Guided Birding by Appointment**

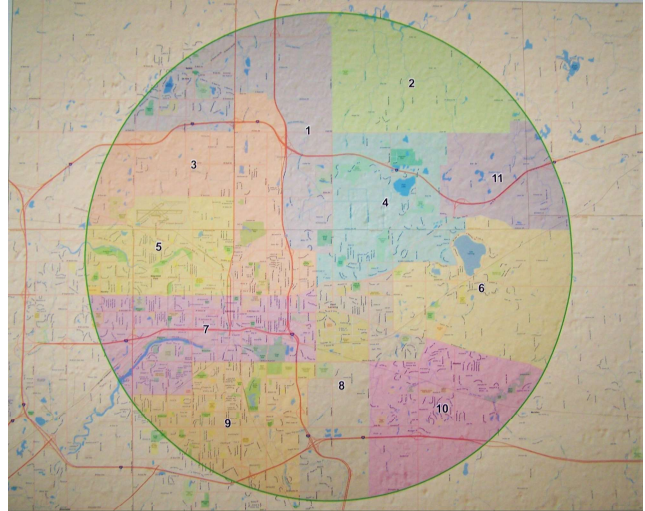
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**We Can't Recycle Our Way Out of This**

## **The 75th ELCBC: A Report from Area 7**



Shortly after writing last month's column, *A Dose of Wild Birds Spells COVID-Blues Relief*, I happened across this review of a study that bolsters my case, *Study: Birds Are Linked to Happiness Levels*: <https://www.ecowatch.com/birds-happiness-study-2649413979.html?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>.

The stars continue to align toward the end of the article. The author mentions the Audubon Society's long-running annual Christmas Bird Count in which thousands of global citizens participate – the topic of which on a local scale, I discuss below. To segue on...

### **BACKGROUND**

On December 19 local citizens who care about wild bird populations completed the milestone 75th annual East Lansing Christmas Bird Count. The 15-mile-wide area called the "count circle" within which all birds are identified and tallied is named for the city or town in which the circle's focal point (the corner of Abbot and Lake Lansing roads) lies, but most of the circle's circumference lies well beyond the city boundaries.

This is one of 74 such counts across Michigan and thousands that take place across the country. All counts are conducted within a three-week window between December 14 and January 5. Check out these links for more on how the count works:

<https://www.audubon.org/conservation/join-christmas-bird-count>

<https://www.michiganaudubon.org/first-christmas-bird-count/>

The East Lansing circle is separated into eleven parcels with an area leader assigned to each. The leader is responsible for coordinating any assisting bird counters in this area and amassing all species and numbers into a cumulative tally for the area by day's end. I've been the assigned as leader of Area 7 since 2004 (see map, next page).

### **AREA 7**

You could say that after seventeen years I've grown somewhat attached to Area 7. I wouldn't trade it for any of the others. It's beyond the fact that it contains more riverbank and riparian habitat than any of the other areas, and thus, often turns up a number of avian highlights that other areas usually lack. With



Area 7 stretches east to west: from Harrison Road in East Lansing at the east edge, then westward beyond Waverly Road and over the Eaton County Line. The western edge abuts the curved perimeter of the count circle. Saginaw Street is the northern limit, with Mount Hope Road comprising over half of the south limit. Thank you to Peg Cheney, Gwen Hummel, and Bob and Cam Stanfield for joining the area count through segments of the day.

familiarity grows fondness. Each December I look forward to the challenge of trying to “beat” my previous year’s species count and maybe even accumulate an all-time high.

So far, I’ve averaged about 32 species per year. My personal low count - 28 species - happened twice. Predictably, these years were associated with god-awful weather conditions. You see, although no one in his or her right mind would ever opt to go birding in middle of a blizzard for kicks, the Christmas Bird Count follows the postal service mantra word for word.

Okay, for any eye-rolling, non-birding reader who says, *What’s so great about seeing the same thirty-something birds over and over every year while freezing your ass off*, I’d respond with a pitying shake of my head, *You still don’t get it, do you?* The cumulative number of species that I’ve recorded in my area over 17 years is around *twice* my annual average. Granted, while many of the feathered faces remain the same from one year to the next, a significant rotating percentage that pop up are species you *don’t* see just any day. This is where the appeal for many participants comes into focus.

## NOTEWORTHY

Statistically, the common birds most people see around yards are as important to the results of a count as uncommon ones. However, for most, including myself, the anticipation of an opportunity to “officially document” an aberrant, unusual, or flat-out *rare* species is continuous throughout the duration of count day. In my area without exception, each year’s tally elicits a few to up to a dozen birds that fit the criterion.

A bird may be deemed “noteworthy” for any of a number of reasons. For instance, the chance that a migratory vagrant - perhaps a western species - may pop up well outside its usual migratory route is always a possibility; although a very slim one, it does happen.

Charismatic species like the Peregrine Falcon and Bald Eagle need no other reason to be deemed noteworthy by many. Both raptors used to teeter on the brink of extinction, but have steadily rebounded over recent decades. Now, they are nearly automatic in Area 7 - that is, as long as you know where to look (i.e., Potter Park for eagles; Moore’s Park, downtown Lansing for peregrines).

The noteworthiness of other species is *seasonal* in nature, i.e., a bird that should have migrated south months ago lingers here into the winter. Last year, case in point, I spotted an Eastern Phoebe, a migratory, airborne-insect-eating flycatcher, along the riverbank at Potter Park. Not only had I never previously tallied one on the count, I had never seen one in Michigan in the month of December *in my life*.

Some species, like the Winter Wren that breeds to the north, definitely reside around these parts in December, but are, at best, very sporadically tallied across the count circle; this, perhaps due not so much to its uncommonality as to its ability to avoid detection by a passing birder. I tallied a pair of Winter Wrens on only my second Area 7 survey back in 2005. It happened inadvertently, while I was “pishing” (that’s p-i-s-H-i-n-g) along the side of the river trail in order to draw a different songbird closer (Learn more about pishing in our October 2015 column, *Does a Birder Pish in the Woods?:* <http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Oct15.pdf>). Suddenly, one then a second of these

stubby-tailed, pecan-colored wrens flew up, then out of a large patch of overgrown yellow grass and into the twigs of a nearby shrub to investigate the commotion. I never would have predicted that fourteen CBCs would pass before I was to tally another in Area 7 again... *this* year!

At 4:30pm, Louis Adado Riverfront Park near downtown Lansing was the final stop of my 11-hour, marathon day of birding under continuously dreary gray skies. I had stopped along the riverbank and stood next to a pedestrian walkway that traverses the river just south of Saginaw Street when I caught a glimpse of a White-throated Sparrow among several other birds foraging on the ground under a shrub. My approach induced the flock to flit a short distance then quickly drop into the overgrown yellow grass along the embankment. I needed to find out whether the others were also white-throats or something else, so I started to pish. The birds responded immediately. I stood motionless as one, then three more of the sparrows, notably ruffled by the harsh noise, flew up from the grasses and landed in view among the tangled twigs of the same bush.



*The tiny Winter Wren, a breeder to our north, occupies overgrown habitat here over the winter. However, this bird is very secretive and its presence often goes undetected. Photo by Greg Smith.*

However, my eye caught the movement of yet another bird in the long grass that was definitely agitated by the sound, but apparently more shy than the rest about revealing itself. I walked closer and continued to pish in earnest. It worked! The Winter Wren popped up and landed among some spiny multi-flora rose shoots that jutted above the grass. It remained for several seconds, tail twitching – long enough for me to focus the binoculars on it before it retreated back into the dense cover below.

## OWLING

With few exceptions if you want to have any chance of adding an owl to your day's tally it is going to require the extra wherewithal to get your butt up and out well before the diurnal birds begin to stir. Over the years in Area 7, however, the hour or so before daybreak that I devote to "owling" produces no tallies more often than not. With such low return on one's sleep-deprived investment I can't blame area leaders who opt to skip it.

At 6:45am I pull into the Kruger Landing lot on Aurelius Road and walk the river trail eastward and along the north boundary of Crego Park. If snow blankets the ground, visibility is a cinch. However, even in the years without snow like this one, the diffused ambient light from innumerable urban sources, especially from I-496 nearby, make a walk on the wooded riverside trail a plenty visible, albeit colorless one.

Owl identifications are almost always strictly auditory in nature. The most common of them, the Eastern Screech-owl, is most effectively tallied by inducing it to vocally respond to a recording. Since over 17 years most of my efforts have produced no owls, when I do hear a soft wavering screech-owl whistle emanating from the gray gloom in response to the recording played on my phone it is cause for subdued celebration. I often whisper, "Yes!" to myself with a gloved fist-pump: Species #1 to kick off the long day ahead.

This year's owling experience proved to be one for my personal record... While calling for screeches, a distant great horned owl - about a quarter mile down the trail and through the woods behind me - started to vocalize, *Who's awake, meeee toooo*, in a deep, toneless series of signature hoots. I had seldom tallied a great horned on past counts. A half-minute passed then it hooted again. The hoots continued amid short intervals as I resumed my audio screech-quest.

Wouldn't you know it, on my very next try a screech-owl responded! I peered beyond looming dark trunks



and through a lattice of thin black branches to spot a small silhouette fluttering limb to limb toward the vocalizations of the imposter. Seconds later, a soft, ethereal, pulsating whistle emanated from the perched, Nerf football-like mass as it surveyed me from above. As soon as it stopped, and while my eyes were still averted in its direction, my ears anticipated, then acknowledged the distant deadpan hoots of the great horned owl. Seconds later the screech-owl rolled out another series of soft whistles... Brief silence, then again the great horned hoot... I remained motionless as one minute then another passed, all the better to immerse myself in this unlikely duet of near and far vocalists.

As the overcast drapery in the southeast sky began to pale I found myself reluctant to leave just yet. A realization had dawned. For all the times over my life that I had heard the vocalizations of great horned owls and of screech owls, I could not recall a single instance where I had heard them calling simultaneously.



*An Eastern Screech-owl roosts in a tree cavity. This common owl readily responds to recordings and is the one most frequently detected on CBCs. .Photo by Greg Smith.*

Most once-in-a-lifetime occurrences are not recognized, if at all, until after they are over - be it minutes, sometimes years later. Therefore, recognition of the uniqueness of the occurrence as it is happening in real time, aptly it seems, elicits a special amalgam of conscious sensations. The thrill becomes tainted with wistful awareness of its pending brevity, along with the more encompassing sense of time's inexorable march. Solitude magnifies the message: there is no turning back.

I considered stretching the "moment" by playing the recording again to induce the screech-owl to continue engaging the faux-intruder, but changed my mind. The phone stayed in my pocket. I'd allow it to retreat in order to resume its night-end routine. It would no doubt soon settle for the day, hidden in some nearby cavity. I had other places to be, as well. Seconds later the dark shape took wing and silently evaporated into the gray.

The peaceful, measured hoots of the great horned still accompanied me in the escalating daylight as I backtracked the river trail toward the parking lot. A small flotilla of Mallards, plainly visible now, milled about in the current to my right. As if announcing that daytime had officially arrived, like obnoxious alarm clocks, several drakes sounded off, each overlapping the other with a loud, descending series of quacks, the soundwaves of which reverberated through the airspace and down the river.

## NUMBERS DON'T LIE

I was in sight of the car when a lone Mourning Dove whistled over my head, over the river, then disappeared into the trees on the far bank. I made a deliberate mental note of it; more than you would think necessary for such a common bird, right? You see, although the Mourning Dove has historically and rightfully been regarded as one of the *expected* species - seen and tallied for the sake of the count all the while hoping for something more unusual, more exciting - the East Lansing CBC record over the last ten years or so has shown dove sightings be undergoing a definite slide.

Case in point for Area 7... I tallied 29 doves in 2004, my first year. By 2018 my tally was only six. As I reviewed the final numbers on the tally sheet after the 2019 count my scan stopped abruptly on the *Mourning Dove*. Unprecedented ere now, the space to its right lay blank;



*A Mourning Dove pair endures a snow squall.*

not a single Mourning Dove in over eight hours of deliberate birding. So, as this particular dove zipped over me I thought wryly, *That's one more than last year*, followed hopefully by, *Could this early one be a harbinger of more doves to come today?* The answer, *Nope*. I didn't tally another the rest of the day.

I did, however, finish this year's count with an impressive 37 species listed – the second highest total over my tenure and the highest in fifteen years! Although the cumulative number of *individual* birds tallied was higher than the last two years (2,537), Area 7 is experiencing a definite downward trend in this particular regard. In the first four years of my record keeping for the area the average total birds came in at a bit over 3,300 individuals... versus the average of the four most recent years, a little over 2,200: a decline of 33 percent. The cumulative birds for the entire East Lansing count circle shows similar declines. Ditto for trends in dozens of counts across the state, around the country and, yes, worldwide: <https://www.audubon.org/news/north-america-has-lost-more-1-4-birds-last-50-years-new-study-says>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

"I used to see so many more (fill in the blank)." Anyone who has been birding for two decades or more senses it from their own observations, independent of what they may read from the scientific community. Yet, myriad studies around the world, CBC results and others, not only corroborate each other, but strongly back the observations of local birders everywhere. Bird abundance across the planet is declining significantly before our eyes, and obviously, human activities are playing direct and indirect roles in it.



*Peregrine Falcons perch high on the Eckert Power Plant in Lansing. Photo, Greg Smith.*

It has somehow become fashionable these days to charge that peer-reviewed scientific research is driven by political or financial motives. I encourage anyone to purchase a good pair of binoculars then attain more *personal* knowledge of the birds that share your slice of Earth. Given time, you'll draw your own conclusions.

As society's priorities currently stand, wild bird life around us is undervalued because its amazing diversity is unacknowledged. A public school education doesn't cover it, so why should we expect otherwise? After more than thirty years of interfacing with citizens of all ages on Michigan wildlife topics, I'm convinced that the vast majority of voting-aged adults would fail the most simple of tests about bird diversity in Michigan. For instance, *List the common names of twenty wild bird species found in our state*. Since well over 300 reside here through at least some of the year there is a lot to choose from, yet, I surmise that over 90 percent of adult participants would fall short (A tip up front... If you need

explanation as to why the entries of "duck", "seagull", "sparrow" or "hawk," wouldn't qualify on the list, save yourself the trouble.).

It seems logical in today's social media-driven world... were the act of active recognition of wild birds (i.e., birding) to trend as cool and healthy (see link in opening paragraph), broad awareness could be gained quite rapidly, and a sense of value toward their colorful and varied existence could go viral. Maybe then slipping populations would have some semblance of a fighting chance: #seebirds anyone?

How to get started, you ask? For one, (virtually for now) you can pop into Capital Area Audubon's monthly meetings (<https://capitalareaaudubon.org/>). The next one is set for Thursday, February 4. There are many other chapter meetings throughout the state (i.e., <https://www.detroitaudubon.org/>) that you can drop in on, as well. All are open and welcoming to the public. For another, arrange almost any day for a fun, personalized, guided local birding experience with us! Wild owls, eagles, peregrines, woodpeckers and even maybe winter wrens, are just an appointment and a pish away. Read on to see how.

*-Jim McGrath*



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*Northern Flicker.*

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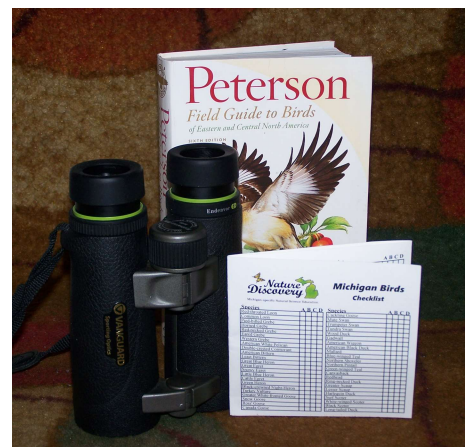
For individual adults, adult couples, families, and other small groups, and a great remedy for the COVID-winter blues! **Parents**, this is an excellent way to get your home-bound students out of the house and into the fresh winter air while providing a fun and educational opportunity that may very well bloom into a lifetime interest! **Adults/Retirees**, a first excursion might just hook you... You may find yourself propelled into an engaging hobby that you'll wish you had found years ago!

While fewer birds can be found in Michigan through the winter months than in other seasons there is quite a list of species that can *only* be found here now. In addition to our common non-migratory species a slew of migrant visitors from northern coniferous and tundra biomes appear in varied habitats, many of which are a short drive from home. It is also the time of year most likely to yield a "surprise" sighting – a vagrant species that shows up here well outside of its normal range.

We are now offering guided birding by appointment almost any day of the week. Jim will meet you at a local natural area of your or our choosing. The goal? To find and identify as many bird species as possible during our time together. Each participant will receive one of our Michigan Birds checklists to keep a running tab of species encountered. Some birds can be viewed even closer through our high-powered spotting scope. Ask about a special "owling" excursion either before sunrise or after sunset.

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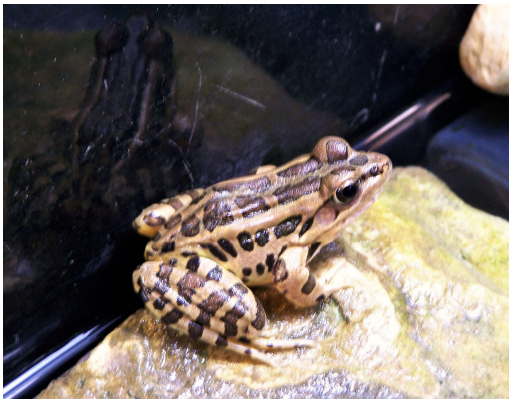
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The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Through the duration of pandemic restrictions individual adults, couples and individual families are welcome to schedule a safe, intimate outdoor or indoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” The unique, in-person, hands-on experiences here are a welcome relief to a student’s screen-learning time! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level. Visitors are required to wear a mask during all indoor time.

Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles” - all ten species native to our state! Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.



*The Pickerel Frog is one of the rarest frogs in the state. Watch it eat crickets.*

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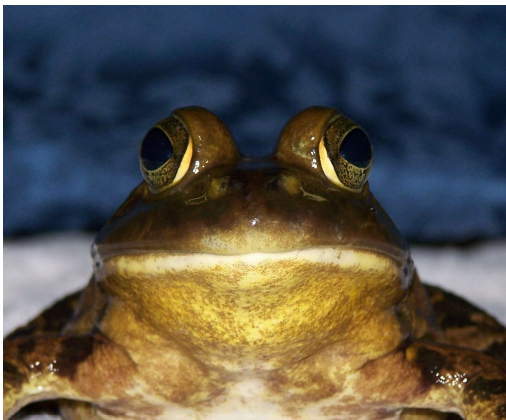
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**Base suggested minimum donation \$25/hr/household.**

**Ask about special arrangements for multiple-household sessions.**

**Contact us for further information or to schedule a date.**



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## ***We Can't Recycle Our Way Out of This***

Exposing the Myth of Plastics Recycling: Why a Majority is Burned or Thrown in a Landfill

<https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2019/09/20/how-to-recycle-plastic>

“The vast majority of plastic that has ever been produced — 79% — has actually ended up in landfills or scattered around the world or burned, but not refashioned into new products, which is what we hope for when we talk about recycling,” Sharon Lerner, an investigative reporter for *The Intercept*, says. “For plastic bags, it's less than 1% of tens of billions that are used in the U.S. alone. And so overall in the U.S., our plastic recycling rate peaked in 2014 at 9.5%.”

“We can't recycle our way out of this problem,” says Judith Enck. “We have to buy less plastic, and we need American and other businesses to make less plastic. There are alternatives, and I want to emphasize even the most careful consumer has a hard time avoiding plastics.”

Additionally, Enck offers these tips for recycling and avoiding plastic: 1) Recycle paper, metal, glass and cardboard. Only recycle plastics with No. 1, No. 2 or No. 5 on the bottom of the container — these types are truly recyclable. 2) Throw out Tupperware and plastic takeout containers, and replace with Pyrex or other glass containers. When you reheat food in the microwave in a plastic container, chemicals in the plastic can leach out into your food. 3) Avoid black plastic altogether — it's made from recycled electronic waste. If you have black plastic, throw it out — it can't be recycled again.



*Recycling programs are grossly inadequate, so we've been amassing our non-recyclable plastic since last March in lieu of tossing it into a landfill. Waiting/hoping for the day that recycling technology finally catches up with the unbridled produce-consume-dispose cycle of plastics that is the status quo today.*

COVID-19 Pandemic Has Led to More Ocean Plastic Pollution

<https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/10/12/plastic-pollution-coronavirus>

There is an “environmental silver lining” as a result of the coronavirus — carbon emissions have been reduced by more than 4%, many wildlife markets around the world have been shuttered and air quality in some places has slightly improved, says Dave Ford, founder of the environmental literacy organiza-

tion, SoulBuffalo, and the Ocean Plastics Leadership Network, a group that brings activists and the industry together to develop solutions to ocean plastic pollution. But thanks to an increase in pandemic-related, non-recyclable materials such as take-out plastic containers and masks, 30% more waste has [crept into our oceans](#).

### Waste Only: How the Plastics Industry is Fighting to Keep Polluting the World

<https://theintercept.com/2019/07/20/plastics-industry-plastic-recycling/>

Today, the plastics industry, estimated to be worth more than \$4 trillion, generates more than 300 million tons of plastic a year according to the most recent records — nearly half of which is for single-use items, meaning that it will almost instantly become trash.

Without good alternatives, the U.S. is now [burning](#) six times the amount of plastic it's recycling — even though the incineration process releases cancer-causing pollutants into the air and creates toxic ash, which also needs to be disposed of somewhere. And poor people are stuck with the worst consequences of the plastics crisis. [Eight out of 10](#) incinerators in the U.S. are in communities that are either poorer or have fewer white people than the rest of the country, and [residents](#) living near them are exposed to the toxic air pollution their combustion produces.

### Hundreds of Environmental Groups Call for 'Presidential Plastics Action Plan'

<https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/12/08/plastic-pollution-biden>

A coalition of more than 500 environmental groups issued a call to action to members of President-elect Joe Biden's transition team. The group has come up with eight steps they say the incoming president can take to reduce plastic pollution without congressional approval. Americans produce more plastic waste than any other people on the planet — per capita, more than 230 pounds a year. Globally, three-quarters is dumped in landfills where it can take five centuries to decompose, and only a small fraction is actually recycled. The rest ends up in the ocean and inside our bodies. -JM

*The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, "What were you thinking? Couldn't you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn't you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?" - Al Gore*

*I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg*



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