



Find out where to go closest to home to see a wild Snowy Owl today. Photo by Greg Smith

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Even those with no particular interest in them possess some level of awareness that fewer wild birds are present over the winter here than in other seasons of the year. While definitely true, however, those who make a conscious effort to maintain bird feeders outside their windows notice that, in addition to the status quo of permanent resident birds, a number of other species show up *only* around the winter months (The **Dark-eyed Junco** and, in our rural environs, the **American Tree Sparrow** come first to mind.).

This awareness alone can make the effort to pay more attention to wild birds over the winter more worthwhile; how worthwhile then depends on you... because these backyard 'snow birds' are barely the tip of Michigan's winter bird iceberg.

In fact, many dozens of migratory species that spend the breeding season across biomes to our north consider Lower Michigan 'south enough.' Migration, in essence, is not about escaping the cold. A healthy bird's insulating plumage and fat reserves keep the chill out just fine. It's all about gaining regular access to the specific foods that it needs to fuel the physiological furnace within. The shorter the distance the bird needs to fly to find it, the better.



Dark-eyed Junco. Photo by Greg Smith.

I get it. Many of us don't take kindly to the prospect of leaving our toasty, sheltered confines to willfully plunge ourselves into the winter elements. Granted, out of necessity we have to step out for work, school, errands, and social commitments... but to look for birds?

I've been winter birding annually since my teenage years. These months offer a lengthy list of Canadian and Arctic species - never seen or even heard of by most people - which show up in an array of habitats

beyond the backyard. Quite a few can be seen a relatively short drive from where you live... That is, if you know when, where and how to look.

Surely the most efficient route involves communication with other birders about what they've seen. Historically, pre-internet, this had been accomplished by simply joining a local Audubon Society chapter like Capital Area Audubon based in the Lansing area. At monthly meetings various birders (many of which are retirees, bitten long ago by the birding bug, a chronic condition) report their recent sightings. They regularly visit local locations - birding 'hotspots' - where habitat is prime for specific winter migrants.

All local birders come to know, then repeatedly visit, such areas where a variety of avian travelers from The North tend to gravitate, during migration and over the winter. Regarding hotspots within a thirty-minute drive of Lansing, Maple River State Game Area north of St. Johns arguably leads the list. Cruise the many byways for miles in and around the vicinity, largely flanked by wide open spaces with birds to see. You're likely to pass one or two other vehicles carrying binocular-wielding birders with similar intent.



The Northern Shrike, a Robin-sized Canadian songbird that preys on other small birds and small mammals, is a likely winter sighting at Maple River SGA Photo by Greg Smith.

Prior to the 2000s, before the proliferation of online content, someone interested in the appearance and whereabouts of less common birds could also rely on a local 'rare bird hotline,' usually managed by an Audubon member and updated weekly. The subject's location and other pertinent information would additionally be shared should the listener opt to 'chase' the rarity. Many birders who keep personal lists of birds encountered are always looking for unusual species to add to their year list, state list, county list, life list, etc.



Well-camouflaged, a Long-eared Owl can be a challenge to find. Photo by Greg Smith.

You could additionally leave a message after the beep if you happened to spot a species that experienced birders might appreciate seeing for themselves. The administrator may call you back for more details, then deem whether your bird was unusual enough to add to the week's installment.

In the mid-seventies, as a startup birder who had recently secured my own set of wheels, I would often call the Chicago area hotline. Each new week, a recorded voice rattled off 'noteworthy' birds that were recently seen as well as their precise locations should any listeners opt to see for themselves. My friend Goose and I would drive to one such location often to find one or more other birders on site who had also followed the hotline's tip.

As recently as the nineties, many 'seasoned' Lansing area bird enthusiasts recall dialing the hotline to listen to the voice of Ted Black, a retired MDNR biologist and avid lifelong birder and conservationist, as he recited the past week's unusual sightings (The Meridian Township parkland once

named *Van Atta Natural Area* was changed after his death to *Ted Black Woods* in honor of the man's lifelong contributions.).

Flashing forward a few decades, the above communications already feel out of the Stone Age! As with virtually everything else now, information about current bird sightings, unusual or not, either locally or in any given location across the entire friggin planet, can be found nearly instantaneously by an astute web-surfer.

The most universally used source is probably *eBird* (<https://ebird.org/home>), a free subscription site coordinated and maintained by Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology. In last month's newsletter I credited eBird for my heightened awareness prior to spotting a flock of rare Evening Grosbeaks that passed through the yard (<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Dec25.pdf>).

This site offers a veritable trove of access to up-to-date wild bird information, locally to worldwide. Interactive opportunities also include programs to list, catalog and report your own avian observations, backyard and beyond, to anywhere you may find yourself across the globe. Really, when navigating eBird, it ultimately comes down this: *How far down the ornithological rabbit hole do you want to go?*



Tundra-breeding Snow Buntings flock to local farmlands over the winter. When snow covers the fields the buntings gravitate to plowed roads to pick at exposed grit - a boon to car-bound birders.

Photo by Greg Smith.



Many hundreds in flight can mimic a swirling snow squall over distant fields. Snow Buntings are commonly seen over the winter at MRS GA, but can potentially be seen over most any agricultural field

Photo by Greg Smith.

This article on the site is indicative of how data amassed through exactly this brand of public input is continuing to shape our understanding of current movements and population trends pertaining to every known species. The results are quite grim; yet another reason to pick up your binoculars and get out there.

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You can easily subscribe on eBird to receive Michigan-specific 'rare bird alerts.' Every day a taxonomically-arranged list of the most recent 'uncommonly-seen' birds appears in my inbox - information amassed from the latest reports submitted by birders across the state - most within the past twenty-four hours. Next to each species is included the county where it was encountered, the observer's name, and a link to a GPS map with a pin indicating the precise location where the subject was encountered. Another link shows the reporting birder's complete list of species and numbers tallied at the location. A photo or two taken by the observer may be included, as well.

When I open the daily alert I quickly scan the list of species, then go over it again with an eye on the counties where they have been seen. I pay particular attention to posts from my own county – Ingham – and' surrounding counties. A species that shows up on the alert from Gratiot County is often pinned at a location around the above-mentioned Maple River SGA.



The Yellow-bellied Sapsucker is a breeder in forests from Northern Michigan into Canada. Quite a few are being reported this winter in Lower Michigan locations, including here on our property. Photo by Greg Smith.



Northerly breeding Short-eared Owls are being reported in Lower Michigan now. They are usually seen near sunset as they hunt for small mammals over expansive tracts of naturally vegetated field habitat. Photo by Greg Smith.

Perusing the list on a given day helps you to target a precise location with a specific unusual bird that you may wish to set your sights on. Whether you are lucky enough to see the specialty bird or not, other birds are sure to abound at a location that is often, incidentally, good-foraging for them, too. While they may be common enough to not warrant mention on the 'rare bird alert,' many are still far from what we'd call 'every-day' birds.

For instance, this past weekend I led a couple of birders to a location near Jackson that was posted on the alert. A **Golden Eagle** and multiple **Short-eared Owls** had been reported. Although we were disappointed to miss these species during our time there, we got great looks at other raptors: a **Bald Eagle**, a **Rough-legged Hawk**, several **Northern Harriers** and a couple of **American Kestrels**, in addition to a good variety of more usual songbird and woodpecker species.

Finally, it bears mentioning that the prospect of exposure to the cold through many such birding jaunts is not as uncomfortable or prolonged as you first might think. Lengthy hikes are almost never required. Nearly all the birds mentioned above - and so many more - occupy habitats that offer unobstructed viewing through binoculars right out the vehicle's window (Frankly, yeah, winter 'car-birding' is pretty cushy.). Then, depending perhaps on whether those in our group wish for better looks at a given subject, we'll pile out of the vehicle and walk around to take photos or to set up the spotting scope for ultra-close looks at, say, a treetop raptor perched across a field or distant diving ducks from a riverside parking lot.

What a great antidote to counter cabin fever and seasonal affective disorder, all the while experiencing birds, the futures of which we cannot take for granted. Particularly in the winter months, Nature Discovery offers intimate guided experiences, locally or more distant, for adults and small groups. Read on for scheduled excursions or contact us to arrange your own special winter birding opportunity.

-Jim McGrath

Nature Discovery

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The Wood Frog is one of ten Michigan frog species on display here.

Visit Our Nature Center by Appointment

*Suggested Minimum
Donation: \$5/person/hr*

The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and individual families are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor or outdoor 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 unrivaled at any other nature center or zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.

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.

Handle any or all of Michigan’s three species of garter snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble up worms and tadpoles. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – the largest in the state!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Identify birds at the feeders. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Ask about arranging a special evening visit. Weather-permitting we can step outside and attempt to attract a wild screech-owl with recordings.

Contact us for additional information or to make an appointment most any day.



A female Red-bellied Woodpecker dines just outside the nature center window.

Guided Winter Birding Opportunities

Lansing Area Winter Birding

Saturday, January 17; 8am to 1pm



Peregrine Falcon. Photo by Greg Smith.

A surprising array of birds can be seen in mid-winter right in or not far from the city. An intimate group of only 3 adult participants will ride in one vehicle, assuring an efficient excursion to locations along local waterways like Potter Park (Bald Eagles and nest), Moore's Park (Peregrine Falcon), westward beyond Frances Park and other locations. The variety of waterfowl, raptors and songbirds should total 30 species or more. Each participant will receive personal Michigan Birds checklist to keep track of the day's finds. Maximum walking required over the day will total less than one mile.

FEE: \$50. Advance registration required. Contact us soon for further details or to reserve one of these limited spots.

Maple River Winter Birding

Saturday, January 31; 7:30am to 1:30pm

Join an intimate guided trip for adult participants to Maple River State Game Area (north of St. Johns) and surrounding backroads in search of winter birds. Bald Eagle, Golden Eagle, Rough-legged Hawk, Northern Harrier and American Kestrel are some of the many raptor species potentially in store. Shrikes, Snow Buntings, Lapland Longspurs and other Canadian breeders highlight an array of smaller bird species that occupy roadside habitats. Each participant will receive personal Michigan Birds checklist to keep track of the day's finds, likely over 30 species in all. Most of the day will be spent birding in or near the vehicle with minimal walking.

FEE: \$70. Advance registration required. Contact us soon for further details or to reserve one of these limited spots.



Horned Lark.

Photo by Steve Sage.

Winter Birding by Appointment

Do you have your own group of up to three people interested in a guided local excursion to these or another location? Contact us to make an appointment!

Eastern U.P. Winter Birding, February 14-16

Planning is underway for a 3-day/2-nite guided excursion for a small group of adults to the Eastern U.P. - from the bridge to Sault Ste. Marie, Whitefish Point and many points in between. Snowy Owl and state-threatened Sharp-tailed Grouse lead the list of anticipated birds. Contact us for further details, cost or to reserve a spot.

At the onset of 2026 we wish to extend our sincere gratitude to those who value and support our mission. A special thank you to these most recent donors...



Winter backyard view of our Williamston home/nature center.

*Anonymous
Jeanette Gladstone
Jan Heminger
Judy & Allen Marr
Okemos Nursery School
Greg Smith
Jenny & Bob Stanfield*

Cedar Creek Vet Clinic: Official Veterinarian of Nature Discovery!

We are grateful to the professionals at CCV for their long-time support of Nature Discovery. The clinic provides health services when needed for the gamut of 'working' Michigan native reptiles and amphibians that reside in the nature center.

Did you know that CCV, located south of Williamston, is acclaimed across the state and beyond for their specialty health care services for birds and reptiles? Check them out, and tell them that you saw it here!

<https://www.cedarcreekvet.com/>



Amelia cradles our Eastern Garter after a recent outpatient procedure at CCV.

Volunteer at Our Nature Center!

Join our mission! Whether you're a high school student, a retiree or part of any demographic in between, our home-based nature center can use your help.

Assist in...

- * maintaining the many members of our huge zoo of Michigan-native reptiles & amphibians
- * upkeep of the nature center rooms and displays
- * seasonally-specific upkeep of outside grounds and trails
- * invasive species removal
- * educational interaction opportunities with visitors



A view to Nature Discovery's lower level menagerie.

Trained volunteers have an opportunity for a paid part-time employment positions. Make an appointment for a preliminary, in-person visit/orientation today.

Wakeup Call:

Our Climate System, Democracy are in Peril

Arctic Sinkholes

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/video/arctic-sinkholes/>

PBS News Confirms Weekend Team Will Air Final Broadcast on Sunday

https://www.yahoo.com/news/articles/pbs-news-confirms-weekend-team-031451420.html?fr=sycsrp_catchall

Heather Cox Richardson, Letters from an American; January 9, 2025

https://open.substack.com/pub/heathercoxrichardson/p/january-9-2026?utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email

Army Talk Orientation Fact Sheet #64; 24 March 1945

https://archive.org/details/ArmyTalkOrientationFactSheet64-Fascism/page/n7/mode/2up?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

-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

The personal actions that cut climate pollution fast are to go flight-, car-, and meat-free. Start with the one that feels most feasible for you; if you can’t totally go without, aim to cut your consumption today at least in half. – Kimberly Nicholas, Under the Sky We Make

What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? –Robin Wall Kimmerer

Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you. – Frank Lloyd Wright

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