

North Country Notes



The Newsletter of the Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance

Marquette and Alger Counties, Michigan

February 2025

From My Perch

By Jeff Towner, Chairperson, Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance

Three years ago, Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance became an affiliate of the National Audubon Society. This affiliation provides us with annual base funding and the ability to apply for grants. (We were awarded two small grants in 2022.) One of the requirements of affiliates is to submit an annual report of finances and events and activities. Our report for 2024 demonstrates what an active chapter we are. For example, we have existing or emerging partnerships with eleven entities, and we provided a total of twenty-five bird outings, monthly presentations, requested bird surveys, citizen science events, and educational and fun activities. After reviewing our report, the National Audubon office provided the following feedback: “It was a delight to read through everything you shared. The Birds and Brews event is a great example of a successful collaboration with partners and great community engagement. Congratulations on such a great event! Also, the number and variety of bird outings your chapter offers is impressive. Bringing people together to appreciate and understand birds is a crucial step in growing our network throughout the hemisphere, inspiring new constituencies—and future generations—to act on behalf of birds and people. I celebrate your chapter’s contributions!”

We are not resting on our laurels; we will have a similarly active year in 2025, and we hope our members will take advantage of the things we offer the community. Please continue to check our website at <https://laughingwhitefishbirdalliance.com>, follow us on Facebook, and watch your email for upcoming events.

Enjoy Your Winter Birds

By Jude Holloway

There aren’t too many things more defined and revealing of the four seasons in the U.P. than birds. It’s the return of all the colorful birds that usher in our **spring**. Our world fills with their beautiful singing. In **summer** we watch them flitting and foraging, teaching their young, and filling our woods and waters with life and movement. **Fall** comes, and as the earth changes color, so do the birds. The once brightly colored birds now dull down into their traveling plumage. The waters and sky team with flock after flocks of birds as they stage up and point south. Then, they’re gone. **Winter** settles in and only the hardiest of birds remain. It is nothing short of miraculous how they endure the cold and scarcity of food. How can you not admire these little guys? For most, winter birding is reduced to looking out windows watching those few that remain, gracing our feeders.

For many people, birding in the winter just is not a big draw. After all, the majority of our birds have migrated out and are enjoying warmer weather and better food supplies south. Our lakes and ponds, which

are wonderful places to watch ducks, and such are all frozen over. Our marshes that in the summer are alive with singing birds are now silent and wind-blown. Even the shoreline of our great lake where plovers, sandpipers, and gulls are always there to entertain us, are now iced over and pretty much void of life. Winter can be a tough time for those of us who live here. Many become semi reclusive tucked in our cozy warm homes. Sadly, many suffer from S.A.D. (seasonal affected disorder) and just do the best they can to get through these dark months. But our faithful birds are out there ready to inspire and greet us. Whether they are at our feeders or flitting and feeding in the tall pines while we're out skiing or snowshoeing. Even when we're out shoveling, they will often come to grace us with their presence. Winter can be an enchanting time. The trees no longer block our view with all their leaves. The ground that in the summertime can be difficult to traverse is now smoothed out with visible passageways. The ground becomes a canvas with little bird tracks and wing prints pressed upon its glittering surface. And out of nowhere the still silence can be broken with the sweet familiar voice of a chickadee, or a nuthatch, or maybe a corvid. Birds, our fellow winter companions, are always waiting to bring us joy.



Photos of birds that winter in Upper Michigan-from left to right: Bohemian Waxwing, Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Grosbeak-
Photos by Skye Haas

Update on Hunts of the Eastern Population of Sandhill Cranes

By Cathy Waller, LWBA secretary/Marquette County Crane Count Coordinator

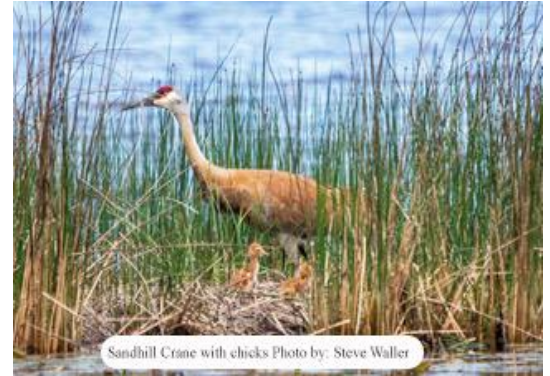
The Eastern Population (EP), which consists of greater sandhill cranes, has rebounded from near extirpation in the late 1800's. The Sandhill Crane disappeared as a breeding bird from Illinois (1890), Iowa (1905), South Dakota (1910), Ohio (1926), and Indiana (1929), and was nearly extirpated from several other states. In Wisconsin, the Sandhill Crane was reduced to an estimated 25 breeding pairs in the 1930s. Michigan was even worse off with a few pairs in the Eastern UP and a few pairs downstate. Since that time, hunting bans and habitat protection efforts have helped Sandhill Crane populations to slowly recover.

Management actions, such as regulating take and the protection and restoration of habitat, allowed this population to increase to a level that exceeded 30,000 cranes by 1996. Most EP cranes breed across the Great Lakes region (Wisconsin, Michigan, Ontario, and Minnesota); however, the range of this population is currently expanding in all directions. By early fall, EP cranes leave their breeding grounds and congregate in large flocks on traditional staging areas throughout the breeding range. During migration, EP cranes use traditional stopover areas which include Jasper-Pulaski Fish and Wildlife Area in northwest Indiana and Hiawassee State Wildlife Refuge in southeast Tennessee. Historically, EP cranes primarily wintered in southern Georgia and throughout Florida. Recent annual

Midwinter Survey data show substantial numbers of cranes wintering farther north into Kentucky, Tennessee, and even Indiana in some years.

In 2010, the Mississippi and Atlantic Flyway Councils endorsed a management plan for EP cranes. One of the plan's provisions included guidelines for potential harvest of this population once the 3-year average of the EP cranes reached above 30,000 cranes, which it has surpassed. Kentucky, Tennessee and Alabama have started a crane hunt issuing a limited number of permits through a lottery. According to the hunt plan, the number of tags a state can issue cannot exceed 10% of the state's five-year average peak crane abundance. Each tag allows a hunter to harvest one crane. The total number of Eastern Population sandhill cranes harvested during 2022–23 hunting season was 1,085 birds, which was 30% higher than the previous year.

As of this writing, it continues to be illegal to hunt Sandhill Cranes in Michigan. Except for agriculture damage permits, Michigan has not had a crane season in over 100 years. But in 2021, Michigan lawmakers introduced Senate Resolution 20 (SR 20) to encourage the Michigan's Natural Resources Commission to approve of a Sandhill Crane hunt. Some Michigan lawmakers say there's been an "explosion" in the eastern sandhill crane population, and that it's causing problems for farmers. In the spring, the birds eat the planted seeds or young plants in the corn and wheat fields. There is quite a bit of debate about whether a Michigan crane hunt would solve the farmers' problem of crop loss. A fall hunting season would likely target more migratory birds and not necessarily those causing agricultural damage in Michigan farm fields. A summer hunt is not possible under the federal framework. It would be up to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to establish guidelines hunting cranes in Michigan. Cranes would have to be declared a game species in Michigan, a hunting plan developed which would include a special permit quota, and season regulations for the first hunt. The hunt plan would then be reviewed by U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services for final approval. More cranes are killed under depredation permits in MI, than total cranes shot in other states hunting seasons in Mississippi Flyway.



Wisconsin is moving forward with establishing a crane hunt. Last December 2024, the Wisconsin Legislative Council Study Committee on Sandhill Cranes proposed a draft bill that introduced combined legislation which included a limited hunting season for sandhill cranes in Wisconsin plus a provision for financial assistance to farmers to treat their seeds with a chemical that deters cranes from eating their crops. The bill was moved forward to the Joint Legislative Council (JLC). The bill (with edits) will be prepared for possible introduction to the assembly before being referred to the appropriate committee. Any proposed legislation will need to get through the Wisconsin legislature and also be signed by the governor.

There are some good biological reasons to hesitate on starting up a crane hunt in Michigan and Wisconsin. Sandhill Cranes are very different than other game birds, who typically begin breeding at one year of age. The average age for the first successful breeding of EP Sandhill Cranes is four years. Some pairs take as long as eight years to produce young that survive to independence. Sandhill Cranes have the longest life span, highest adult survival, but lowest percentage of juveniles

within the total population of any game bird in North America. This is important because the number of juveniles present in a population provides insight into the population's ability to support harvest. There are several factors that contribute to the low ratio of juveniles to adults. Additionally, Sandhill Crane pairs produce fewer young annually compared to other game birds. Sandhill Cranes rarely raise more than one chick (called colts in cranes) each year, and many of these chicks do not survive their first year of life. A 22-year study of Sandhill Cranes in central Wisconsin revealed that, on average, only 44% chicks survive to fall migration per territory per year. Given that Sandhill Cranes produce smaller clutches and have delayed maturity, they need long periods of time to recover from population declines. Although population estimates for Eastern Population Sandhill Cranes are currently derived

from several standardized surveys, it is not clear whether these surveys provide the precision needed to prevent overharvest.

The Eastern Population of Sandhill Cranes is a fabulous conservation story. They went from being almost completely wiped out from our state to being beautiful regular creatures in our spring, summer and fall skies. I'm glad that there is a solution in place for farmers and thrilled that the Michigan Sandhill Crane hunt seems to have stalled out...for the moment at least.

Sources:

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service: Status and Harvests of Sandhill Cranes 2023 Mid-continent, Rocky Mountain, Lower Colorado River Valley and Eastern Populations

Southern Wisconsin Bird Alliance: <https://swibirds.org/cranebill>

International Crane Foundation: <https://savingcranes.org/news/resources/statement-on-wisconsin-legislative-study-committee-sandhill-cranes/>

Michigan Audubon Society: <https://www.michiganaudubon.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Frequently-Asked-Questions-Regarding-Proposals-to-Open-Sandhill-Crane-Hunt-in-Michigan.pdf>



Annual Sandhill Crane Count on Saturday, April 12, 2025

The International Crane Foundation will sponsor the 49th Annual Midwest Crane Count on Saturday, April 12, 2025, from 6:30 to 8:30 a.m. More than 2,000 volunteer participants from throughout Wisconsin and portions of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan, Ohio, and Minnesota will participate in the spring survey, which gathers information on the abundance and distribution of cranes in the upper Midwest.

New volunteers interested in taking part in this yearly survey need to first contact their local County Coordinator. The Crane County Coordinator will assign a site and give additional instructions. Cathy Waller (cathy@upwallers.net) is the Marquette County Coordinator. Jude Holloway (906kayaker@gmail.com) is the Alger County Coordinator. Additional information on the crane count can be found at cranecount.org.

The International Crane Foundation works to conserve the world's 15 species of cranes and the natural communities on which they depend. The Michigan population of Sandhill Cranes was nearly gone by the early 1900s, but the species has successfully recovered and is slowly expanding their numbers. That is good news for all of us that enjoy watching these majestic birds. Observations of Sandhill Cranes can lend insight into threatened crane species, including the endangered Whooping Crane.

The International Crane Foundation works worldwide to conserve cranes and the ecosystems, watersheds, and flyways on which they depend. The Foundation is committed to a future where all 15 of the world's crane species are secure. Through the charisma of cranes, it envisions a future where people work together for wild crane populations and the landscapes they depend on—and by doing so, find new pathways to sustain our water, land, and livelihoods.

3rd Annual Birds & Brews on Saturday, April 26, 2025

The Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society and MI Birds will be holding another “Birds and Brews,” Jeopardy Game on Saturday, April 26, at 5 PM, at the Ore Dock Brewing Company, 114 W Spring St, Marquette, MI. Play two rounds of bird trivia and learn about the importance of our public lands to birds—all while enjoying a complimentary drink on us.

There will be a brief presentation on the MI Birds program before the fun begins with two rounds of bird-related trivia covering 10 topics with MC Steve Waller, LWAS member. There will also be bird-themed coloring pages for children to color.

MI Birds is a public outreach and education program created by Audubon Great Lakes and Michigan Department of Natural Resources. Birders and hunters share similar conservation values, but rarely cross paths. MI Birds aims to bridge the divide and increase and deepen the number of Michiganders engaged in the understanding, care, and stewardship of public lands that are important for birds and communities.

Field Trip to Peninsula Point- Spring Migration & Picnic Sunday May 18, 2025

Peninsula Point Lighthouse, at the tip of the Stonington Peninsula, is one of the best locations in the UP to witness spring migration. LWBA will host an all-day birding event on Sunday, May 18. Gather mid-day in the picnic area for lunch—bring your own food and beverages. Join us for some of the spring’s best birding. A bonus of this gathering is that there will be plenty of expert birders available to help with spotting and bird-identification.

March 12, 2025 (Wednesday) 7 PM - Owls

Location: Peter White Public Library, Shiras Room, 3rd Floor

Presenter: Scot Stewart

Owls - Silent Hunters of the Night – Owls are one of the really unique groups of birds and garner a huge amount of attention because of the forward-facing eyes and their mostly nighttime lifestyle. Because they can look you straight in the eyes and cruise the skies soundlessly they are truly a special lot. This owl program will take a look at the different species of owls found in Michigan and a few others, comparing appearances, overall ranges, special features, and some of their visits to the Upper Peninsula including some that have been in the area this winter. Scot Stewart is a local writer, photographer, and educator in Marquette. He is a regular contributor to the Marquette Monthly and the Mining Journal and part of the MooseWood Nature Center in Marquette.

April 9, 2025 (Wednesday) 7 PM - Spring Tune-up

Location: Peter White Public Library, Shiras Room, 3rd Floor

Presenter: Gary Palmer, LWBA Board Member

LWBA board member Gary Palmer will present a refresher on the birds returning to the north woods this spring. Gary will be presenting an overview of many of the migrants that can be found throughout the Upper Peninsula as they travel back to breeding grounds.

Gary Palmer has been a longtime member of Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance, serving on the board since 2012. He fell in love with birding over a decade ago during a spring field ornithology course at Northern Michigan University and has been utterly hooked ever since. Gary spent several seasons as a professional migration counter at sites such as Whitefish Point and Hawk Ridge and has spent summers censusing breeding birds in Illinois and Idaho.

October 8, 2025 (Wednesday) 7 PM-GEMS (Grouse Enhanced Management Site)

Location: Peter White Public Library, room-to be determined

Presenter: Heather Shaw, Wildlife Biologist at Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Heather will speak about the DNR’s GEMS program. With the help of hunters and partners, the DNR is developing a series of intensively managed, accessible and walk-in ruffed grouse hunting areas across the northern Lower (NLP) and Upper Peninsulas (UP). The areas are called “GEMS”.

Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance Membership Form

Dues support the newsletter, programs, & local birding activities. Donations are tax-deductible.

Your name (or gift-recipient's name): _____

Street: _____

City, State and Zip: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

(E-mail addresses are not given to other groups or commercial entities)

Annual Membership fees (please check one)

Gift membership - \$15 Regular(family) membership - \$15 OR Student - \$5.00 *How would you like to receive your newsletter?*

E-mail or Postal service

Are you also a member of the Michigan Audubon Society?

YES or NO

Additional donations:

\$ _____ General Expenses for club projects

\$ _____ Research/Conservation Grant to fund birding research/conservation in the UP

FOR GIFT MEMBERSHIPS please supply your name and the recipient will be notified of your gift: DONOR NAME: _____

Mail this form, along with your check (payable to LWBA) to: *Cathy Waller, 201 County Road KB, Marquette, MI 49855*

c/o Beth Olson
5 Arrowhead Dr.
Marquette, MI 49855

