

North Country Notes



The Newsletter of the Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance

Marquette and Alger Counties, Michigan

September 2025

From My Perch

by Jeff Towner, President, Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance

Spending time outdoors, observing birds, and learning about them is good for our mental and physical health and something that all birders enjoy pursuing. But these days it is not business as usual when it comes to birds and bird conservation. We are losing our birds, and it's happening rather rapidly. In addition to the physical changes to the environment, including global warming that is changing the climate and habitats, the use of pesticides, and many other sources of mortality including domestic cats, collisions with buildings, etc., we are also losing our birds and other wildlife due to government policies. This is not a partisan view, but simple fact. As far as I can tell, the popular media rarely cover these stories, so it behooves us as lovers of birds and the natural environment to make the effort to inform ourselves.

Take the case of Muleshoe National Wildlife Refuge in the Texas panhandle. A refuge of 6,440 acres, Muleshoe provides essential habitat for pronghorn antelope, lesser prairie chickens, stopover habitat for huge flocks of sandhill cranes, and many other wildlife species as well as swaths of grassland wildflowers. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been planning and working with private landowners to enter into conservation easements for some fifteen years. These voluntary agreements would have expanded the refuge to approximately 700,000 acres. But the Fish and Wildlife Service has abruptly abandoned those agreements. Those purchases would have been made using funds already appropriated through the Land and Water Conservation Fund. This is the first time on record that a pending federal refuge expansion has been canceled and is a precedent that should concern us all. The state and federal politicians who deep-sixed

this effort claimed that landowners were being coerced into selling. The Fish and Wildlife Service never coerces landowners into entering a conservation easement. Even if they wanted to, it's not legally possible to do so.

The Council on Environmental Quality, which is a White House agency that administers the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) earlier this year proposed to rescind the implementing regulations. This is the law that examines the impacts of, and allows for, public and agency comments before issuing federal permits for projects. A local example are the improvements to the Sault Sainte Marie lock system for which the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers prepared an Environmental Impact Statement before beginning construction. Rescinding these regulations would completely change how the government goes about documenting impacts to environmental, social, and cultural resources in deciding to deny or approve federal permits for all kinds of projects. It is unthinkable, but they're moving forward with it.

Another of our most important laws, the Endangered Species Act (ESA), is also under an unprecedented attack. Opponents of federal environmental regulations, including those that implement the ESA, have attempted to rescind or weaken the Act ever since it was passed in 1973. But this time it is different. This time our bedrock federal environmental laws and regulations are under a full-frontal assault.

The federal government this year changed the definition of "harm" under the ESA regulations. The definition for many years included significant alteration or destruction of habitat that results in harm to a threatened or endangered species. Such a finding

triggered consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or NOAA Fisheries Division, depending on the species involved. As birders we know that if you destroy an animal's habitat you take away or reduce that species' ability to survive and reproduce. On top of that, the government under Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum is moving forward under several recent executive orders directing the federal government to change ESA regulations in a way that could enable businesses—fossil fuel firms in particular—to bypass the typical environmental reviews associated with project approval. There are currently approximately 70 species of birds protected under the Act, including the California Condor, Whooping Crane, Piping Plover, and Northern Spotted Owl.

In May the Department of Interior, which houses the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Bureau of Land Management, among other agencies published in the Federal Register the following request for comments: "The U.S. Department of the Interior (DOI) seeks comments and information ... in identifying existing regulations that can be modified or repealed, to ensure that DOI administrative actions do not undermine the national interest and that DOI achieves a meaningful reduction in regulatory burdens...[and] advance American energy independence., and ensure the responsible stewardship of the Nation's public lands and resources. This Request for Information, is part of DOI's implementation of recent directives from the President, including executive orders, which seek to deconstruct the regulatory burden that has been self-imposed on our Nation's interests and improve the relevant processes to establish a more efficient regulatory program at DOI." Among the government gibberish the phrase "advance American energy independence" gives away the true rationale. The comment period for this drastic change to our essential federal natural resource regulations quietly closed on July 31st.

It doesn't stop there. There are additional directives to revise federal land management laws and regulations, to include the elimination of the requirement for

agencies like the Bureau of Land Management to develop land management plans, a core function of that agency. In addition, on August 29th the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) published a Notice of Intent to rescind the 2001 Roadless Area Conservation Rule. This move will initiate a 21-day public comment period and could significantly alter the management of nearly 45 million acres of national forest lands across 37 states. It just goes on and on. These actions by the federal government are without precedent. This is all happening under the radar, and the popular media are completely failing to inform the public.

I could include more examples, such as the huge cut to the budget of the National Park Service, with more cuts proposed. I haven't even mentioned the firing without cause of thousands of federal employees and the destructive impact to the morale of those employees lucky enough so far to have been spared the indiscriminate wrecking ball of DOGE. All of these changes will take decades to repair and some of the impacts will result in irreversible damage.

We have specific laws designed by Congress to protect all migratory birds, threatened and endangered species, bald eagles, golden eagles and marine mammals. These resources belong to all of us. They are held in trust by the government for those of us alive today and for future generations. The protections that have been in place for decades are being systematically dismantled. Any one of us can decide whether and how to push back on this assault. What I have done for many years, and to me what seems especially urgent now is to join and donate to organizations that reflect my values, including The Nature Conservancy, The Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, Defenders of Wildlife, Ocean Conservancy, Conservation International, the League of Conservation Voters, and the National Audubon Society, as well as local NGOs. Remaining active in our Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance to inform and inspire our members and the public to the value of our avian resources is equally important.

Peregrine Falcon Nesting Box on Cliffs Shaft in Ishpeming, Update

By Thom Skelding

The discovery of iron ore in 1844 by U.S. Surveyor John Austin Bert in what is now Negaunee, began a history of over 175 years of nonstop mining of iron ore in Marquette County. Of the many underground mines that operated, and then closed, the one that outlasted them all was the Cliff Shaft Mine. It was operated by the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Company for 100 years from 1867 to 1967, after which open pit mining became the most cost-effective way to mine iron ore. Cleveland Cliffs still operates the Tilden Mine which is just south of Ishpeming/Negaunee and operates three others on the Minnesota iron range. I moved with my brother to the Upper Peninsula in 1974, where we both began working at the new Tilden Mine. As you approach Ishpeming from the west on highway 41, then take the business route through town. You can't help but see the Cliffs Shaft Mine Museum's three towering



headframes, the tallest is "C" shaft 170 feet high. The mine buildings fell into disrepair after 1969, then in the 1990's a group met with the mine owners about acquiring the mine property for a museum. Fast forward to 2022 when I began thinking that the 170 foot "C" shaft would be the perfect place for a Peregrine nest box. Getting approval from the museum board members, I acquired some CAD nest box building plans from a retired Michigan Tech engineer named Phil Quenzi, and approached the Ishpeming High School woodshop teacher, Andrew Mason, about having his students build, which they finished in the fall of 2023. The box was installed later in 2024 by an Eagle Mine employee who goes by the name, "Safety Man Dan"! It is on the same level as the hoist motors that brought up iron ore from 1700 feet underground. He also installed the motion camera this spring. Peregrines have been sighted near the museum through the years, and piles of pigeon feathers attest to the presence of raptors. So far, I have lots of photos of Starlings and pigeons. There was a photo of a Peregrine chasing pigeons in downtown Negaunee earlier this summer, so I am crossing my fingers for a pair to

set up housekeeping next summer.



1 View from C shaft, hoist motors on same level as nest box, A and B shafts



2 Hoist motor which hoisted ore from 1750 feet underground is next to Peregrine box.



3 Hoist motor which hoisted ore from 1750 feet underground is next to Peregrine box.

2025 Breeding Bird Survey of Tory's Woods

By Cathy Waller

This past spring, the Upper Peninsula Land Conservancy (UPLC) contacted Laughing Whitefish Bird Alliance to see if we could, once again, conduct a breeding bird survey at Tory's Woods, on the west

corner of Alger County off M-28. The first survey was conducted in 2017 by Scott Hickman, with additional surveys done in 2018 and 2019. The most recent was conducted by Cathy Waller and Beth Olson on June 20,

2024, from 05:45 to 11:20 AM. The 2025 survey was conducted on June 17, 2025, from 05:30 to 11:15 AM by Cathy Waller and Ivan Wiljanen.

It was a couple of days earlier than the previous two years of surveys. The conditions were good: clear skies, 67°F temperatures and 10 mph wind that increased to 20 mph later in the morning. In contrast, the conditions for the 2024 survey were perfect for the survey with clear skies, 60° F temperatures and no wind. The increased wind during the course of the morning may have kept some birds from vocalizing; but the birds that chose to sing were singing a lot.

The birds of Tory's Woods were surveyed by using the transect – listening stop method. The existing trails were used as the transect route as is frequently done when employing this census method. In 2024, we had set-up in advance GPS locations that were pretty close to the listening stops used in the 2017-2019 surveys but varied some of our stops to fall near wetlands. Stops 1 and 2 are on the road (Lake Superior Point Trail). Stops 3 and 4 are on the South Trail that travels through what used to be very muddy section of the property. New boardwalks were built in the fall of 2024, which made the censusing of the South Trails go much faster. Stop 5 is at the intersection of the North and Middle Trail. Stop 6 is in the middle of the Middle Trail. Stops 7 through 10 are on the North Trail.

Thirty-five species of birds were encountered during the 2025 survey. In comparison, 2024 had 40 species, 2023 had 39 species, 2019 had 28 species, 2018 had 33 species, and 2017 had 39 species. One bird species was added to the 2025 bird list for Tory's Woods: flyover of a Double-crested Cormorant. No federal or state endangered or threatened species were encountered. Sixty-six species have been found during the seven years of Tory's Woods Breeding Bird Surveys. Fourteen of those species have been recorded during the last six surveys: American Crow, American Robin, Black-capped Chickadee, Blue Jay, Black-throated Green Warbler, Hermit Thrush, Nashville Warbler, Northern Parula, Ovenbird, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Red-eyed Vireo, Winter Wren, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Their numbers are fairly stable or on the increase.

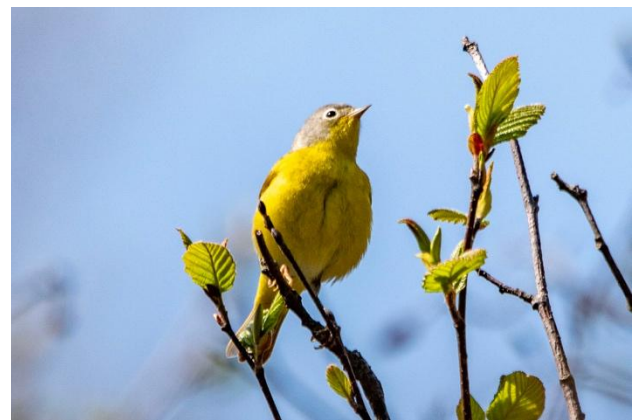
The most vocal bird species this year was the Nashville Warbler (33), found at nearly every leg and stop during



4-Black-throated Green Warbler. Photo by Steve Waller

our census. Nashville Warblers breed in deciduous, coniferous, streamside woodlands, and also bogs and thickets. They favor cedar and spruce bogs in northern part of range. Tory's Woods has all of these habitat types within its acreage. Two other birds, the Black-throated Green Warbler (19) and Red-eyed Vireo (19), were heard in very high numbers as well this year.

Tory's Woods is an important nesting habitat for two “watch-listed” species— Canada Warbler and Cape May Warbler. The Canada Warbler was encountered on the Lake Superior Point Trail, an area that has a shrubby edge/wetland opening, prime habitat for Canada Warbler. *PartnersInFlight.org* states that the “Canada Warblers are relatively uncommon as their



5-Nashville Warbler. Photo by Steve Waller

populations declined by 62% between 1970 and 2014. They are a Yellow Watch List species with a declining population and a Continental Concern Score of 14 out of 20. The current estimated global breeding population is 3 million. Partners in Flight estimated in

2015 that if the current rate of decline continues, Canada Warblers will lose another half of their remaining population by 2072. Population declines are likely due to changes in forest structure, forest management practices that reduce understory vegetation, and loss of forested wetlands. Extensive browsing of understory vegetation by white-tailed deer has altered the forest understory, eliminating the shrubby component Canada Warblers need for nesting. Logging practices that thin understory vegetation may also reduce nest-site quality.” (Partners in Flight)

Cape May Warbler, found at the first part of the South Trail, was likely using the larger spruce/tamarack trees which it prefers that are available nearby. Cape May Warbler is known as a “spruce worm specialist. Its numbers fluctuate with outbreaks of that insect. Habitat loss— especially of mature spruce trees— is the biggest threat to this bird. Aerial insecticide spray to control spruce budworms, an important food source during the summer, can cause steep population declines. Cape May Warbler populations declined by an estimated 2.5% per year from 1966 to 2015, resulting in a cumulative decline of 70% over that period, according to the *North American Breeding Bird Survey*.

The Magnolia Warbler has been found in Tory’s Woods (between Stops 2 and 3) during the 2016, 2017, 2019, 2023, 2024 and 2025 surveys. It has been declining in the national forests of the upper Midwest and utilizes smaller, close-growing conifers in coniferous wetlands for breeding habitat which are prevalent in Tory’s Woods. This is a habitat type that has been under increasing pressure for pulp-paper production making the protected status of Tory’s Woods likely to become even more important. Magnolia Warblers populations increased by nearly 1% per year from 1966 to 2019



6-Magnolia Warbler. Photo by Steve Waller

according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Partners in Flight estimates the global breeding population at 39 million and rates them 8 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score, indicating a species of low conservation concern.

The results of this year’s survey indicate that Tory’s Woods continues to provide habitat for a healthy diversity of breeding birds. This is even more important with the nationwide loss of habitat and the growing threats from climate change. The shocking news report published in the 2019 *Science* reported on the loss of 3 billion birds since 1970. The 2025 State of the Birds Report for the United (Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, 2025) showed that bird declines have continued, and in some cases, accelerated in recent years. Tory’s Woods remains an important gem for breeding and nesting birds.

4th Annual “Birds & Brews” & Highlights from the 3rd Birds & Brews

Mark your calendars for another “Birds and Brews”! Laughing Whitefish Audubon Society and MI Birds will be holding 4th “Birds and Brews,” on Saturday, April 25, 2026, at 5 PM, at the Ore Dock Brewing Company. The event will include a free drink for attendees, a bird nerd trivia game styled after the Jeopardy game show, and door prizes furnished by MI Birds, LWBA members and local businesses. On April 26th the MI Birds program and LWBA held our third annual and very popular Birds and Brews event at the Ore Dock Brewing Company. The

event included a free drink for attendees, tickets to the evening concert (complements of the Ore Dock) and featured a bird nerd trivia game styled after the Jeopardy game show. The turnout for the event was standing room only, greatly surpassing last year.

The bird trivia game pit four large teams of veteran and novice birders in a spirited contest to score the most points based on their knowledge of birds and bird biology. There were two rounds of Jeopardy. The first round required teams to identify a specific bird species from a photo or song in one of five categories. If a team got lucky enough to receive one of the bonus questions, their team's score might zoom ahead. Round Two focused on rare birds, attracting birds, general bird biology and behavior. Whether a birding expert or novice, everyone had a great time.

Twenty-two attendees

migrated home with birdy door prizes. MI Birds furnished a pair of Nikon binoculars, a *National Geographic Birds of Eastern US 2025* book and two MI birds Beanies. LWBA contributed a bird feeder and 10 pound bag of bird seed, Dead River coffee, and Donckers chocolate. Marquette Food Co-Op donated bird friendly coffee. LWBA board member Jude Holloway donated seven books and LWBA member Kurt Babcock donated two bird prints.

MI Birds is a public outreach and education program created by Audubon Great Lakes and the 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.

Birds and Brews is becoming an annual event on Marquette's Spring calendar for all those who love birds. So, mark your calendars for next year, Saturday, April 25, 2026, and... Bird on, Yoopers!

Door Prize winners (from left to right): book winners, bird feeder, and MI beanie



Door Prize winners (from left to right): binoculars, photo, coffee, and another book winner

LWBA Fall/Spring Programs 2025-2026

(Programs are held at Peter White Public Library, 217 N Front Street, MQT)

September 9, 2025 (Tuesday) 7PM - "Featherweight Champions: What a bird's body can teach us about resilience."

Location: Peter White Public Library, Community Room

Presenter: Dr. Cory Elowe, Assistant Professor of Biology, NMU

Migratory birds have incredible physiology that allows them to make the perilous trip from their wintering grounds to their breeding grounds and back. This talk will highlight some of the research into their ecological physiology--the ways that the environment influences their function--to show how conservation efforts and physiology research go hand-in-hand.

Dr. Cory Elowe is a new professor of biology at Northern Michigan University. Cory has spent the last 12 years studying the ways that animals endure stressful conditions. He focuses on the physiology of migratory and overwintering songbirds, using whole-animal energetics and molecular tools to understand how their flexible bodies allow them to withstand the challenges of migration and frigid weather.

October 8, 2025 (Wednesday) 7PM - Morocco: Birding at the edge of the Sahara—via Zoom

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

Presenter: Don Burlett, Board Member, Oakland Bird Alliance

Morocco is well known for its exotic locations like Casablanca and Marrakesh and the Sahara's presence is always part of the story. However, beyond the desert are mountains and fertile lands. And, of course, there is a wonderful collections of birds to see. Join the speaker as we explore this fascinating country and see what it has to offer.

Don was a research scientist working in the rubber industry for almost 40 years, having retired in 2016. He has been an avid birder since he was a young boy (started off on his own without assistance). He has birded on all 7 continents and 50 countries and all 50 states. He loves to bird and travel and is also very active in helping others learn about birding and the environment.

November 13, 2025 (Thursday) 7PM - Annual Membership Meeting and Social Gathering

Location: Peter White Public Library, Community Room

Bring fun pictures to share with the group. Refreshments will be served.

January 13, 2026 (Tuesday) 7 PM - Owls - Silent Hunters of the Night

Location: Peter White Public Library, Community Room

Presenter: Scot Stewart, local writer, photographer, and educator

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.

February 10, 2026 (Tuesday) 7 PM - Renewable Energy in the U.P.

Location: Peter White Public Library, Community Room

Presenter: Jenn Hill

Jenn will discuss... program description forthcoming

March 24, 2026 (Tuesday) 7 PM - Cougars, Wolves, and Lynx

Location: Peter White Public Library, Community Room

Presenter: Brian Roell, MDNR -

Brian will discuss... program description forthcoming

April 14, 2026 (Tuesday) 7 PM - Spring Tune-up

Location: Peter White Public Library, Shiras Room, 3rd Floor **Presenter:** Gary Palmer, MS/HS Teacher, Gwinn Area

Community Schools 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.

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

