Green-Backed Gazette

NEWSLETTER OF THE CENTRAL MINNESOTA AUDUBON SOCIETY

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President's Note, by Dan Kneip

A recent query to the CMAS website asked about Important Birding Areas (IBA) in Minnesota.

After some research, I did learn that the IBA program was initiated in Europe by BirdLife International and was adopted in the USA in 1995 by the National Audubon Society.

In Minnesota, the DNR nongame wildlife program in cooperation with Audubon coordinated the IBA project with the objective of identifying and conserving critical bird habitats. According to the National Audubon site IBA explorer, there are 284 identified sites in Minnesota, including Avon Hills, Crane Meadows NWR, and Sherburne NWR. The site reports have been linked to ebird so that it is possible to verify birds identified in each IBA.

In 2014 the project was updated to Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas, but the acronym did not change. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) launched a mission in 2016 to unite all conservation diversity programs under Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA's), which Birds Canada has joined.

The objective of all these programs is to help in identifying critical habitat and orient conservation efforts. Some of the areas will have markers or signage but the program is primarily a non-regulatory conservation initiative based on identifying critical habitats, therefore signage is dependent on local management. Check out the Audubon IBA Explorer. The site is slow and it works best to click on areas on the map to verify individual descriptions.

The Green-Backed Gazette has transitioned to a digital format. CMAS members and anyone interested can receive the newsletter directly to their inbox by signing up at: https://centralmnaudubon.org/newsletter/, or by sending your email to us. The newsletter will also be accessible on the website and on Facebook. Also note that changes in format will be coming to the newsletter. Suggestions and ideas are always welcome.

We have many programs and events scheduled for the first Semester of 2026. We will have speakers for the January, February, and March meetings (third Wednesday at UUF). These three programs will also be available by Zoom. In April we will join the local chapter of the MN Master Naturalists and other area groups to host John Lattimer, phenologists at KAXE, in a presentation at St. Johns University.

(continued at right)

Calendar

Wednesday, January 21, 2026

CMAS Meeting 7 p.m.
Location: Unitarian Universalist Church
Speaker: Tanner Barnharst
Subject: Lichens in Minnesota

Saturday, January 24, 2026
St. John's Outdoor U Owl Hoot Event
6-8 p.m.
Location: St. John's University
Cost: Free for members and CSB/SJU students, $10 for non-members

February 14, 2026
Great Backyard Bird Count Outing 9:30 a.m.
Location: Beaver Island Trailhead

February 18, 2026
CMAS Meeting 7 p.m.
Location: Unitarian Universalist Church
Speaker: TBA

February 21, 2026
Kestrel Box Building Event
Location: Warner Park, Clearwater, MN
*Event sponsored by Stearns County Parks

March 18, 2026
CMAS Meeting 7 p.m.
Location: Unitarian Universalist Church
Speaker: Dick Doll
Subject: Purple Martins

To experience and understand the world around us, it's essential that we focus our minds. For only by listening deeply, with a quiet mind, can we ever fully experience nature. ~Joseph Cornell

(President's Note, continued)

In February we will join Stearns County Parks for a Kestrel-box building event at Warner Park and again in early May for a "Kids to Park" event at Quarry Park. Watch our calendar of events on the website, on Facebook, and in our newsletter. We look forward to seeing you!

*Follow us on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/centralminnaudubonchapter/ · Check out our new webpage: https://centralmnaudubon.org/ · Email: centralmnaudubon@gmail.com

MN Plant Watch

Deanna Leigh, MN DNR Community Science Coordinator with the Minnesota Biological Survey (MBS) attended our November meeting to discuss the MN Plant Watch (Plant Watch).

Plant Watch focuses on the conservation basics of tracking species biodiversity. It focuses on the four ecological provinces found in Minnesota: the Tall Grass Parklands, Prairie, Laurentian Mixed Forest, and Eastern Broadleaf Forest.

Deanna discussed the importance of biodiversity for human health, recreation, healthy ecosystems, resiliency and culture. She noted there are many threats including habitat loss, over-exploitation of resources (poaching), habitat degradation, and climate change.

Minnesota is home to at least 1,900 native plants. Over 20% are rare (all of which are listed federally or locally as threatened or endangered);37 have been extirpated; and 60 species have five or fewer known occurances.

Plant conservation can be in-situ (on-site, where it is) or ex-situ (off-site). For in-situ conservation, land protection is the primary focus with habitat management occurring such as prescribed fire, invasive species control and tree or brush removal as necessary. Ex-situ conservation focuses on living collections at places such as the Arboretum, seed banking, propagation research, re-introduction, and rescue/salvage/transplant operations. Seed storage allows easy storage of multiple populations of each species for diverse genetics preservation.

Rare species are tracked through the Natural Heritage Information System (NHIS), the MN Biological Survey, Bell Museum Herbarium (and biodiversity allies), and iNaturalist and crowd sourced data (citizen science).

The Bell Museum has all of the DNR plant specimens from across MN with more than 160,000 specimens from the 1800's to the present stored. The MN Biodiversity Atlas has searchable digitized collections. They include information on the location, habitat, phenology, and morphology.

The NHIS is how the DNR keeps track of rare species over time. Deanna noted that it's a never ending story that includes data gaps and historic records (of whether a species is still there). She added that knowledge is POWER! It facilitates protection, decision making (regarding environmental review and land management, for example), legal status, and population health.

Plant Watch is Minnesota's citizen science program that launched in 2023. It's a partnership between MBS and the Plant Conservation Program funded by the Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund (ENRTF). The goals of Plant Watch are to have 50 - 75 trained volunteers who survey and collect seeds each year from at least 20 populations. In the inaugural year, there were 19 volunteers that conducted 65 surveys (11 populations). In 2024, the volunteer number jumped to 66, conducting 76 surveys of 39 populations. In 2025, 91 volunteers conducted 92 surveys of 42 populations!

(MN Plant Watch continued)

Training includes 4-5 hours of on-line training followed by a full field day. Deanna noted that 117 volunteers have been trained, to date.

Deanna noted that locations for review and survey are selected by staff, either on public land or private land with the permission of the landowner. They look for easy to identify plants where there is easy access. Historic records are updated. Surveys are conducted in small groups. They meander through appropriate habitat and if the target species are located, they record the location and number of plants in the population. It can take 4 - 8 hours per survey (plus travel time). Deanna noted that in the past, there was no GPS, so plant species were mapped to the quarter section (160 acres). Now the data is collected mobilly with phones or i-pads.

When banking seed, it has to be done correctly. The seed has to be collected sustainably (with proper permits). The seeds have to be ripe and in good condition. They collect 10 - 30% of the seeds per plant, depending upon the species. Multiple visits are often needed. The goal is 3,000 seeds from 50 individuals per population. It may take multiple years to collect the desired number of seeds. Seeds are sorted by plant, stored separately (after the chaff is removed) in a frozen condition. Germination tests are conducted periodically to check viability.

Seed collection challenges include phenology issues (timing of seed maturation, for example), not having enough information about a plant, animal browse, not having enough plants to collect from, and poor pollination. For example, Nuttalls ground rose was targeted in 2024. There were 39 surveys in 21 counties with 22 specimens that provided between 2 - 9,000 seeds per collection.

Deanna discussed several other special concern and watch list species that have been found through this incredibly important work for biodiversity and concluded by detailing the physical requirements of volunteering.

> The highest reward for man's toil is not what he gets for it, but what he becomes by it.
> ~ John Ruskin

Looking for ways to make a difference?

Donations are welcome for our fund to assist with continuing to operate the website, create birding backpacks and to bring quality speakers to the meetings. If you choose to help out, please make out a check to Central MN Audubon Society (CMAS) and send it to our President, Dan Kneip. THANK YOU SO MUCH!!

CMAS is now registered to receive donations via GiveMN:

Local Membership: Some CMAS members may wish to only belong and support our local Chapter, without belonging to National Audubon and receiving the Audubon magazine. Membership is $15 annually.

"Mulligan" - The Albany Golf Club Snowy Owl Rescue

November 19th, the Albany Golf Club posted a picture of a female Snowy Owl on its Facebook page which quickly caught the attention of area birders. For the next 24 hours, anyone who was interested was easily able to get a look at this beautiful animal from the road that runs along the north side of the golf course.

By early afternoon of the next day a few in the group had begun to speculate that the owl was injured, though she was alert, she appeared to move very little from where she was first discovered. Thus began the rescue. That afternoon, five of us met under Neil Skoog's guidance, as he had prior experience and quickly organized the group.

The owl barely resisted, so we caught her quickly and without incident, after which Neil left for the Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota.

As we reminisced the adventure, one in the group suggested we name the owl "Mulligan" which seemed fitting as she was found on a golf course and given a second chance. The initial prognosis at the U of M was positive though they determined that she was suffering from retinal scarring and a left shoulder injury. As I type this on December 30th , 40 days after the rescue, we were just informed that Mulligan has made a complete recovery and that they intend to release her back into the wild in the next few days near where she was found. A happy ending!

If you would like to donate in support of the medical care of these raptors, please visit https://raptor.umn.edu/support-us/donate.

-Jeff Velline

Rescue team: Neil Skoog, Kyle Woitalla, Herb Dingman, Neil Peterson & Jeff Velline

Photos: Kyle Woitalla & Jeff Velline

Post script: Snowy Owl Mulligan was released on January 5th at the Sherburne National Wildlife Refuge (SNWR)!

Did you know... bird embryos need oxygen transfer through the egg shell for development? It makes logical sense, right? Well, pesticides that use a petroleum-based carrier can stick to shells, thereby reducing the amount of air transfer enough to kill the bird embryo. If people want or need to use pesticides for noxious weed control, waiting to spray until the Fall is best. Better yet, plan to incorporate integrated pest management or use a non-petroleum based pesticide if you really must use chemicals.

Christmas Bird Count December 20th

CMAS had 17 stalwarth individuals participate in covering our count circle in our Christmas Bird Count on December 20th. We also had three people in our count circle who participated by counting birds at their feeders. This group effort was able to locate 44 species of bird in our count circle despite a strong cold wind. We also added one species of bird, a yellow- bellied sapsucker to our composite list. which now stands at 91. Our total count was 3700 birds on count day. We also added two species of birds that were seen during count week.

Here is the bird count by species:

Canada Goose- 755
Trumpeter Swan- 197
Wood Duck -1
Mallard -855

Common Goldeneye-96
Common Merganser-3
Wild Turkey-120
Ring-necked pheasant-16
Rock pigeon-165
Mourning dove-37

Bald Eagle- 22
Sharp-shinned Hawk-2
Red-tailed Hawk-7
Eastern Screech Owl-1
Great Horned Owl-2
Barred Owl-1

Red-bellied Woodpecker-30
Yellow-bellied sapsucker -1
Downy woodpecker-39
Hairy woodpecker-10
Northern Flicker-6
Pileated woodpecker-10

Peregrine falcon-2
Northern Shrike-1
Blue jay-110
American Crow-117

Black-capped chickadee-107
Cedar Waxwing-24
Red-breasted Nuthatch-19
White-breasted Nuthatch-43
Golden-crowned Kinglet-2
European Starling-190

Eastern Bluebird-5
American Robin-28
House Sparrow-122
House Finch-110
Purple Finch-2
Redpoll-1

Pine Siskin-2
American Goldfinch-143
Snow Bunting-22
American Tree Sparrow-32
Dark Eyed Junco-222
Northern Cardinal-20

Additionally a Eurasian Collared-Dove and a Brown Creeper were seen during count week.

Thanks to all the participants in this year's count.