

Coulee Birder

Newsletter of the Coulee Region Audubon Society
Website: <http://couleeaudubon.org/>

November-December 2004

Events

Coulee Audubon meetings

Nov. 17 — Rich King, Necedah National Wildlife Refuge biologist will speak on 70 Years of Whooping Crane Conservation. Whoopers are famous now but what about seventy years ago? Who first protected them? How? What worked and what didn't work? What does the future hold for whooping crane conservation?

The program follows a short meeting of the Coulee Region Audubon Society which starts at 7:00 p.m. on the lower level of the La Crosse Public Library at 800 Main St., La Crosse.

Refreshments are served.

Dec. 18 — Christmas Bird Count. Call Rick Kinzie (608) 734-3136 for assignments. or e-mail him at huey@mwt.net. The December meeting will be the Pot-luck following the bird count, which will be at Mike and Laura

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Peregrine Falcons fly above streets of La Crosse

By Fred Lesher

Peregrine Falcons reappeared this spring and summer in downtown LaCrosse for the first time since May of 1996. One bird of this species was first sighted on St. Joseph the Workman Cathedral on April 2, then not again until June 17.

In August there were five sightings on the Cathedral. Then strangely, on Sept. 8 two Peregrines (PEFA) were sighted on a nest box on the NE corner of the US BANK building three blocks west of the Cathedral on Main St. On Sept. 9, the two birds were found perched on the "US BANK" sign on the NW side of the building. The larger female perched on the "S"

President's notebook

Here's what we've done!

I had the satisfying task recently of filling out a Chapter Report form telling the National Audubon Society what our club accomplished in the past year (July '03 - June '04). It's an impressive list of activities! Some highlights:

Our chapter cosponsored the "first annual" Mississippi Flyway Birding Festival . . . Coulee Audubon organized and chapter member Jennie Sauer coordinated the annual Sandhill Crane Count for La Crosse County on April 17, in conjunction with the International Crane Foundation of Baraboo . . . members took turns staffing an Audubon Society booth at the Earth day celebration on the campus of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse . . . Our club was also represented at the Mississippi River Grand Excursion celebration at Genoa, WI, with club member and licensed falconer Mike Furr

and his red tailed hawk along to attract and educate the public.

Our chapter financially supported the La Crosse office of National Audubon's Upper Mississippi River Campaign . . . twice this year, spring and fall, Coulee Audubon cleaned up its two-mile stretch of I-90 . . . field trips included the legendary Lansing Loop and the Reno Hawk Watch . . . Our chapter's web site was maintained and several new pages were developed, including a simple but effective Bird ID game for "kids of all ages" . . . and Coulee Audubon's Rick Kinzie tackled the task of organizing the 2003 La Crosse Christmas Bird Count.

National Audubon Society also asks us to look forward and plan the next year's activities. Following is the plan

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and the smaller male perched on the "K". They have been seen similarly perched 5 times since Sept. 8.

On Sept. 21, they were disturbed by window-cleaning activity on the Bank, but the male was back on site Sept. 22.

Plans are to place a nest box on the Cathedral this fall, so that returning Peregrines will have two nest site choices next spring.

CRAS members have been asked to clean up after the falcons if they nest on the Cathedral. Prey remains fall to the sidewalk below the nest. The USBank custodian is receptive to the presence of the falcons. Nesting falcons could add to the excitement of downtown LaCrosse next spring!

(For more, see page 3)

We need your contributions of material for the Audubon newsletter. Please send your suggestions for articles, news of events and other things birders need to know. Deadline for copy is the third Friday of the month preceding publication. The next deadline will be Dec. 16. Send information to: dkoloda@earthlink.net or by mail to Newsletter, W6396 Riverview Drive, Onalaska, WI 54650.

Why do people dance like cranes?

Newsweek — Eighty-five hundred years after someone in ancient Anatolia drilled holes in the wings of a crane — evidently to make a bird costume for a ritual dance — then hid one wing in a narrow space between mudbrick houses at Çatalhöyük in what today is Turkey, scientists are asking a two-part question: Why stash the wing, along with a pile of other unusual items, in a place where only modern-day archaeologists would be likely to find it? And why do people around the world dance like cranes?

For posing that question — and attempting to answer it with evidence from an archaeological “dig” through a long-buried Anatolian village and from a museum collection of modern bird bones in Ithaca, N.Y. — two Cornell University scientists have won the Antiquity Essay Prize for the best article of the year in that scholarly journal. Written by Nerissa Russell, associate professor of anthropology in Cornell’s College of Arts and Sciences, and by Kevin McGowan, a research associate in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, the puzzle-filled article is titled “Dance of the Cranes: Crane Symbolism at Çatalhöyük and Beyond” and was first published in

September 2003.

Says ornithologist McGowan: “Dancing is one of the most obvious displays by any social bird, and all species of cranes do it. It is quite striking and impossible to miss — by people today as well as those in cultures thousands of years ago” the dance involves stiff-legged marching, running and leaping into the air with spread and beating wings, bowing, pirouetting, stopping and starting and tossing twigs into the air.

Zooarchaeologist Russell (an anthropologist who studies the role of animals in the lives of ancient peoples) adds: “Cranes of various species are found all over the world, with the exception of South America and Antarctica, and so are human crane dancers. They were at ancient Chinese funerals and Okinawan harvest festivals. The Ainu of Japan, the BaTwa of southern Africa and the Ostiaks of Siberia did costumed crane dances. Plutarch writes that Theseus and his companions, after they slew the Minotaur and landed in Delos, performed a crane dance.”

One thing zooarchaeologists look for is possible human-made marks on animal bones, Russell explains. She can tell

whether an Ice Age mastodon was butchered by meat-eating Paleoindians in North America, for example, or whether the now-extinct animal died from other causes. The Çatalhöyük crane wing bones do not bear discernible butcher markings (although cranes are edible, according to McGowan, who has tasted sandhill crane meat and rates it “quite palatable”). Rather, the bones of a common crane (*Grus grus*, as determined by comparison with bones in the collections of the Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates and the Smithsonian) were pierced with a series of holes.

The holes were placed in a way that makes no sense for dismembering the wing or removing its meat. Rather, the piercings created suitably sized holes for a piece of cord or string. That’s why Russell thinks the 8,500-year-old wings — when they still had feathers on them — might have been laced on the arms of a dancer to make a costume.

While they were pondering crane dance mystery and wondering why people around the world are sufficiently intrigued with the birds to imitate them in dances. Russell and McGowan made a list of human-crane similarities:

* *G. grus* and *H. sapiens* are both bipedal and both stand about the same height.

* Cranes and ancient humans lived to about the same age, around 40 years.

* Humans and cranes have similar social structures. Both species congregate in large flocks; form lasting, monogamous pairs; and keep the young in the family for an extended period of juvenile dependency. Humans and cranes tend to move in family groups.

* We humans and those cranes make similar “music.” The crane’s call, from its long, coiled trachea, sounds like a person playing a bugle.

When one crane starts to dance, others usually join in, McGowan says, adding one more fact about the sociable birds: Sometimes a group of cranes is just standing around and can be encouraged to dance by a human imitating the crane dance.

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your Board proposes for the Coulee Region Audubon Society for the current membership year (2004-2005). Virtually all these activities include opportunities for your active involvement. Together let’s soar—get ready, hang on and enjoy the ride!

- Publish 5 bi-monthly issues of the *Coulee Birder*; post the current issue on our website and send a link to those members who choose to save us paper and postage by receiving the newsletter electronically.
- Hold 9 membership meetings, open to the public, with educational and entertaining programs at each.
- Offer 3-6 field trips to nearby natural areas or birding routes, based on member interest.

- Participate in educational/PR opportunities as they come up.
- Install and monitor Peregrine falcon nest box on St. Joseph Cathedral; do weekly cleanup of bird parts from area sidewalks.
- Do spring and fall highway cleanup.
- Sponsor the area’s Sandhill Crane Count.
- Co-sponsor the second annual Mississippi Flyway Birding Festival.
- Plan and implement a fundraiser for the chapter in conjunction with the Fest.
- Sponsor the La Crosse Christmas Bird Count; host post-count tally and potluck holiday party.

Checking out the marsh



When the State Audubon Council visited La Crosse for a meeting recently, Coulee Region Audubon Society members were on hand to guide a bird walk in the La Crosse River Marsh before the meeting. From left are Lynn Tennefoss, National Audubon's head of chapter services, Pete Cannon, of Madison Audubon, June Platz and Sarah Stoll, of Sheboygan County Audubon (behind Pete), Bobbie Wilson, Coulee Audubon president, Karen Etter Hale, Madison Audubon, and Pat Wilson. Pat and Bobbie led the hikers who were impressed by the marsh trails and the opportunity afforded for birding in the city.

Feathers fly when Peregrines dine downtown

By **Dave Skoloda**
Newsletter editor

Prowling peregrines pluck pigeons. That's the news from downtown La Crosse.

Coulee Region Audubon Society members were advised at a recent meeting of the presence in downtown La Crosse of peregrine falcons, the swift flying raptors that snatch birds out of the air, particularly pigeons (see Fred Lesher's report on Page 1). Peregrines were nearly extinct, decimated by the effects of DDT. But thanks to reintroduction programs, the birds are making a slow comeback in many parts of their former range, including the bluffs along the Mississippi River.

A peregrine hunts from the wing or from a high perch. After it spots prey it begins a streamlined dive, which is called a stoop. During the stoop, the bird can

reach speeds of 200 mph.

The falcon hits its prey with its foot, stunning or killing it, then swoops back around to catch it in mid-air. If the prey is too heavy to carry, the peregrine will let it fall to the ground and eat it there.

Peregrines pluck their prey before eating it. It was the plucking behavior that betrayed their presence to me on a recent morning. The birds had been seen on the U.S. Bank building, so I walked around the building gazing up at the top. Since there was no sign there of the birds, I was about to give up when a puff of feathers came off the top of the "K" in the bank sign on the northwest side of the building. As the feathers slowly drifted toward the ground, a few more spurted from the sign. Taking a few steps back, I could then see the peregrine pair plucking their prey.

There have already been some close encounters with the peregrines. A Main Street shop owner said that he was opening his store one September morning and

Bird fest planners set dates for spring event

The committee planning the second Mississippi Flyway Birding Festival has set the dates for the event for May 13-15 in the La Crosse/Onalaska area.

The festival will include guided back-water birding boat trips, guided birding by kayak and canoe, seminars, intermediate/advanced guided birding walks and a children's birding walk.

Other events include a birder's social and a banquet.

Last year 115 species were sighted by those participating in the festival.

For more information contact Bonnie Koop at 608-784-2992 or bkoop@audubon.org.

The Coulee Region Audubon Society is one of the organizations planning and sponsoring the event which, in addition to offering great birding opportunities during the spring migration, will highlight the importance of the Upper Mississippi River as a globally important flyway for some 236 bird species.

saw a peregrine on the sidewalk astride a dead pigeon.

The falcon was straining to get airborne with the pigeon, which it eventually did.

Prey remains fall to the ground below a nest (the birds pluck their kill before feeding their young), so Audubon members signed up at the recent meeting to clean up after the birds if they should choose to nest in a second nest box that was placed on the St. Joseph the Workman cathedral. There is also a box on the bank building.

So area residents may have some spectacular flying to watch next year even if the Blue Angels don't return. The nice thing about these fabulous fliers is that they are also pigeon and starling exterminators and they go about it quietly.

(I have excerpted this article from a column I wrote recently for the Onalaska Community Life and Holmen Courier.)



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Furr's. Their address is W5324 CTH "MM". Reach their house from Hwy 14 south of LaCrosse up the big hill on "MM". It is on the left near the top of the

hill. Their lane makes an acute angle from "MM" then through a dense pine plantation. The time is roughly 5 p.m. Bring a dish to pass. Both the count and potluck

are open to non-members.

For the January meeting, Craig Thompson will present a program on Birding in the Tropics..

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YES, please enroll me as a member of the Coulee Region Chapter (Z19) of the National Audubon Society at the introductory rate of \$20 for one year or \$35 for two years. Membership benefits include The Coulee Birder and Audubon Magazine.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ St _____ Zip _____

Mail along with your check to:
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