

# Coulee Birder

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

May-June 2005

## Events

Coulee Region Audubon meetings in April and May will be held at 7 p.m. in the community room on the lower level of the La Crosse Public Library at 800 Main Street, La Crosse.

**April 20 - Birding Opportunities on Mississippi Valley Conservancy projects. Conservation Specialist George Howe from the MVC will discuss habitat preservation and birding opportunities on their projects..**

**April 30 — I-90 trash pickup. Volunteers to meet at the Dresbach way-side at 9 a.m. Done by lunch time. Y'all come! Mark Webster, 787-6398.**

**May 18 — Ann Blankenship, Park Ranger with the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife & Fish Refuge will present a wildlife photography slide show with music.**

Ann has photographed wildlife and landscapes on trips to every state west of the Mississippi River, Portugal, Costa Rica, Baja California and Alaska. Over the years she has shown her work to a wide variety of audiences, from public schools and universities, to agencies and nonprofit organizations.

**June 15 - Pot-luck picnic at Myrick Park (6 p.m.) followed by a bird hike.**

**July and August - No meetings**

## May bird walks

La Crosse River Marsh walks, Tuesday mornings, May 3, 10, 17. Meet at the Rabbit Trail, near the Zoo parking lot.

Hixon Forest walks, Thursday mornings, May 5, 12, 19. Meet at the Hixon Forest trail parking lot, off Milson Ct.

All bird walks start at 6:30 a.m., and the plan is to finish at 7:45 or 8:00 a.m. Feel free to leave early or stay later. Bring binoculars if you have them.

Leaders: Pat and Bobbie Wilson, (608)788-8831

## President's notebook

## Spring: A season of renewal

**By BOBBIE WILSON**

Bloodroot and Dutchman's breeches are blooming, and glorious formations of geese, swans and even pelicans lift the eyes as well as the spirits. As I write this, robins, chipping sparrows and song sparrows have returned, but the juncos are still here and the first yellow-rumped warbler has yet to be found. By the time you read this, we should be well into the next wave of spring migrants. This truly is the season of renewal. Whatever your favorite traditional sign of spring, it's either here or right around the corner.

Spring also brings another kind of renewal. It's been a year now since we

first asked Coulee Region Audubon Society members to "join locally." Many of you responded right away—and your support was appreciated. But now, for some folks, it's time to renew your local membership.

Please take a moment to **check the mailing label** on this newsletter. If you are currently a "local member," there should be a capital letter L followed by a date in the upper right corner of the label. This is the date by which we would appreciate a membership renewal check. Please use the local membership form

See **NOTEBOOK**, page 2

## Early registrations already exceed last year's festival attendance

At the deadline for this newsletter the early registrations for the second Mississippi Flyway Birding Festival May 13-15 have already exceeded the attendance at the first festival last spring, according to Bonnie Koop, co-chair of the planning committee.

The Sunday morning rail car trip through the Tiffany Bottoms is already full, planners were told at a meeting April 12. Other events are filling up as well, including the boat trips.

But many of the hikes still are open for participants, so if you haven't signed up for the festival yet, there's still time

to meet the May 1 deadline for pre-registrations. Single day registrations are also welcome at the time of the festival. The event includes seminars and evening events, all of which have openings. Coulee Region Audubon has been instrumental in the organization of the three-day festival May 13-15. For more information, go to [www.couleeaudubon.org/festival05.html](http://www.couleeaudubon.org/festival05.html) or call 784-2992 to ask for registration materials.

To volunteer to help with this event or any other Coulee Audubon event, contact Bobbie Wilson, president at [pbwilson@centurytel.net](mailto:pbwilson@centurytel.net).

*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 Aug. 19th. Send information to: [dskoloda@earthlink.net](mailto:dskoloda@earthlink.net) or by mail to Newsletter, W6396 Riverview Drive, Onalaska, WI 54650.*

# *Barn Owls silently serve as pest control*

By Ann Bailey Dunn

(Reprinted with permission from the author from Wisconsin Natural Resources magazine)

The Common Barn Owl is one of Wisconsin's rare birds, a remarkable bird of prey that can silently, accurately find its way and capture prey in total darkness.

The barn owl can turn its head more than 270 degrees, almost completely around, in order to see its surroundings. Its fearless brown eyes are fixed within the sockets and are as large as a human's. Extremely large retinas give the barn owl binocular vision that is from 50 to 100 times more efficient than human sight at distinguishing small objects in dull light. Sharp vision is matched by unequalled hearing. The barn owl's ears lie under its round facial disks. Its ears are slightly different sizes and one is located a little higher on the head than the other. This asymmetrical placement enables barn owls to sense direction and distance with incredible accuracy. This owl can detect a mouse stepping on a dead leaf from over 75 feet away. Its dinner menu includes mice, shrews, moles, rats, birds, frogs, insects, lizards, bats and baby rab-

bits.

A creature of the night, the barn owl's unmistakable high-pitched screeches and eerie hiss-screams are occasionally heard throughout the southern third of the state. On a still night its calls travel for miles.

For centuries barn owls were victims

of naive superstition and they were driven from their nests in the mistaken belief that they brought bad luck. In fact, these sleek, silent fliers are wonderful mousers. These crow-sized birds

measure about 13 to 15 inches in length and weighing from 17 to 20 ounces. These flying mousetraps can eat 1.5 times their weight each day in mice and meadow voles!

The barn owl is handsome, dressed in a sandy brown, golden and cinnamon suit of feathers streaked with white and blue with a white belly speckled black or



DNR photo

brown. The barn owl is distinguished by a large, round tuftless head and a white heart-shaped face edged brown. At night it appears completely white. Its look and moth-like flight earned the nickname ghost owl.

Barn owl flight is silent as a stalking cat. Special feathers on the front of its 42 to 45-inch wings dampen noise. It attacks with frightening efficiency; gripping and snatching prey with razor-sharp talons. A barn owl seldom misses its mark while cruising the edge of open country along meadows, grasslands, fencerows and wet lands near granaries and barns. Small quarry is swallowed whole. Larger victims are torn into pieces with a sharp, hooked beak.

Though these owls can breed year-round in Wisconsin, mating typically takes place from April through July. If food is plentiful, a second brood may be reared in early fall. Courtship consists of the male chasing the female, bringing her mice and uttering a series of rapid squeaking noises. It's believed that barn owls mate for life. As cavity nesters, the pair chooses natural sites or abandoned buildings, church steeples, silos, belfries, water towers, manmade nesting boxes as well as barns. A pair may use the same nesting site each year.

The female lays one white egg every two days until there are five to seven in her clutch. Both parents bring prey to the young, called owlets. The food, usually mice, is swallowed whole. A nesting pair of barn owls with six young may consume over 1,000 mice during their three-month nesting period.

Barn owls are not equipped to survive severe winter weather and, truth is, they have never been plentiful in Wisconsin. Their bodies store little fat. If they don't find a constant food supply, especially during cold spells, they may die. On average a barn owl lives only three to four years.

The Common Barn Owl, *Tyto alba*, (*Tyto* is Greek for owl and *alba* is Latin meaning white) is also known as mon-

## **NOTEBOOK from page 1**

on the back page of the newsletter.

If your label says Z19 in the corner and is in all capital letters, you are a National Audubon Society member. You will continue to receive the Coulee Birder as well as Audubon Magazine if you keep that membership current. However, only a small fraction of that membership comes back to our Coulee Region chapter. You are warmly invited to "join" at the local level where your membership would help support all the chapter's activities:

\* Monthly meetings with informative and entertaining programs \* Field trips to local natural areas, led by experienced birders \* Bimonthly newsletter

with chapter announcements and other environmental news and articles \* Educational programs for schools—Audubon Adventures \* Volunteer opportunities such as the Highway Cleanup or staffing an informational booth \* Special events like the Christmas Bird Count, Sandhill Crane Count, and the Mississippi Flyway Birding Festival

New local members are welcome any time! Continuing members, since there is no July/August newsletter this is the last notice you will have until September, so please check for that date on your label. Thanks, and Happy Spring!

See **BARN OWL**, page 3

# Report sightings of specially marked scaup

MADISON – Waterfowl researchers and wildlife biologists are asking the public's help in reporting sightings of specially marked ducks, known as either lesser scaup or bluebills. People can report sightings including the location, color of the marker and any letters visible on the marker by calling 1-888-MINNDNR (1-888-646-6367).

The birds are marked with colored "nasal saddles" over their upper bills. The

saddles were applied to birds captured on pool 19 of the Mississippi River near Keokuk, Iowa. Several colors are being used.

"Scaup migrate through Wisconsin on their way to more northern breeding areas and are a popular gamebird," said Kent Van Horn, DNR waterfowl biologist. "Over the last 25 years or so we've noticed a steady decline in the breeding population and we're wondering why?"

## BARN OWL from page 2

key-faced owl, ghost owl, rat owl, night owl and death owl. It is listed as a state endangered species in Wisconsin due to habitat loss from more row cropping, fewer fields of oats, fewer fencerows and wetlands. Metal pole barns with fewer uncovered entryways also reduced rural nesting areas.

Owls are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, meaning it is illegal to harm or possess these raptors. If you find an owl that appears wounded or poisoned,

call your local conservation warden who often works with networks of licensed rehabilitators who can help injured birds recover.

Support to the Endangered Resources Fund could help train volunteers to build and install barn owl boxes and resume programs to track barn owl movements and captive breeding.

Ann Bailey Dunn writes from Campton, Kentucky.

"Locally, there's been a shift in their migration routes in response to changing food and habitat conditions," says Van Horn, "and biologists have observed some die-offs on the Mississippi River and in the Milwaukee area from parasite infestations but these events don't explain the decreasing continental breeding population."

As for a possible cause of the decline, Van Horn says that is what this research effort is attempting to uncover. Previous research done at Louisiana State University suggests that scaup were losing weight when they migrated across the upper Midwest, arriving on their Manitoba, Canada nesting grounds in poor condition.

"This could mean that when they arrive on the breeding ground they would not be in good enough condition to nest successfully," says Van Horn. "The cause of the decrease in body weight is unknown but may be the result of poor habitat or contaminant issues along the migration route. That's something we're trying to understand".

## Students seek answers on scaup decline

Matt and Mitch Weegman, Winona Senior High School sophomores, were honored recently by the La Crosse County Conservation Alliance for their research project on the diet of scaup that may suggest a reason for the decline in lesser scaup numbers.

The twin brothers, who collected invertebrates in Lake Onalaska last summer and analyzed them for nutritional content, learned that zebra mussels, which have become part of the scaup diet, are far less nutritious than freshwater shrimp and other foods that dominated the scaup diet prior to the invasion of the zebra mussels.

The Weegmans had help with the project from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Geological Survey, Viterbo University and Winona State University personnel.

## It's turkey season: Be careful if you answer the call

"Even though turkey hunting has some unique safety concerns, our goal is zero incidents and the cornerstone of this effort is that basic (hunter) safety axiom of knowing your target and what's beyond," says Tim Lawhern, DNR hunter education administrator.

The "unique" safety concerns Lawhern is referring to is that turkey hunters wear camouflaged clothing to blend into the landscape, set up realistic decoys and use calls that might attract other hunters as well as gobblers. And, one might add, birders who might be attracted by the call.

The spring hunting season, consisting of six Wednesday through Sunday hunting periods, opens April 13 and runs through May 22.

Lawhern cautions hunters against wearing bandannas, hats or gloves or any other piece of red, white or blue clothing because it could be mistaken by another hunter for the colors found on a turkey's head. He also recommends not carrying any items with those colors, including soda cans.

DNR statistics reveal that 80 percent of accidents reported during turkey hunting season involve hunters mistaking other hunters for game; hunters failing to positively identify their target.

One of Lahern's tips for hunters is to "never assume that what you hear or what answers a call is a turkey." Good advice for birders as well if you're in the woods during turkey season.



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## Local group to receive bluebird award

The North American Bluebird Society has notified the Brice Prairie Conservation Association that it will receive the NABS Achievement Award for its notable efforts in Bluebird Conservation.

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The Award will be presented in Ashland, NC May 21.

In 2004, the association fledged

3,066 bluebirds from 741 houses with a production rate of 4.14 bluebirds per house. The association also was recognized for programs in education and promotion of bluebird conservation.

### Coulee Region Audubon Society Local Membership

\$15 Household     \$30 Supporting

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Thank you!