

Indiana Audubon Society
CARDINAL

NEWSLETTER • FEB - MARCH 2020 • Vol.51 No.1

EXPLORE THE NEW

**INDIANA
BIRDING
TRAIL**



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The *Cardinal*
Newsletter
is a bi-monthly
publication of the
Indiana Audubon
Society. Its purpose
is to share stories
and conversations
so that members
and the birding
community beyond
can stay meaningfully
connected both
to birds and to the
people dedicated
to their protection.



JOIN —OR— RENEW TODAY



MEMBERSHIP PERKS

- Access to bi-monthly & quarterly newsletters
- Mailed printed copies of bi-monthly & quarterly newsletters
- Complete access to Birds of North America Database
- Discounted Field Trips & Programs
- Special Access to Mary Gray Birding Sanctuary
- 15% discount on all IAS online store merchandise
- Register a friend to any IAS field trip at member rate

► Be a part of Indiana Audubon Society! Sign up at: IndianaAudubon.org/membership



UPCOMING TRIPS & EVENTS

Join Indiana Audubon for an assortment of field trips and workshops being offered this spring. Visit IndianaAudubon.org/events for more information or to register for any of these upcoming activities. Additional events are listed on the website. Many fill early, so sign up now!

jan 31-feb 2: upper peninsula	winter up owl tour [stignance, mi]	march 14 east central in	summit lake waterfowl field trip [new castle, in]
feb 13 - 22 cuba	2020 cuba birding trip [havana + many locations]	march 21 northern in	kankakee wetlands waterfowl [north judson, in]
feb 14-17 upper midwest	ias sax-zim bog tour (full) [meadowlands, mn]	march 21 southern in	goose pond waterfowl field trip [linton, in]
feb 16 central, in	feathers & fermintation [indianapolis, in]	march 21 southern in	goose pond woodcock trip [linton, in]
feb 29-mar 10 cuba	2020 cuba birding trip ii [havana + many locations]	april 4 central in	lye creek burn field trip [crawfordsville, in]
feb 29 indiana dunes	idbf poster release party [chesterton, in]	april 10-11 southeast il	prairie chicken field trips [newton, il]

2020 INDIANA DUNES BIRDING FESTIVAL

The Indiana Dunes Birding Festival is happy to announce the upcoming year's keynote speakers and special headliners that will kick off each day of the 6th annual event, to be held May 14-17, 2020.

HEADLINERS

Sarah Saunders

Survival by Degrees: 389 Bird Species on the Brink
thu 11:30 am-12:30 pm
indiana dunes visitor center

Hannah & Erik Go Birding!

The Birds Don't Know They're Special!
fri 11:30 am-12:30 pm
indiana dunes visitor center

Marc Kramer & Eliana Ardila Ardila

Birding by Bus: Where Van Life Meets Birding
sat 11:30 am-12:30 pm
indiana dunes visitor center

Adriaan Michiel Dokter

3 Billion Birds Lost: A Biodiversity Crisis
sun 11:30 am-12:30 pm
indiana dunes visitor center

for more information, please visit:
www.indunesbirdingfestival.com

START PLANNING!

EARLY bird registration for IAS members begins March 1st.

Indiana Audubon members can enjoy early registration for this year's Indiana Dunes Birding Festival. Beginning on March 1, not only can IAS members register a week earlier than the general public, but they will also receive a discount of \$20 off the regular registration rate! Members can visit indunesbirdingfestival.com on March 1 to register and save their spots on some of the best programs, tours, and workshops.

If you haven't made reservations yet, consider staying at one of two festival host hotels. The Comfort Inn & Suites will be holding rooms again this year with a special \$89/night rate, as well as being one of the closest hotels to the festival's activities. Additionally, Springhouse Inn will be offering newly remodeled rooms overlooking the wooded Little Calumet River as low as \$69/night. Both are excellent sites to lay your head after a day of birding.

Don't forget you can also pitch a tent for the ultimate immersion birding experience. Both the Indiana Dunes State Park and Indiana Dunes National Park offer camping reservations for their respective campgrounds. Due to the popularity of the festival, many rooms and sites won't last long. Get your reservations in soon before they're all booked up!

KEYNOTE

Scott Weidensaul

A World of Wings: Migratory Birds on a Changing Planet
sat 5:30-9:30 pm | sand creek country club [chesterton, in]

Even as scientists make astounding discoveries about the navigational and physiological feats that enable migratory birds to cross immense oceans or fly above the highest mountains, go weeks without sleep or remain in unbroken flight for months at a stretch, humans have brought many migrants to the brink. Based on his forthcoming book *A World of Wings*, author and researcher Scott Weidensaul takes you around the globe - with researchers in the lab probing the limits of what migrating birds can do, to the shores of the Yellow Sea in China, the remote mountains of northeastern India where tribal villages saved the greatest gathering of falcons on the planet, and the Mediterranean, where activists and police are battle bird poachers - to learn how people are fighting to understand and save the world's great bird migrations.

GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT FEB 14-17

The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) is a free, fun, and easy event that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of bird populations. Participants are asked to count birds for as little as 15 minutes (or as long as they wish) on one or more days of the four-day event and report their sightings online at birdcount.org. Anyone can take part in the Great Backyard Bird

Count, from beginning bird watchers to experts, and you can participate from your backyard, or anywhere in the world.

Each checklist submitted during the GBBC helps researchers at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society learn more about how birds are doing, and how to protect them and the environment we share. Last year, more than 160,000 participants submitted their bird

observations online, creating the largest instantaneous snapshot of global bird populations ever recorded.

The 23rd annual GBBC will be held Friday, February 14 through Monday, February 17.

► Please visit the official website at birdcount.org for more information and be sure to check out the latest educational and promotional resources.

NEWS

MARY GRAY BIRD SANCTUARY

As winter approaches, preparations begin in anticipation of the busy 2020 season. Machine maintenance and goals are to be completed and new ones established. However, it is fun to take a glance at some of the 2019 banding highlights.

The banding team consisted of numerous volunteers - too many to list. Led by Amy Wilms, the effort banded a total of 584 birds at Mary Gray. The most commonly banded species was the Swainson's Thrush with 49 individuals banded, followed by Gray Catbird (42), Common Yellowthroat (43), and Tufted Titmouse (25). We processed a total of 2849 individual birds of 78 species; some recaptured birds were handled multiple times.

The oldest bird to be recaptured this year was a Red-bellied Woodpecker that was originally banded in 2015 and identified as an after-third-year bird at that time. That means the bird was at least 7 years old when recaptured this year. How cool is that? A recaptured Tufted titmouse was at least 5 years old, and a Kentucky Warbler was at least 6 years old. The Kentucky is particularly amazing because of its wintering range in Central America. How do these feathered marvels traverse such distances with such accuracy?

This past season, the banding of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds (RTHU) only had 428 new birds being banded at Mary



Banding a Thrush at MGBS

Gray. The number is lower than previous years, primarily due to a reduction in the number of banding days. The accompanying photos represent two unusual views of male RTHUs. One is the unusual lighting of the adult male's throat that frequently results in calls to MGBS stating that the caller has seen a Black-chinned Hummingbird. The other is a picture of a young hatch-year male that is just beginning to molt into adult plumage.

The most recent banding effort at MGBS

was for Northern Saw-whet Owls (NSWO). As reported around Indiana, there were few migrants visiting all over. At MGBS, only three individuals were banded. All had radio telemetry placed on their backs in order to learn if they were overwintering at Mary Gray. One NSWO remained at MGBS most of last winter. One bird remained in the area this winter for about a month, but it has since moved elsewhere.

WELCOME

NEWEST LIFE MEMBERS

Welcome to our newest LIFE members that joined Indiana Audubon for a lifetime membership in the last year. Learn more about Life membership and how it benefits the society at indianaaudubon.org/membership.

Gregory Bauske
Debra McClain
Kristine Fallon

Deborah Robbins
John Castrale
Peggy Florestano

Alex Takasugi
John and Jo Brugos
Martha Mullin

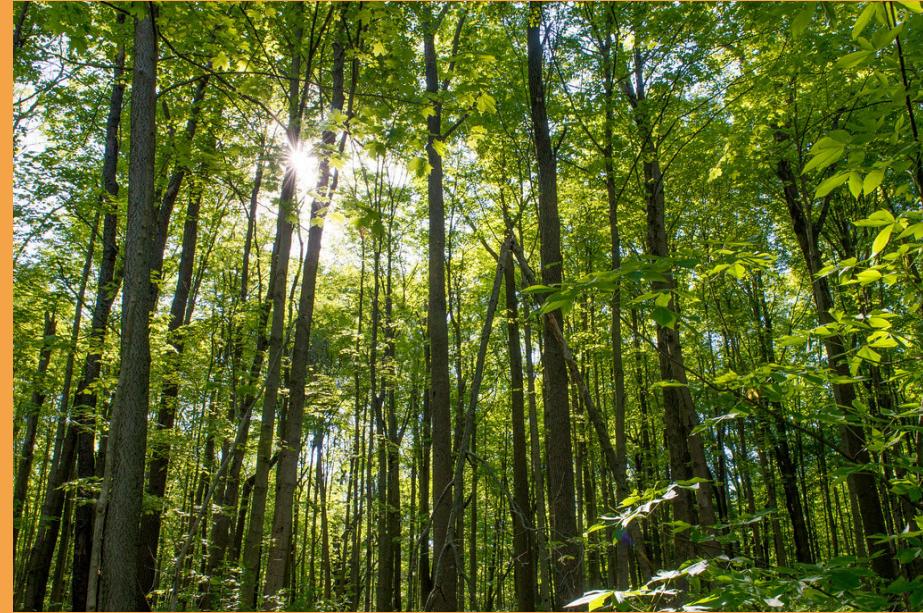
INDIANA BIRDING TRAIL HIGHLIGHT

RITCHIE WOODS NATURE PRESERVE

BY NICK KEIHL

Ritchey Woods Nature Preserve is made up of 127 acres of forest, prairie, and wetland that provides shelter for a variety of migrant and breeding songbirds within one of the fastest growing communities in Indiana. The park's restored prairie is an excellent place to become immersed in the sounds of displaying American Woodcocks during March and early April, and provides cover for an abundance of sparrows during migration.

The Blackbird Trail near the parking lot leads to a small cattail wetland, where Sora and Virginia Rails can be heard and occasionally seen in early spring. From early March through early April, this is one of the more reliable places in central Indiana to see Rusty Blackbirds. They gather in trees around the wetland near dusk, usually mixed in with the more abundant Red-winged Blackbirds.



Where the forest meets the prairie, Yellow-breasted Chat, Orchard Oriole, and Willow Flycatcher can often be found during the spring and summer months. The Beech Hollow and Hickory Trails are home to breeding Yellow-throated Vireo, Ovenbird, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Summer Tanager, and Wood Thrush from April through August, while the Swamp Trail and boardwalk are excellent for a variety of migrants. In late May, the Swamp Trail consistently hosts an Alder Flycatcher or two.

The park is usually quiet in the winter, but five species of woodpecker, Eastern Towhee, Winter Wren, and the occasional Sharp-shinned Hawk may break the silence.

Total time to bird: 1-2 hours, but longer during migration.

TIMING

Typical Time to Bird

Site: 1-2 Hours

Best Time to Bird:

The best times to bird Ritchey Woods are during spring and fall migration. April and October trips often produce a good variety of sparrows, including Lincoln's, Swamp, White-crowned, and Fox. May and September are the peak months for migrating warblers, when up to 30 species

Hours:
Sunrise to Sunset

GETTING THERE

Address:

10410 Hague Rd
Fishers, IN 46038

Directions:

The best times to bird Ritchey Woods are during spring and fall migration. April and October trips often produce a good variety of sparrows, including Lincoln's, Swamp, White-crowned, and Fox. May and September are the peak months for migrating warblers, when up to 30 species

SITE LOGISTICS

Admission:

FREE

Ownership:

City of Fishers

Accessibility:

There is a small boardwalk, but otherwise all of the trails are dirt or gravel. The terrain is level, with the exception of the Beech Hollow loop. In the spring, the dirt trails are sometimes very muddy or even under water after heavy rains.

Restrictions:

Visitors must remain on the trails at all times, and pets must be on a leash.

PARK & STAY

Parking:

There's a gravel parking lot with ample parking spaces, but the weekends are sometimes crowded.

Nearby Amenities:

The park has heated restrooms with running water. A small building adjacent to the parking lot has information about the park, including maps. The nearby cities of Fishers and Castleton offer many options for lodging.

CONTACT INFO

Website:

fishers.in.us

Phone Number:

(317) 595-3111

eBird Hotspot Link:

[ebird.org/hotspot/
L902846](http://ebird.org/hotspot/L902846)

meet a **MEMBER** LIBBY KEYES



Tell us a little about yourself? Family? Where do you live and work?

I was born and raised in Tinley Park, IL, where I still live. I like to think it's about an hour from just about everything, conveniently right in the middle of places I like to bird and where I work. I'm a biology adjunct at Governors State in Illinois, where I got my master's in environmental science, and at Indiana University North in Indiana. I also got to teach an ornithology class at IUN a few summers ago, and had a ton of fun introducing birding and fieldwork to some unsuspecting undergrads. I work as a field tech for Audubon Great Lakes in the spring and summer, surveying secretive marsh birds. If I'm not birding, then I might be camping, hanging with my dog Hamilton, checking out an estate sale, or reading a good book. I'm probably doing those things a little distracted though – was that a bird?!



What got you interested in birds and birding?

I've always been interested in nature, but I went through a hardcore reptile phase before I settled on birds (I like to think that makes sense, evolutionarily). Took an ornithology class as an undergrad and got hooked. I love that there's always more to learn, a new bird to see, or a new call or behavior to observe in a species I've already seen. Beyond my own interest, birds are a fantastic way to engage people. I spend a lot of time talking about the mechanics of different environmental issues, but nothing connects like a local, living example.



Tell us about some of your favorite bird-related projects you've been working on lately?

There's a lot! Last year I started volunteering with the Indiana Dunes Saw-whet Owl banding, which has been incredible. I also help run the banding station at Governors State. I volunteer as a Chicago Bird Collision monitor, walking a route in downtown Chicago and picking up live and dead birds that have hit buildings during migration to get them to rehab or the Field Museum, respectively. The work I've done with Audubon Great Lakes surveying secretive marsh birds has been a fantastic project that's actively changing how wetlands in northwest Indiana are being managed, and it's my job to bird by kayak!



Do you have a favorite bird or groups of birds?

For as often as I'm asked this question, you'd think I would have a better answer to it, but I don't! I often go with my last lifer (couple birds ago, but Cactus Wren), or my last new bird in the hand (Eastern Screech-owl), or sometimes I get to rescue something "common" as a collision monitor (Red-tailed Hawk) and I start appreciating them all over again.



What's your dream birding destination?

Are "islands" an acceptable answer? Island ecology in general is interesting to me, but the birds are fascinating. The Galapagos, Madagascar, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, South Georgia. I'd love to volunteer or do some short-term field jobs monitoring or banding birds in the future. I have lots of birding left to do right here though, and I'm happy to do it!

NEWS

FROM THE INDIANA AUDUBON SOCIETY

ADOPT A SHRIKE!

Help save the shrike! Indiana Audubon, in partnership with the Division of Fish and Wildlife and the Loggerhead Shrike Working Group, have teamed up to help provide shrubs for shrikes in the Adopt a Shrike program.

The Loggerhead Shrike is a state-endangered species that has experienced precipitous declines in recent years. In the late 1980s, Indiana's Loggerhead Shrike population consisted of nearly 100 breeding pairs. Ongoing monitoring efforts now identify fewer than ten breeding pairs annually in the entire state. Habitat loss due to changes in land use is likely a contributing factor, as much of the grassland habitat in their historical range has been developed or converted to large-scale agriculture.

Remaining shrike breeding pairs now tend to occupy small farms with overgrazed pasture, barbed wire fences, and bushes suitable for nesting. Overgrazed pastures produce bare ground, which provides ideal hunting conditions for shrikes - which need to spot and capture prey on the ground - but little in the way of nesting trees and shrubs. The DNR's current efforts are working to provide shrike nesting habitat by focusing on nest bushes and shrubs along fencerows. In helping with this initiative, IAS and the DNR Division of Fish and Wildlife Non-game program are teaming up for the Adopt a Shrike program. Donors will receive a special adoption certificate highlighting the shrike research and conservation being done, an annual report detailing all the year's shrike banding efforts, and a commemorative "Never met a shrike I didn't like" T-shirt. Each adoption is \$50 and can be purchased through the IAS Online Store. Visit indianaudubon.org/adopt-a-shrike to learn more.



Adopt a Shrike T-Shirt

ACCESS THE BIRDS OF NORTH AMERICA

Indiana Audubon has a great partnership with Cornell to offer the Birds of North America (BNA) as a membership perk to all regular members. The print version of BNA encompasses 18 volumes - more than 18,000 pages - and took the American Ornithologists' Union, Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Academy of Natural Sciences 10 years to complete. The online version is an updatable living reference which includes the life history information detailed in the print version,

and has the added benefit of including calls, songs, video and supplemental information.

The annual BNA subscription cost is \$42, but IAS is proud to offer this online service to its membership at no additional cost. IAS can provide this benefit due to the tremendous response in migrating mail delivery of The Indiana Audubon Quarterly and The Cardinal to electronic delivery in 2009. Visit the publications page on the IAS website to begin access to the BNA if you're not already taking advantage of this great membership option. You can also read more about the BNA at bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna.

IAS VISITS GOOSE POND IN MAY

In 2020, IAS will present a full weekend of birding at Goose Pond and nearby properties to gain appreciation for the diverse breeding birds that call Goose Pond home. While a single day can see many birds in early to mid-May, this trip will aim to observe the full suite of amazing birds found in the wetlands, prairies, and forests of the area. The goal will be to log well over 100 species during the weekend, May 8-10, in what will truly be the ultimate Goose Pond migration experience.

Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area and the adjacent Greene-Sullivan State Forest boast nearly 20,000 acres of prairies, wetlands, and forest land. The continuing restoration of habitat at Goose Pond FWA has created a wildlife mecca that has quickly become one of the state's best birding areas and has hosted an amazing array of rarities since its creation. The trip will begin with participants checking in to lodging, and caravan to dinner Friday evening. Two evening bird excursions will occur for Chuck-wills-widow, nighthawks, and owls. An early start Saturday will include a full morning of birding, a box lunch at Goose Pond, followed by afternoon birding. Birding Sunday morning will target species missed, as well as the nearby Greene-Sullivan State Forest, where forest birds will push the total trip list well over 100 species. The trip will conclude by noon on Sunday. Spots are limited on this unique tour. Indiana Audubon member cost is \$219.00 per person, double occupancy. Visit indianaudubon.org/events for more information on this special birding trip.

Flocking the Birding Sites Together: Birds of Feather Unite in First Statewide Birding Trail

BY BRAD BUMGARDNER

"The birds of Indiana are not the same [as] they were when we were young."

- Amos W. Butler

Just as when Amos Butler made this insightful statement back in 1920, today, birds are a changing dynamic. New species enter the Indiana landscape, while others leave. Habitats change. New parks and preserves are created. Climate change, today more than ever, continues to have an influence on bird migration and timing. Today's contemporary birders generate not only a vast database of sightings that researchers can use, but they also bring in important dollars to the communities they visit. How do you connect birders, statewide and out of state, to the ever-changing world of birds and the habitats in which they are found? Enter the Indiana Birding Trail.

Birding is a growing passion, with a diversity of demographics and starting points from which people enter this great hobby. The whole birding trail phenomenon has been coined "birding economics" for years. Birding trails show a commitment from communities wanting to support responsible tourism and bird appreciation, as well as preserve natural resources within the region.

From the shores of Lake Michigan to the banks of the Ohio River, and everything in between, Indiana's diverse habitats have supported more than 400 documented bird species. Whether seeking close encounters with Ruby-throated Hummingbirds at Indiana Audubon's Mary Gray Bird Sanctuary or observing Bald Eagles roosting on the Mississinewa, adventure awaits on the Indiana Birding Trail, which made its debut in December 2019.

Located within the Mississippi Flyway, Indiana is a prime migratory zone. Birds cruise back and forth between the far northern arctic, passing through Central America, to arrive in Argentina.

The prairies, wetlands and forests of Indiana provide resources for birds to fuel up during migration, and the lakefront experiences massive spring migratory congregations as birds rest and prepare for the flight over Lake Michigan.



Not to mention the wide variety of bird species that return to Indiana each spring to find mates and raise their young before returning to their wintering grounds farther south. Birding Trails as a thing are relatively new. The first "bird trail" began in Texas in 1996, when the first segments of the Great Texas Coastal Birding Trail opened. Part birder resource, part marketing scheme, the idea took off, and today birding trails are popping up across the US. Some trails market entire states, others just certain regions, or even individual cities or towns.

Geography and habitat diversity justify Indiana's need for a statewide birding trail. While individual segments allow you a snapshot of some of the birds, the entire trail when pieced together showcases 60 of the best birding

locations that the state has to offer. The entire state has been divided into geographic regions, making for easy navigation based on where you are visiting. Each site, whether you are referencing the printed or online guide, has eBird checklists integrated so you can see what birds are likely to be seen at a given time of the year. The new Indiana Birding Trail is not a new project - Indiana Audubon and the Indiana DNR have been talking about the concept for nearly a decade! The current trail is the work of an eighteen-month project partnership with many local Audubon chapters, tourism leaders, and divisions of the DNR. We hope you find the content useful in planning your next birding adventure, and take the chance to read about one great location featured here in this Cardinal issue.

See you on the trail!

A screenshot of the Indiana Birding Trail website. The header features the logo "INDIANA BIRDING TRAIL" with a bird icon. Below the header, a large banner image shows a bird (likely a Pied-billed Grebe) on water. The text "Adventure Awaits" is overlaid on the banner. Below the banner, there is a button "Access the Indiana Birding Trail →". At the bottom right, there is a map of Indiana with colored regions and a sidebar with a list of bird species. The footer contains copyright information and links to the guide and resources.

GEAR REVIEW

Steiner HX 10x56 • BY MATT IGLESKI

SPECIFICATIONS

FOV: 332' at 1000 yards
Weight: 42.3 oz
Width: 5.6
Height: 7.1
MSRP: \$1,174.99
Amazon: \$969.99

My initial impression as I took these out of the box was "heavy." Weighing in at 42.3 oz (2.64 lbs.), these binoculars are definitely heavier than my everyday pair. Because of that heft, they do feel well-built - sturdy enough to be thrown around with all your other birding gear and maybe even take a fall out on the trail. Next, I checked out the included accessories: a soft carrying case, well-fitted lens covers, lens cloth, and a padded neck strap. Attaching the neck strap was extremely easy! Steiner has a unique clip-in design, branded as ClicLoc, and is much easier to set up than virtually any other brand of binoculars - the straps simply click into receptors on the sides of the binoculars and you're ready to go. The objective lens covers are also excellently engineered and fit snugly into the ends of the barrels. The ocular lens covers fit well, but are shaped very differently to accommodate the ocular eye-shields (keep reading, I'm getting to those).

Like most high-end binoculars, the Steiner HX come equipped with eye-cups that twist up and down (I wear glasses so I always use binoculars with eye-cups down). In addition to the eye-cups, these have built in eye-shields - rubber triangular flaps that fold up or down to block out side-light. These eye-shields would likely be welcomed by many non-bespectacled users, however I found them to be a little annoying during general use. The eye-shield flaps, made of rather grippy rubber, would flip up on their own as I moved and used the binoculars. On many occasions, I would raise the binoculars to my eyes only to be met by an outstretched eye-shield poking into the side of my glasses - which forced me to pause, flip it back down, and then locate my target. One other thing that kind of bothered me as I held these in my hand was how my thumb landed right on the thick rubber ridge that runs the length of each barrel. After prolonged use, that ridge can become noticeably uncomfortable.



Photo of Steiner HX 10x56 Packaging

Another important consideration for these binoculars is the inter-pupillary distance. I have fairly narrow-set eyes, and these were almost too wide for me at their minimum closed distance. The official inter-pupillary distance on this model is 56-74mm.

But the real question is how do they perform for birding? The answer is very well! The 56mm objective lens diameter does an excellent job of gathering light, and produces an extremely clear, crisp image. These binoculars performed extremely well in all types of light and really shined in low light conditions - you never have to worry about overcast days or the impending dark when you're trying to squeeze out another 20 minutes of birding at sunset. This model is also equipped with a very convenient feature called "fast-close-focus." If a bird flew

Overall, the Steiner HX 10x56 is an extremely well-built pair of binoculars with all the standard specifications you would expect for the price point: high-precision roof prisms, coated lenses, fogproof, waterproof, durable rubber exterior, and superior image clarity. I really enjoyed using them for car birding and lake watching - basically the kind of birding where I didn't need to carry them on my person for long periods of time. As everyday binoculars that you might be carrying for hours at a time, these might not be the best choice. If the much lighter 10x42 model performs as well as these, I wouldn't hesitate to look to those as an option if you are thinking about a binocular upgrade.

"These binoculars performed extremely well in all types of light and really shined in low light conditions - you never have to worry about overcast days or the impending dark when you're trying to squeeze out another 20 minutes of birding at sunset." - Matt Igleski

MARSH MADNESS

By Fred Wooley

Fred Wooley is a naturalist, writer, and land preservation/restoration enthusiast. He lives on part of an old farm overlooking an extensive fen in northern Steuben County, Indiana. He can be reached at fwooley@frontier.com.

There are many traditions that give pleasure to our year, indoors and out. In late winter and early spring basketball rules and nowhere more so than Indiana. Tournament hopefuls hit the hardwoods with great enthusiasm this time of year. Similar madness comes to March meadows, woodlands and wetlands. Birders get antsy and those who don't tough it out on Christmas counts and frozen adventures, begin to look for binoculars tucked away since fall migration. While still holding a cold grip the frozen fingers of winter begin to thaw and loosen. Life stirs and turns towards spring and another year.

Nowhere is this more evident than in northern Indiana wetlands. In early February all seems calm in the cold of winter. Cattails stalks stand tall, tan and lifeless. Aside from an occasional, brief warm spell, the winter temporary pools, lakeside wetlands, and expansive marshes are ice covered and sometimes topped with light snow. Even on sunny days, especially with wind, a wetland is seemingly void of animal life.

The marsh mood changes with higher and longer-lasting sun. A late February cold snap may set in, but still, even in our Hoosier home wetland on the Michigan border, the first red-winged blackbird arrives. No need to check the calendar. You see it on the sports page and in a March wetland. The madness is about to begin.

In the marsh, it might just start with a peep and I don't mean shorebird! When temperatures get to and hover in the 50 degree range for any length of time, the first frogs of the season blink, stir and make their way from the cold mud to the quickly warming surface. The spring peeper, no bigger than the tip of your little finger, is generally the first to emerge. The male peeper, in all the energy it can muster with a puffed up vocal sack the size of sweet pea, pierces the warm air with a sharp, high-pitched "PEEP!" As warming continues, another one peeps, and another, and another, all hoping to attract a female peeper. These tiny mites, peeping together on a warm, spring night, is nearly deafening for anyone standing courtside of a thawed marsh.

They are soon joined by chorus frogs, just slightly bigger than peepers. These males make a steady, "Reeeeeeeeep..... reeeeeep...." similar to drawing a thumbnail across the teeth of a stiff plastic comb. In chorus, as their name implies, they bring a steady sound and soon individual frogs are difficult to discern from the muddy crowd. I'm always amused when trying to sneak up for a peek at just one frog and have all nearby fall suddenly silent. "How do they know I'm there?"

While March frogs frolic down low, things get wild higher among last year's cattail stalks, standing trees, and any raised mud flat or muskrat mound. The birds return and it's time for business.

The chatter and outright honks of resident geese foretell the action. Some geese have stuck around all winter where water stays open, but their activities are mostly in survival mode, find food, keep sheltered... wait.

Wait for March, wait for spring! The migrating geese will continue north in their mindless "Vs" driven more by instinct than reason. The resident geese have figured it out. They are here all winter and now comes the time for courting, defending territory, and finally nest building and tending that claim of wet March mud.

Geese mate for life, but taking nothing for granted, males still court females with enthusiastic honks and wing flaps. The wilder bursts of honks and wing beats are males chasing off marauding competitors posing a threat to their treasured ganders or grounds for nesting.

While the exact day may depend on weather, the first male red-winged blackbirds return to northern Indiana in late February. In March they come north in force and start setting up house-keeping. For weeks it is just the males and for that time, it's a free for all.

Breeding males look sharp in all black. Their red shoulder epaulets are sometimes covered with wing covert feathers, revealing just a narrow yellow border. When excited or challenged, back go the coverts and out come the bright red shoulder feather patches. With a stretch and a heave forward, out explodes that characteristic, "KONG-KA-REEEEEE!"

A March wetland visit at this time reveals lessons in red-wing homesteading. Each male selects a number of perches from which to land and shout his claim to that point. Much time and energy is spent these initial days. Flying from perch to perch, each bird outlines his stake to a breeding territory. I recall a research paper that reported on this phenomenon. Researchers marked on a map the points from which each red-wing displayed. By connecting the dots, the marsh was divided into numerous polygons of irregular shapes and sizes, each marking a territory. While some intersect; most are distinctly separate.

It's in the intersections of territories where the most madness occurs! The birds for the most part, eventually come to some agreement on boundaries. In a few weeks the females arrive and the marsh madness crescendos again; to victors go the partners and the marsh becomes fertile with more red-wing members.

It's a fun activity to visit such a wetland this time of year. Take a clipboard and sketch a crude map and plot the singers and showboats. Make several visits as the month progresses and the territories and their occupants become clear. It's like filling out your basketball brackets; it's the business of March marsh madness.



Red-winged Blackbird



Canada Goose Pair



Nesting Season!

Dune Birds *in Art*



2019 Entry "Killdeer Over Eggs" Photograph by Susan Kirt

A regional, juried art exhibition showcasing artwork of indigenous and migratory birds of the Midwest. Artwork will be displayed at the Indiana Dunes Visitor's Center in conjunction with the Indiana Dunes Birding Festival, an annual event drawing bird-lovers from around the country.

An opening reception and meet & greet with the artists is held:

**Wednesday, May 13th 2020 from 6-8pm CDT
at the Indiana Dunes Visitor Center
1215 IN-49, Chesterton, IN 46304**

Exhibition will be on diplay until June 20th 2020. For more info go to:
<https://indunesbirdingfestival.com/pages/art-exhibition>

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