

WPBO THE MIGRANT

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Winter 2009 - Spring 2010



Mission Statement

The mission of Whitefish Point Bird Observatory is to document the distribution and abundance of birds in the Great Lakes Region, with special emphasis on migration. Research projects will focus on assessing the status of bird populations and movements. Information acquired will be used to increase our knowledge of bird migration, to encourage public awareness of birds and their environment, and to further conservation of birds.

Visit the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory Website at: www.wpbo.org



Sunset at Whitefish Point.

Photo: M. Sefton

FROM THE CHAIR

Dear fellow members of WPBO,

As we start a new, exciting season at WPBO, let me first reflect briefly on this past year. As many of you may remember, we were facing some pretty severe economic issues in 2009. You, our faithful members, responded very generously to our pleas and your board made some tough decisions to help us reduce our operating costs. As a result of these actions, your organization showed a small, positive financial result last year. Thanks to all for helping us “turn the corner”. We are, by no means, completely comfortable yet, so your continued help and our continued vigilance on costs will still be necessary.

As part of our efforts on cost containment and with ever-increasing usage of the internet as a method of receiving communications, we are in the process of changing from a paper-based newsletter, *The Migrant*, to an electronic newsletter. We are still doing a lot of work on this and will advise our membership by letter on exactly how you will receive future issues.

When you receive this issue, we will have completed our spring seasonal activities. Our Raptor Count began on March 15 with James Butch, who previously was lead observer at Bonney Butte, OR, as our Raptor Counter. Our Owl Banding operations also started on March 15 with Chris Neri and Nova Mackentley, our long-time banders, returning for another season. On the second night of banding this season, they captured a whopping 73 owls, mostly Saw-whets but including a Great Gray, giving promise to an excellent season. On April 15 we began our Waterbird Count with Mike Duckham coming from North Wales, UK to be the counter. Our Educator/Naturalist position is being filled by Intern/Volunteer Libby Zeman, who started some interesting programs.

The Owl's Roost Gift Shop, with new selections of birding related clothing, books and gifts, was open in time for our Spring Fling, April 23-25, with Joanne Selbee managing our efforts with assistance from Betty Maxson and with Libby Zeman and Betty Carmody filling in as needed. Please stop by and take advantage of these excellent offerings.

We hope that you enjoyed our Spring Fling with an exciting dinner speaker and informational programs. We also hope you will partake of our bird tours, led throughout the year by experienced birders.

Thanks again to all. We look forward to another exciting, successful year at WPBO.

Jerry Ziarno
Board Chair

Cover Photo

Among the birds seen at the Tip on October 8, 2009 were Red Phalarope; Boreal, Short-eared, and Northern Hawk Owls; and Scissor-tailed Flycatcher! For an account of this amazing day, see Waterbird Counter Tom Prestby's report on p. 4. Cover photo of Red Phalarope by Owl Bander Chris Neri, October 5, 2008.

Go to our web site for more photos:
www.wpbo.org



Editor's Note: If you have an interesting photo or article that you would like to share with the readers of the *Migrant*, please submit it to:

The Migrant
c/o Mike Sefton
2491 Towner Blvd.
Ann Arbor, MI 48104

Digital photos may also be sent via e-mail to: mseft@yahoo.com

Photographer or author will be credited. Copies are suggested, as submissions will not be returned.



Owl bander Nova Mackentley talks about wing molt in the Northern Saw-whet Owl Photo: M. Sefton

WPBO Summer Owl Banding Program is Unique

Thanks to funding provided by the Baille Fund, private donations, support from WPBO members, and your pledges to the 2009 WPBO Staff Birdathon, we were able to conduct our fourth season of summer owl research this year. While last summer's results were our first indication that Northern Saw-whet Owls (NSWO) were at the low end of their breeding cycle, this summer showed them to be on the rebound. Given the extremely wet and cold summer we experienced, costing us many net hours, we were very pleased with the season's results. We banded a total of 260 owls; 257 NSWO and 3 Long-eared Owls (LEOW). One hundred and eighty-nine of the NSWO banded were juveniles, representing an increase of over 300% relative to the 60 banded last summer. The season's peak night occurred on July 30 when 27 juvenile NSWO were banded. While the timing and magnitude of juvenile numbers has fluctuated significantly from year to year, adult NSWO have been remarkably consistent during the first three full summer seasons. Adults occur mainly early in the season with 185 of the 196 banded the last three summers occurring in July. Despite the fact that it was the sighting of 3 LEOW and a juvenile NSWO on July 21, 2006 that inspired us to start the summer banding, all 10 of the combined summer LEOW captures have occurred in August. With every summer season we gain more insight into this previously unknown aspect of owl biology.

Since we made this discovery in 2006, a few other northern NSWO banding stations where this occurrence was considered most likely to occur have attempted summer banding, without success. We have also continued searching literature and speaking with many of North America's owl researchers. This study remains unique and movements of juvenile NSWO have yet to be documented anywhere other than at Whitefish Point. We have now

banded a total of 1,200 owls during the summer season. The panic attacks I experienced at the beginning of the last two summers, worrying about whether or not what we experienced in 2006 was a fluke, have disappeared. Beyond all expectations, we have now banded 987 juvenile NSWO. The birds we banded have turned up in New York, Massachusetts, Virginia, West Virginia, Ontario, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio. This spring we recaptured a few of our juveniles from previous years and this fall a site in northern Ontario captured one of our juveniles from 2007 and another from 2008. We continue to gather data on the post-juvenile molt, active molt among adults, body condition of juveniles vs. adult, and bill tip color. This discovery and the data gathered continue to provide the only documentation of this event, not only increasing our knowledge of these beautiful birds, but also disproving some previous beliefs.

This research remains incredibly exciting to us. With a combined 24 seasons of spring and fall owl banding under our belts, there is still something very odd about banding owls during the summer. The nights are short, temperatures are comfortable, and we obviously don't have to deal with snow. What we do have to contend with are the bugs. Nova is unfortunately one of those to whom mosquitoes are particularly attracted. Even on nights when they are hardly bothering me, she needs to wear a head net and is pursued by a cloud of mosquitoes. The sight of this always reminds me of Pigpen from Charlie Brown. Of course, mosquitoes are not the only insects around. There are various beetles and large numbers of moths in the woods at night. While these insects are of annoyance to us as they are attracted to our headlamps, they seem to play an important role in the survival of juvenile NSWO. While insects are believed to make up just a very small percentage of the diet of NSWO, the inexperienced juvenile NSWO are taking advantage of their availability. Every pellet that one of our juveniles has cast has contained the shells of beetles. This summer I was watching a juvenile back by the nets when it suddenly flew to within about 7 feet of me at eye-level, grabbed a small moth with its foot and lifted it to its mouth and ate it. Without the owl banding we would not only miss out on these kinds of observations, but this event would occur completely under the radar. The juvenile we found in July 2006, which led us to start this project, remains the only juvenile seen outside of the banding. We are already looking forward to running the 5th summer season in 2010. Bring on the bugs!

Quilt Raffle Reminder

This notice is a reminder to anyone who wishes to enter this year's 27th Annual Quilt Raffle that the drawing date is September 23rd. This year's prizes feature a queen-sized quilt, a pair of binoculars, and the National Geographic Field Guide to Birds. If you have already sent in your ticket stubs, many thanks. If you still wish to enter the drawing, or desire more tickets, please mail/contact: Michael Fitzpatrick, 56 Hubbard St, Mt. Clemens MI 48043, or e-mail eagle2@ameritech.net. All proceeds benefit migratory bird research.

The Fall 2009 Waterbird Season

by Tom Prestby

The Fall 2009 Waterbird Count was conducted from August 15 to November 15, 2009. After a slow fall a year ago, most species rebounded in a major way. The waterbird total this fall was 101,594 birds, represented by 73 species of waterbirds. This total is 23% above the 21-year average. October was by far the best month of the count as 61% of the waterbirds seen this fall were seen during this month. As is typical, the season started slowly in August and ended very slowly in November.

Each month had distinctly different weather, forming a weather roller coaster which is so often the case on the shore of Lake Superior. August was warm with mainly sunny weather and a few days of rain. September was basically the summer, with ridiculously warm and dry weather. Throughout the UP, it was one of the warmest Septembers in recorded history. October was the opposite; it was one of the coldest Octobers ever and fairly wet. Much to my liking, the gorgeous weather returned in November with mainly clear skies and very little precipitation. Although I feel like I was prepared for it, I'm glad I didn't have to face the typical November weather that many past waterbird counters and birders tell horror stories about.

With the exception of Green-winged Teal, dabbling ducks were seen in slightly below average numbers. American Wigeon and Green-winged Teal were the two most numerous dabblers with 1,007 and 897 individuals seen respectively. Diving ducks were variable with some species seen in average or slightly above-average numbers and some species seen in numbers that were well below average. The highlight was two days in a row with female Eiders: 26 October and 27 October. Scaup and other *Aythya* species were seen in normal numbers, but the same is not true for scoters. Aside from slightly above average numbers of White-winged, it was a bizarre fall with a second-highest fall count of Black Scoter (255 individuals) and a second-lowest fall count of Surf Scoter (173 individuals). It was the first fall where Black Scoters were more numerous than Surf Scoters, and as you can see it wasn't even close. The total of 32,841 Long-tailed Ducks was the second-highest fall count ever and crushed the average by more than 20,000 birds! This alone accounts for the above average number of total waterbirds. While Bufflehead was seen in above normal numbers, Goldeneye and each species of Merganser were seen in slightly lower numbers than normal. Red-throated Loons were seen in above average numbers with a peak of 86 birds on 23 September. The total of 2,626 Common Loons was slightly below average. Red-necked and Horned Grebes were also seen in slightly below average numbers with 10,407 and 325 of each respectively. The high Red-necked Grebe count occurred on 23 August when 2,313 were seen.

Shorebirds generally had a good season with 22 species detected. Highlights included a Piping Plover that continued from the first breeding family in the last 23

years, 12 Whimbrel (a second-best fall count), 5 White-rumped Sandpipers, the second fall record of Long-billed Dowitcher, the 4th highest fall count of Dunlin, and a Red Phalarope that was seen after the count on the evening of 8 October.

Gulls, Terns, and Jaegers also showed quite a bit of variability between species. Overall it was a poor jaeger year, but you really cannot complain with 4 Parasitics, a Long-tailed, and 11 unidentified jaegers. Numbers of Herring and Ring-billed Gulls were above normal and the Bonaparte's Gull total of 167 birds was well below average. Single Franklin's Gull, Iceland Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, and Sabine's Gulls were seen. Great Black-backed Gulls showed well with 10 individuals and 2 Glaucous Gulls were seen. A special treat was a juvenile Glaucous Gull that spent all of November keeping me company at the shack. It seemed to prefer pretzels over the other snacks we offered it and it bullied the Ring-billeds and Herrings that were also begging for food.

The highlight of the season was October 8th, a day which will officially go down in the Whitefish Point history books as a legend. Whitefish Point has certainly had its fair share of amazing birding days but this day may take the cake. Things started with a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher that came in off the lake during mid-morning. This gorgeous southern vagrant is always most welcome in the upper Midwest. In early afternoon a few birders noticed a medium-sized owl fly out of the pines and over the lake to Canada, a bird that was almost certainly a Boreal Owl. Another Boreal Owl was seen shortly after in the woods by another observer. After the count had wrapped up, a few birders remained and saw a Short-eared Owl at the tip. This brought back a crowd of birders who were stunned to be greeted by a Northern Hawk Owl sitting on the Merlin pole! Just after the excitement of the owl, a phalarope was spotted flying down the beach. After searching in the water off the tip for several minutes, the bird was refound and eventually ID'd as a Red Phalarope! This was a state bird for many of the birders present and a life bird for some. This flurry of excitement was an example of how amazing Whitefish Point can be. The first Point record of Tufted Titmouse and the second Point record of Western Grebe made the honorable mention for the highlights of the season.

Finally, I would like to thank Chris and Nova for making this an extremely enjoyable fall season and I would like to thank Chris for counting once a week for me and joining me most afternoons, no matter how brutally slow or miserable it may have been at times. Most of all, a huge thanks to all of the birders and visitors who stopped by the shack. It was great to spend time with the regular Point birders and meet a lot of the regular Point visitors.

Space Still Available on WPBO Field Trips

Bird some of the best hot spots in Michigan with experienced WPBO leaders. The fees for these trips support WPBO's research and education programs.

Fall Migration at the Point, Saturday, Sept. 18, 2010
For details, go to www.wpbo.org and click on *Events and Field Trips*, or call Tom Wheeker at (517) 628-3843 or email dorowheeker@cablespeed.com

Fall 2009 Owl Migration

by Tim Hanks and Britta Schielke

Our first trip to Whitefish Point was in the spring of 2006. We decided to visit Chris and Nova, whom we'd met and befriended at a hawk migration site in New Mexico, instead of hiking to some hot springs in the Southwest. From what we'd been hearing about all the owls they were catching and all the hawks there were to be seen, we thought surely we made the right choice. As chance would have it, we ended up arriving at the same time as about 12 inches of snow. If we're remembering correctly, we saw only a couple of Northern Saw-whets and one Long-eared that Chris and Nova were kind enough to wake us up for. The storm not only shut down the owls, it did the same to the hawks, the passerines, everything. Needless to say, after three days of this we were really wishing for the Southwest, some sun and a nice soak in the hot springs. It was great to see old friends, but that was a long drive from Colorado for three owls and a handful of hawks. The years passed and we didn't give Whitefish Point much thought until this past summer. We were working in Ontario at Algonquin Provincial Park. It was getting to that time of the summer season when wandering field technicians start to worry about what's coming next, when we saw the fall owl bander positions posted. The timing was perfect, we applied (surprising Chris and Nova who thought we'd never come back after the snow storm) and in mid-September once again found ourselves at Whitefish Point.

As first time owl banders, a big migration may have been a bit overwhelming, yet we were hoping to see a little more action than what they had in the fall of '08. We ended up banding a total of 129 owls, a happy medium: 123 Northern Saw-whets (NSWO), three Barred Owls (BOW), two Boreal Owls (BOOW) and one Long-eared Owl (LEOW). We also caught five NSWO that were already banded. Four of those had been originally banded at Whitefish Point. Of those four, two were from the summer of '09, one the spring of '09 and one the spring of '08. The fifth was banded at a different station, still unknown at this time. The owls came pretty steadily and evenly distributed throughout the season. That is to say, we never really had a "big" night or a peak. The most we caught in one evening was 12 NSWO and one BOOW. We had a few more nights with double digit captures, many more in the mid to upper single digits and it wouldn't be a banding season without far too many nights of one or zero owls captured.

The numbers surely would have been higher were it not for the exceptionally wet and windy fall. We started the season working ten days straight and hoping for a night off. After that it seemed like we were doing the exact opposite. We missed 18 complete nights and many partials due to the weather. Seasoned field technicians like us know there's nothing to be done about weather, but I'd be lying if we didn't say that missing that many nights was rough. We also were unfortunate to be banding during a fall that followed what must have been a very productive breeding season for fox. As wildlife lovers, we normally love to see any little furry critters running around. As

banders, that's not the case. There were many nights we had to close down some nets and sit by the ones we still had open due to fox prowling around the area. It's tough to miss that many banding hours, but the safety of the owls is first and foremost.

For those of you that have seen owls in the hand, you'll truly understand when we say they are amazing animals. We consider ourselves very lucky to have had the opportunity to see and handle every one of those 134 owls. Not much can beat all of those little Northern Saw-whets looking up at you with those big, inquisitive eyes and a face you just have to love. Not to take anything away from those little guys, but the highlights of the season have to be the two Boreal Owls and the chance to see a Northern Hawk Owl. The first Boreal Owl surprised us early in the season on October 3rd when we had at least 8 visitors crammed into the banding lab. The waterbird counter, Tom, and his family were a part of this group. It was the first Boreal any of us had ever seen. The second BOOW was on October 17th and was no less exciting. We called down to the house to tell Chris, Nova, and Tom and they were up at the lab before we could do much more than put a band on it. The Northern Hawk Owl was a huge treat. This was also an owl we'd never seen before. It would have been nice to capture it, but seeing an owl in its natural environment and not in-hand is pretty special. A good friend of ours was visiting at the time and we all (along with about 20 other birders) had a great look at it perched on the Merlin pole before it decided to fly back across the lake to Canada.

All-in-all, the fall of '09 was a great experience for us. We would like to thank Chris and Nova for making it possible. It was nice to be able to spend another fall with them. The reunion was long overdue. We'd also like to thank Tom for being a great housemate and for keeping us updated on what we were missing as we slept through the daylight hours. And to Rick, Lorrie, Ken and Connie, thank you for feeding us all and allowing us to spend a bit of time in front of the big screen. Whitefish Point is definitely a special place. Our second visit will not be our last.

WPBO Salutes a Valued Friend, Donor

One of the first places that most visitors head to when visiting the Observatory is to the many feeders located behind the Owl's Roost. There, one usually finds a myriad number of "feeder-birds" enjoying a seemingly endless supply of sunflower seeds. For many years now, that "endless supply" has been donated by Rosann Kovalcik, owner of Wild Birds Unlimited in Grosse Pointe Woods, MI. This year's donation totaled 1000 pounds! Rosann has also donated the binoculars for second prize in our annual quilt raffle the past few years. She also co-chaired Spring Fling for 5 years. As all of us know, organizations like ours thrive on members' volunteerism. WPBO would like to extend a special thanks to Rosann for her efforts and generosity. (The Chickadees do too!)

Spring 2010 Waterbird Count, by Mike Duckman

The 2010 spring waterbird count at Whitefish Point, Michigan, tallied 19,395 individuals during the standardized eight-hour daily count period from the 15th of April to the 31st of May. Total hours of observation were 363, the only hours missed being due to either foggy conditions or lack of sickness cover. Species in order of decreasing abundance were Common Loon (n=3542), Long-tailed Duck (n=2996), Canada Goose (n=2645), Merganser sp (n=2688), Sandhill Crane (n=1316), and White-winged Scoter (n=1215).

This spring was generally warm and sunny; indeed April was the warmest since records began in the late 1880s in the Sault Ste. Marie area. There was no lingering floating ice on the lake or the bay at the beginning of the count on 15 April. Compare this with 2003, when "The lake and bay were frozen at the inception of the count. Floating ice continued to be seen through the beginning of May." There was a general perception among Michigan birders that it was an "early" spring, which seems likely, and also that certain aspects of the waterbird migration were lacking, in particular the dabbling ducks. This certainly appeared to be the case at Whitefish Point.

A total of 3542 Common Loons was tallied between 15 April and 31 May. In addition a total of 988 distant loon sp were counted. Combined, this number is 1706 below the average from 1984-2006. Common Loon numbers have fallen below seasonal averages every season since 1999. The peak flight occurred May 5 and totaled 324 individuals. There were only two other days with over 200 Common Loons. It was noticed that Common Loons will fly into a headwind; they are large, powerful birds able to fly into a north westerly and may even prefer this as it will give them lift. Another observation was that on some days (particularly calm days), many Common Loons take the "short cut" over the harbor and across the peninsula and out into the main part of Lake Superior, in fact it was estimated that on 2 or 3 days, one half to three quarters of all the Common Loons were taking this route, including many that were cutting across a long way to the SW, perhaps up to 2 or 3 miles distant, as they could be spotted through a powerful scope due to the fact that the light was very much better when looking in that direction. Both these observations would require further research to verify with regard to weather conditions and would make an ideal project for an undergrad student or volunteer. The Red-throated Loon total of 428 was above the long term average of 392.

The total number of 19,395 waterbirds counted was 15% below the long-term average of 22,761 (1984-2006). Species with below-average numbers this season include: White-winged Scoter, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Bonaparte's Gull, Dunlin and several duck spp.

The Long-tailed Duck count of 2996 was the second highest ever after 2006 (1084 on average). Other species with above average or average counts include: Sandhill Crane (1316, average 646), Red-throated Loon

(428, average 392), Herring Gull (507, average 435), Red-necked Grebe (578, average 585), Canada Goose (2645, average 2417). The latter species was still migrating in early June in good numbers after the count had finished, as were Common and Red-throated Loons and Red-breasted Merganser to a lesser extent.

Shorebirds were almost universally down on seasonal averages; they cannot have passed through before the start of the count like some of the duck spp., however the same warm weather with, in particular clear skies and light winds both day and night will have encouraged them to migrate through without stopping, and often quite high. On the very occasional day when there was fog or rain, shorebirds were often present, however these conditions were few and far between.

Although the total number of waterbirds seen was below average, the total number of species was about average. For example, additional unusual species seen include Laughing and Franklin's Gulls, Pacific Loon, American Woodcock, Willet, and Trumpeter Swan. These are species that are not seen annually during the waterbird count. Interestingly, though not a waterbird, a Northern Saw-whet Owl was observed coming in off the lake after a spell of fog. Unusual species seen from the shack include Black-backed and Red-bellied Woodpeckers and Prairie Warbler. Notably absent from the waterbird count this year were Canvasback, Redhead and White-rumped Sandpiper.

All in all an enjoyable and successful season, I currently hope to be able to return in 2011 to experience the fall count if possible. I would like to thank team members Chris Neri and Jason Bojczyk for standing in for me a couple of times, and them and the rest of the team - Nova Mackentley, James Butch, and Libby Zerman for helping to make my stay so enjoyable, and Chris and Nova for coordinating, organizing and generally knowing stuff. Thanks also to Jerry Ziarno for all his help and support and to everyone who kept me company at the shack. And finally a big thank you to Phil Chu for keeping me company for the final 2 weeks and standing in every once in a while when a rare bird needed chasing.

Saginaw Bay Marshes Tour

On March 27, an eager group of seven avid birders led by Jerry Ziarno toured the marshes of Saginaw Bay, visiting a number of "hot spots" from the Bay Port area on the east side of the Bay, down to Bay City, and then finished the long day with a trip up the west side to Nayanquing Point near Linwood. Everyone seemed to really enjoy the large numbers of birds, many on their migration north. Highlights included 17 species of waterfowl (over 1000 Tundra Swans), 2 separate Bald Eagle nests with adult birds in attendance, an American Kestrel carrying its prey, a Sandhill Crane coming in for a landing, an early feeding group of Tree Swallows, and a flock of lingering Snow Buntings. There is still room for the September 18 WPBO tour to Whitefish Point.



Immature Northern Goshawk at the Point

Photo: Chris Neri

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4/12/2010	Bonnie L.	White	Waterbird Count
5/11/2010	Beverley	Kirby	Owl Banding
5/16/2010	Elizabeth K.	Dapson	Hawk Count & Waterbird Count
5/28/2010	Tex	Wells	All the Research
5/29 & 30	Robert	Pettit	Hawk Count
5/31/2010	Ken & Robin	Ballard	All the Research

Our thanks to all who support WPBO through donations and membership



Western Kingbird at the Point

Photo: Chris Neri

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Northern Pearly Eye

Photo: Chris Neri