

# Coulee Birder

Newsletter of the Coulee Region Audubon Society

Website: <http://couleeaudubon.org/>



January-February 2009

## Events

Audubon meetings are held at 7 p.m. at the Ho Chunk Nation building, lower level, 725 Main Street, La Crosse.

### January 28

(Note the change from our usual meeting date)

Annual Meeting and Pot Luck

Pot Luck at 6 p.m. with meeting to follow. Bring a dish to pass, your own dishes and eating utensils.

New officers will be elected.

Members are invited to bring photos and videos of bird sightings and birding trips. There will be a laptop available to use for sharing photos. Dan Jackson will have a slide show of pictures he took in 2008.

### February 18

Speaker: Rick Kyte is Director of the D. B. Reinhart Institute for Ethics in Leadership and President of the Coulee Region Chapter of Trout Unlimited.

Topic: "How to Ruin the River or Ten Practical Steps that Anyone Can Take to Ensure That the Upper Mississippi River Valley Becomes Just Another Indistinguishable Place on the Way from Here to There"

Rick will discuss several Trout Unlimited grants and projects as well as answer questions.

### March 18

Pat Manthey, Wisconsin DNR, will present a program on her Trumpeter Swan project.

### Sierra Club

January 27 7 p.m. at the Ho Chunk Nation building, lower level, 725 Main Street, La Crosse,

Merv and Suzanne Broten from the

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## President's notebook

### Rekindle your passions!

By Dan Jackson

Christmas is over and a new year has started. That means that the annual meeting of the Coulee Region Audubon Society is almost here! On January 21st, we will hold our annual elections. For this meeting, we will also have a potluck dinner and give members an opportunity to share their pictures of special outdoor trips and nature (be warned, I will be bringing some new bird pictures). It is always a fun meeting and I urge you to show up with a dish to pass and perhaps some pictures of your own!

The potluck will start at 6 p.m. and

the business part of the meeting will start around 7. The election will not take long so we should have plenty of time to share special pictures. There will be a notebook computer and projector available if you would like to share digital pictures. Otherwise, please bring your own equipment.

In addition to pictures, please bring along ideas about field trips and / or speakers that you would like to see in the next year. The board is always interested in ideas to make our programming even better and fresh ideas

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## Education Fund receives memorial gift

A \$700 gift to the Audubon Society has been made in memory of Betty Jane Liethen, 71, of Onalaska, who died Nov.23, 2008.

According to her obituary, "Betty's last wishes were quite characteristically very clear: 'After I pass away, in lieu of flowers that only wilt and die, please make donations in my memory to the Audubon Society'."

The note on behalf of her six grown children that accompanied the gift said that "Betty would like the donations to go to the Education Fund of the Coulee Region Audubon Society.

The note further said, "Our mother raised us kids teaching us the beauty of nature and birds. She was a gifted gardener and always cared for the birds that visited her backyard. She made notes in her yearly planner books of all the different species of birds that flew into her yard in Onalaska. When she saw a new bird, she would look it up in her ... bird books. Then she would call her friend, Artis Aasen, and talk about them."

*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 for the March/April issue is February 27. Send information to: [dskoloda@earthlink.net](mailto:dskoloda@earthlink.net).*

# **Bobolinks to benefit from land protection**

Two recent easement donations to the Mississippi Valley Conservancy have given grassland birds a break.

A Kickapoo Valley farm couple have protected their land and its nesting bobolinks by donating a conservation easement to the MVC.

Robert and Patty Mika protected their 140-acre working farm located between the Kickapoo River and West Fork of the Kickapoo in Vernon County.

In addition to the farm fields, some of them organic hayfields that support grassland birds such as bobolinks, the lands include native prairie remnant, complete with asters, blazing stars, and pasque flowers, oak savanna habitat and oak forest.

Robert Mika introduced his land to

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***In the early spring we look forward to the return of the bobolink and we do not cut the hay until they have hatched and fledged out.***

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- Robert Mika

MVC in an e-mail requesting information on conservation: "We value the land and take care of it, especially when it comes to our wildlife. In the early spring we look forward to the return of the bobolink and we do not cut the hay until they have hatched and fledged out. We have a very healthy population of these birds and are happy to provide them with a home especially when so many farmers around here are putting every last acre in corn. Obvi-

ously the property will be passed on to our heir when we go, but whoever ends up owning this property in the future, we would like to see our wishes followed and that being the preservation of the land for the wildlife and not a bunch of houses or corn planted all over the place."

The newly completed easement incorporates those wishes, according to Abbie Meyer, conservation specialist with MVC. "With the protection of the Mika property, the bobolinks will be guaranteed a place to return to each spring, forever," she said.

Patty Mika said, "We wanted to preserve our land, to keep it how it is, forever ..." Mika was especially concerned that the migrating birds would keep their nesting place.

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are always appreciated.

With the start of a new year, I make it a point to start a new birding year. I begin new lists for the state and my favorite birding areas. Although not everyone thinks that keeping lists is a good idea, I happen to be one of those who enjoy it. In the middle of winter, when it is otherwise hard to be excited about birds and birding, starting new lists for a new year adds excitement and excuses to dust off the optics and head out to see what I can see.

So far this year (which is less than a week old as I write this), I have already found a few dozen species for my new lists. None have been remarkable, but because each was "new" I was able to

once again get excited to see old friends like House Sparrows, Rock Doves, European Starlings and other very familiar birds.

I think there is a good lesson in this exercise. The world around us is always full of wonderful things. We just need to make sure that we have the right attitude so that we get out and enjoy them. So, no matter what your interests are, make use of a new year to rekindle your passions and "start new lists" with your favorite hobby or pastime. I am sure that all of us can use a little more passion in our lives.

I've got to go. I just heard a Chickadee outside of my window.

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Coulee Wildlife Rehabilitation Center will discuss the work they do rehabilitating wildlife, songbirds, and raptors including the recent rehabilitation and release of a bald eagle after hunters found it caught in a leg-hold trap. They will talk about the natural history of these birds, their habitat, and ecology, with plenty of time for questions. Their education ambassadors, a red-tailed

hawk and a barred owl, will also be part of the program.

**March 6, 7 and 8**

2009 International Festival of Owls  
Houston, Minnesota

Programs, Owl Prowls, displays, nest box building, food, films and more.

For information and registration information, see the web site at [www.festivalofowls.com](http://www.festivalofowls.com)

In Grant County, landowner Laura Coglan has recently assured the protection of "Bobolink Farm Preserve", 63 acres of beautiful prairie and oak savanna outside of Blue River in the Wisconsin River valley. Coglan signed a conservation easement with MVC on Dec. 30. The conservation easement allows Coglan to continue to own and use the land, but with the requirement that the wildlife habitat on the site, the prairies, oak savanna, springs, and creek, must be protected permanently.

"It seems living space for animals, birds and plants will always be pushed aside to make more room for people. One example is the farm I grew up on:" said Coglan, "it's now spread end to end with concrete streets, houses and condos. I couldn't let that happen to this beautiful and unique little corner of Wisconsin, and you never can know what may happen years down the line."

Coglan said, "I'm happy and proud to be able to leave at least one meaningful mark in the world: this quiet valley and the rocky goat prairies that overlook it will be here, just as they are now, forever. Of course I have MVC to thank for making that legacy possible."

# Christmas count tally: 6,600 birds; 58 species

By Dan Jackson

I have received reports of over 6,600 birds of 58 species from participants in the 2008 Christmas Bird Count. Surprisingly, we did find 10 species of waterfowl despite the fact that the Mississippi was deeply frozen for two weeks before the count. For comparison purposes, last year we saw about 7,000 birds of 59 species with similar snow and temperature conditions but without the falling snow.

In general, the participants complained that it was hard to find and see birds because of the inclement weather. With a couple of exceptions, large concentrations of birds were only found at feeders and birds away from feeders were especially hard to find. However, with the addition of a few more counters and several more feeder watchers, the count results were very good despite the bad weather.

Total participation in the count was

65 people. 43 people braved the weather to count sections of the count circle and another 22 (plus a few of the former group as well) helped by counting the birds at their feeders. This level of participation is great! It has allowed us to divide the count circle into smaller pieces that are easier to canvas and this allows better representation of the birds that are currently in the area.

Given the weather, the biggest surprise for this year's count is that 653 robins were reported including one flock of 300 birds. Although most Robins migrate south for the winter, a few hardy souls try to stay here. In order to survive, they eat fruit and seeds from bushes and trees (crab apples, Hackberry seeds, etc.) Robins seem to run on a two-year cycle during the Christmas Bird Count. This is definitely one of the high years with Robins being seen by 12 different counters.

Red-breasted Nuthatches, which were unusually common last year due to a lack

of food up north, were only found by one observer this year. This is a more normal representation on our count. It is amazing how quickly these birds reverted to their normal territory after the major irruption of last year.

The most unusual birds reported were 6 Trumpeter Swans below the east spillway, 3 White-crowned Sparrows in Hokah, 1 Carolina Wren at a feeder on Granddad's Bluff, a Northern Flicker on the south side of La Crosse, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker along the bluffs, and a Wilson's Snipe in Smith Valley.

Birds that were under-represented this year are Red-winged Blackbirds (3) and Northern Shrikes (1). The cold weather has obviously been effective in chasing the blackbirds south for the winter and Shrikes are not irrupting south in significant numbers this year.

For a complete listing of birds counted, see the website at <http://couleeaudubon.org/>

## Wouldn't you rather sing than fight?

Newswise — To many people, bird song can herald the coming of spring, reveal what kind of bird is perched nearby or be merely an unwelcome early morning intrusion. But to Sandra Vehrencamp, Cornell professor of neurobiology and behavior, bird song is a code from which to glean avian behavior insight.

Birds use song systems to communicate about mating and reproduction, territorial boundaries, age and even overall health. Vehrencamp, with colleagues in the Bioacoustics Research Program at Cornell's Lab of Ornithology, studies birds from Costa Rica, Colombia and Bonaire to decode which elements convey such essential information.

Vehrencamp records bird songs and then plays them back to birds of the same species to decipher strategies that various species use to attract mates and resolve territorial disputes. The technique allows researchers to study birds' reactions to songs when such elements as overlapping vocalization, finer song structural features and the type of song played back are varied.

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***"Birds start to negotiate a boundary dispute with song — they don't want to fight."***

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"You kind of feel like you're talking to the bird," Vehrencamp said. She found, for example, that song sparrows in southern California can interpret some forms of playback as "fighting words," because they often resolve conflict by singing the same type of song — known as song-type matching — back to one another. "They get really mad," Vehrencamp said. "They treat playback like it's another bird and will sometimes come right up to the speaker."

Between male birds, if song-type matching fails to resolve a conflict, physical confrontation might ensue. "They both pay costs if they fight," Vehrencamp said. "Birds start to negotiate a boundary dispute with song — they don't want to fight."

Vehrencamp's work also suggests that males that are most successful are those that share many song types with their territorial neighbors. Song sparrows, for example, can learn songs only within a narrow time period restricted to the first few months after fledging, which means that males must learn neighborhood songs quickly to facilitate successful territorial negotiations.

"Song sparrows are very restricted learners, so the dominant birds that acquire territories within their natal area share more song types with their neighbors and survive better," explained Vehrencamp, who observed that birds with a low degree of song-sharing spend more time fighting with neighbors and are rarely seen the next breeding season.

Vehrencamp said that placing such avian observations within a larger framework can help predict what effects environmental factors — including humans — might have on an animal's behavior or survival.

"If we can understand the ecological

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factors that enhance reproductive success and can link them to conservation, then we might be able to save a species," she said. She added that by better understand-

ing how ecological factors affect the evolution of social behavior, "you can see where humans fit into the big picture, and

that adds a richness and depth of understanding for why we are the sorts of animals that we are."

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## Coulee Region Audubon Society Local Membership

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