

# Coulee Birder

Newsletter of the Coulee Region Audubon Society

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



September-October 2010

## Events

### Meetings

Meetings are held at 7 p.m. in the Eco Park building located in Myrick Park, off of La Crosse Street. There is easy access parking nearby and the entire building is handicapped accessible. The programs are free and open to the public.

**Sept. 15** - Clayton Daughenbaugh, conservation organizer with the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance will present a program on AN AMERICAN ICON: UTAH'S RED ROCK CANYON LANDS. America's red rock canyon lands wilderness, located in southern Utah, draws pilgrims from across the country and around the world. It is the largest network of undesignated wilderness lands remaining in the lower 48 states.

The program includes "Wild Utah", a multi-media slide show documenting citizen efforts to designate public lands in southern Utah's spectacular canyon country as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. This 15-minute journey through red rock splendor, narrated by Robert Redford invites viewers to participate in the movement to protect these unique lands.

"These are spectacular public lands owned by all Americans. As citizens we have a great opportunity to act to protect these special places," Daughenbaugh said.

Daughenbaugh also serves as the volunteer Chair of the Sierra Club's National Wildlands Committee and is the author of "Common Sense Democracy: How to Complete the American Revolution in Your Neighborhood" written from two decades as Chicago community organizer.

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## President's notebook

### Summer's highlights linger

To say that I am not ready for fall is an understatement. This summer has simply disappeared before my eyes and I can't believe that the calendar already says September. Wasn't I just looking for spring warblers last week? Well, I guess not - it just feels that way. These days, the days just get away much too easily.

For me, this was a busy summer. When I wasn't working, I tried to spend as much time as possible outdoors chasing birds and bugs (boy, am I glad that I have an understanding spouse). While that means that I didn't always get my chores around the house done in a timely manner, it did help me retain whatever little bit of sanity that I have left and also allowed me to find some pretty interesting critters. It also means that I have dozens of great new photos to share at the January meeting!

In June, the highlight of my birding summer was a close encounter with a Kirtland's Warbler. I have been taking part in the Kirtland's Warbler surveys for several years and this year I headed up to Bayfield County to do some surveying in an area that doesn't attract enough volunteers. I had planned to go up for the first weekend in June, but a poor weather forecast made me decide to stay home.

That weekend, a photographer found a Kirtland's Warbler on one of the 2 parcels that I was supposed to survey. It was exciting, but also very disappointing. I really want to find one of those birds on my own!

I did go up the next weekend and unfortunately, I did not find any birds at my other location. However, when I went to the location where the bird had been found, I was lucky enough to have it fly into a group of pines very close to the road. It was truly breathtaking to watch the bird foraging and singing within 50 feet. I tried not to move much and was amazed that even when I did that the bird absolutely didn't care that I was in the area. I almost laughed when I saw it catch a caterpillar and then beat it on a branch before swallowing it whole.

This summer I also led two dragonfly field trips at Veteran's Memorial Park in West Salem. About 20 brave souls took part in these 2 inaugural events. Although the programs were very rough around the edges and both were almost disrupted by weather, the participants did have fun. A big moment for me was when I overheard a boy tell his mother after the second event that he was really glad that they had come that day. As an outdoors man

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*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 November/December issue is Nov. 1. Send information to: [dskoloda@earthlink.net](mailto:dskoloda@earthlink.net).*

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### **October 20 - Special Joint Meeting with Sierra Club**

Marge Gibson from the Raptor Education Group, Inc. (REGI) will share some of her stories of many years working with birds through, research, rehabilitation and education. She will bring a number of beautiful raptors, all of which are permanent residents of REGI due to non-releasable conditions. This is a rare opportunity to get up close and personal with some of the raptors of REGI, learn their stories, how they came to be with REGI as well as some of their interesting natural history.

Marge Gibson founded Raptor Education Group, Inc. (REGI) in 1990 along with her husband Don. She has worked with wildlife for over 30 years beginning with raptors as a field biologist and has worked with many high profile field projects including the California Condor Recovery Team and the Bald Eagle Capture and Health Assessment Program in Valdez, Alaska following the Valdez Oil Spill where she was team

captain. In addition, Marge teaches wildlife rehabilitation internationally.

In the beginning, REGI was focused on public education programs and supporting field research on avian species. While specializing in large raptors and swans, all avian species are accepted for rehabilitation at the center. Since its beginning, thousands of raptors and other avian species have been patients at the wildlife center. REGI averages 500 new patients annually and conducts up to 200 educational programs.

November 16 -- Highway Cleanup. Meet at 9 a.m. at the Dresbach Information Center Parking Lot on I-90. We'll pick-up a two-mile stretch of I-90 and Hwy. 61 from Dresbach to Dakota, Minnesota. Safety Vests and trash bags are provided by the Minnesota DOT. Pick up takes about 2 1/2 hours. Wear sturdy shoes and work gloves. For those interested, we'll plan on meeting at Corky's Restaurant in La Crescent afterwards for lunch.

## **Birders welcome at new Onalaska preserve**

Area birders will have new territory to hike thanks to a land purchase by Mississippi Valley Conservancy as part of a partnership with the City of Onalaska. Onalaska's Savannah Oaks nature preserve is a 51-acre property in Greens Coulee.

The land is managed as natural habitat as part of the larger city Greenway Project with a connection to the Greens Coulee Park bluff. Hiking and other non-motorized use such as cross country skiing and bird watching are encouraged.

MVC will own and manage the property for several years and then transfer it to the city with a conservation easement that will restrict some uses and all development, according to Tim Jacobson, MVC executive director. "A goal of the preserve is to serve the needs of the public to the greatest extent possible while protecting natural resources."

Jason Gilman, Onalaska's Land Use and Development Director, called the

Savannah Oaks project an important addition to the Onalaska Central Greenway System. The Greenway Plan, adopted in 2000, laid out a citywide system of interconnected parks and open space. Savannah Oaks along with Green Coulee Community Park to the south preserves a famed ridgeline peak from Hamlin Garland's "Son of the Middle Border" book.

George Howe, MVC conservation director, said, "The land includes rare natural communities such as dry bluff prairie and globally imperiled oak savannah." MVC found the largest population identified in this part of the state of a rare prairie plant called "death camas" in the lily family, as well as the beautiful yellow lady's slipper orchid.

To reach to trailhead, drive into Greens Coulee on Greens Coulee Road. Continue past Clearwater Farm, turn right on Clifford Drive. Trailhead kiosk is at the end of Clifford Drive.

Watch the November/December newsletter for details on the following:

November 17 - Kevin Kenow :

Update on Loon Research

December - Christmas Bird count.  
(date to be announced)

### **MVC events**

Sept. 11 -- The Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration will host a stargazing hike from 6 to 9 p.m. Sept. 11 at Villa St. Joseph located on St. Joseph Ridge.

The event is part of the Mississippi Valley Conservancy's Linked to the Land series. FSPA is a sponsoring partner of the MVC "to assist with the protection of Coulee Region Lands," according to the FSPA web page.

Participants will walk St. Joseph Ridge at sunset while waiting for the stars to shine. Telescopes will be available courtesy of the La Crosse Area Astronomical Society.

To drive to the event, take State Road (Hwy 33) east out of La Crosse for approximately 7.5 miles. Go through St. Joseph and the villa is on the left just as you leave town.

FSPA Ecological Advocate Sister Lucy Slinger has worked with MVC staff to develop a long range sustainability land management plan for the Franciscan Sisters' 200-plus acres of bluff woods and crop land where the stargazing event will be held.

Sister Lucy says, "By partnering with Mississippi Valley Conservancy, we can identify the breadth of biological and geological resources that exist on FSPA's land. Such expert guidance in decision making and plan implementation ensures that we protect the treasures that exist on St. Joseph's Ridge and all FSPA lands, including properties in Iowa, Northern Wisconsin and Washington where FSPA spirituality centers are located."

**Oct. 7** -- MVC annual banquet at the Radisson Hotel. Social hour begins at 6 p.m. Silent auction, speakers, awards, reports on progress in land conservation. Call 784-3606 to register.

# FWS explains vast green carpets on Mississippi

## News from the Upper Miss National Wildlife Refuge

The most common question heard on the Mississippi River this summer from Wabasha to Prairie du Chien has been “What is the cause of all the ‘weeds’ on the river?” During July, huge mats of filamentous algae and duckweed formed on top of aquatic plant beds in main channel borders and backwaters of the Mississippi River. It was a widespread natural occurrence that made boating, fishing, and other recreational activities in the affected areas difficult. In mid August, large quantities of this plant material washed downriver as a result of a quick and substantial rise in water levels, causing a different array of problems.

“The causes for the large mats are many, including clear water, high nutrients, periods of calm weather, low current, warm water and other factors,” said John Sullivan, Water Quality Specialist -

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. “Of these factors, water clarity was likely the most important.”

This summer’s scenario likely began with the high water clarity on the river last summer, which provided a boost to the development of new plants this spring. Water clarity allows light to reach the bottom, which is necessary for the growth of aquatic plants. This was followed by very good light penetration in May and early June. “Light penetration monitoring at locks and dams near Genoa and Lynxville indicated the highest values in late spring and early summer since we started checking in 1988,” said Sullivan. The clear water enabled aquatic plants to flourish.

Sullivan believes that the sizeable zebra mussel population that exists in the river was a large factor in the high water clarity values found in May. Zebra mussels in large numbers have the ability to

make the river water clearer because an adult zebra mussel can filter a liter of water per day, siphoning out all the small particles they encounter. Water clearing by zebra mussels in the mid 1990s was a contributing factor in the recovery of the aquatic plant beds from the scarcity which existed in the early 1990s.

The river level peaked about May 22 in Pool 8 and then receded until mid June, during which time algae and duckweeds grew in a lush manner. Another rise in water levels occurred at that time due to heavy rains, which floated filamentous algae and duckweeds loose, moving them downstream in the current where they accumulated in the quieter water in the lower part of the pools.

The water gradually receded through July and algae and duckweeds grew vigorously in the quiet conditions provided by the extensive beds of aquatic plants that had reached the waters surface in early June. Periods of calm winds, hot weather and an ample supply of nutrients fueled the growth of algae and duckweeds into the green carpet that was so apparent in late July and early August.

Recently the river level rose to the point where the aquatic plants in backwaters and the main channel border were uprooted by the increased current in the river. “Even clumps of emergent plants that grow on the waters edge such as arrowhead were observed moving downriver,” reported Jim Nissen, La Crosse District Manager of the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge. “There was just a tremendous amount of underwater vegetation, duckweed, and arrowhead plants on the move downriver which caused problems for facilities such as the water intake at the Genoa plant for Dairyland Power, and machinery used for the island construction in lower Pool 8.”

Unfortunately, there are no quick and easy answers. The rooted vegetation will be with us until fall, when it dies back. Then the current will move it downstream again. Typically this can continue until late September or early October.

“I don’t expect any major change in

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## Cardinal red not all it’s cracked up to be

Newswise — Normally, the brilliant red of a male cardinal signals to females that he is a high-quality mate. But that may not be true of cardinals living in urban areas, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that the bright red feather coloration of male northern cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) was less related to body condition for birds living in urban forests than it is for those in rural forests. In other words, even cardinals in relatively poor condition may appear bright red in urban areas.

“We found that the relationship between brightness and body condition was stronger in more rural landscapes

than it was in urban areas,” said Amanda Rodewald, co-author of the study and professor of wildlife ecology at Ohio State University’s School of Environment and Natural Resources. “That means urbanization has the potential to disrupt cues that birds have long used to assess quality and choose mates.”

In cardinals, as in some other birds, feather coloration is related to their diet. Diets high in carotenoids – pigments found in some fruits and other parts of plants – lead to brighter feather colors.

Previous studies indicate that forests within urban areas have nearly three times the amount of fruit and nearby bird feeders than exist in rural areas.

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who really enjoys sharing his passion with others, those were really sweet words to my ears. They made my summer and made my time spent preparing for those events worth all of my effort.

Now, with the days growing shorter and the peak of the fall warbler migration under way, it is time to take advantage of nature’s bounty. I urge you to

make whatever excuses are necessary and get out and enjoy the last few days of summer. Make sure you take a good, long look at the birds, butterflies, and dragonflies that you see. It will be fall and winter before you know it and we will need those memories while we impatiently wait for their return in the spring.



Coulee Region Audubon Society,  
P.O Box 2573  
La Crosse, WI 54602

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the foreseeable future,” Sullivan said. “If we see a crash in zebra mussels and this is followed by a spring with high flow in the river with turbid or muddy water,

perhaps the vegetation will reset to a lower level due to the reduced water clarity.” A reduced amount of the plants that

grow below the water’s surface will result in less algae and duckweed as the plants provide a stable place to grow.

## **Contacts**

### **PRESIDENT**

Dan Jackson  
DanielEJackson@earthlink.net  
608-483-2271

### **BOARD MEMBER**

Janice Hatt  
608-498-1191  
wooliesrus@charter.net

### **VICE PRESIDENT**

SueFletcher  
jiren@centurytel.net

### **BOARD MEMBER**

Kurt Brownell  
Kurt.A.Brownell@mvp02.usace.amymil  
608-269-6124

### **TREASURER**

Mary Sullivan  
608-785-7095  
marysullivan@hotmail.com

### **NEWSLETTER EDITORS**

Dave and Gretchen Skoloda  
608-781-7502  
dskoloda@earthlink.net or  
gskol@earthlink.net

### **SECRETARY**

Mark Webster  
608-787-6398  
mvweb@charter.net

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