

Birds of the Campus Natural Areas by Season

by Roma Lenehan

The Campus Natural Areas (CNA) have long been known for their birds. Early in Madison's history, people hunted at University Bay. Subsequently the CNA was used for education, research and bird watching.

Bird populations change through the seasons. Spring and fall are the most diverse periods. The bird populations of the CNA have changed through the years, reflecting the modifications of the landscape from "wilderness" to agriculture to urban natural area and the variations in the bird populations of Wisconsin.

Below is a seasonal selection of the birds that are seen in the CNA along with some history.

Winter

Winter has the lowest diversity and the least predictable species composition. In some winters the CNA hosts winter finches, northern owls, and late migrants. Some interesting birds also occur regularly.

- Tundra Swan – Tundra Swans usually appear in late fall after the boats leave and stay until the lake freezes over. In the recent warm winters there have been several hundred swans during the holidays. In early January, 2005, 269 swans were observed in University Bay. They may also visit the CNA for short periods earlier in the fall and in the spring.
- Bald Eagle – Bald Eagles can be seen in any month in the CNA, although they are more common in late fall, winter, and early spring when there is open water. They are most often seen in the dead trees at the base of the Biocore Prairie and on Frautschi Point. Four Eagles visited Frautschi Point for several weeks this past December. In the nineteenth century Bald Eagles nested in southern Wisconsin and were regularly reported at Eagle Heights. They declined through the 1950s and 1960s, becoming endangered, because DDT lowered their reproductive success. Subsequently the Eagle population has increased greatly. In 2004, for the first time in years, Eagles again nested in the Madison area.
- Great Horned Owl – The Great Horned Owl is a year around resident, most frequently seen roosting during the daylight at Eagle Heights Woods, Frautschi Point and Picnic Point or hunting during the twilight in the gardens or at the Class of 1918 Marsh. The Owls are most obvious during the winter, when they court, build nests, and lay eggs. They can often be found by following the excited crow mobs (crows also mob hawks) and by hearing their 4 to 8 deep "hoos" in the early morning or late evening. In 1944 Aldo Leopold noted the importance of these Owls to field ecology education and their reliance on mature trees.
- Screech Owl – Another year around resident, the Screech Owl, is most visible in winter when it suns in holes in trees. Multiple pairs of this small Owl live in the CNA, but they can easily be overlooked. Surprisingly, I have never heard their eerie call in the CNA.

Spring

Spring is the most popular time to observe birds in the CNA. Waterfowl diversity peaks as the ice breaks up in University Bay. Song bird diversity peaks in May.

- Common Loon – The Loon has become a symbol of northern wilderness, but it can be seen and heard (more often on foggy or cloudy days) in the spring and fall on Lake Mendota. A few spend the summer on the lake.
- White Pelican – Recently the spectacular White Pelican has soared over the CNA in May. After almost totally disappearing from Wisconsin, the Pelican now nests in Horicon Marsh and Green Bay and summers along the Mississippi River.
- Osprey – Osprey can be found during migration. In recent years, since they have nested in the Madison area, they can also be found fishing in the late summer. Like the Bald Eagle, the Osprey has increased significantly since the banning of DDT.
- Sandhill Cranes – In recent years a Crane pair has nested, occupying University Bay and the Class of 1918 Marsh in different years. The Cranes are most visible feeding near the Class of 1918 Marsh and in the soybean fields (summer). The Sandhill Crane has made a dramatic recovery in Wisconsin, after almost disappearing in the 1940s.
- Warblers – Picnic Point is perhaps best known for the May (1-20) visit of the warblers. These tiny, brilliant, hyperactive birds arrive in waves with the southern winds. Usually 29 species of warblers are seen annually and often someone finds some of the rarer species, especially if there is a good fallout. Most of these warblers also visit in fall (when they are easiest to see at Frautschi Point, the Picnic Point Marsh, and the open areas and gardens), but they are "confusing fall warblers" and are harder to see because of the leaves.
- Neotropical Migrants – In addition to Warblers, in May and September the CNA hosts numerous birds that winter in the tropics, including flycatchers and thrushes. The abundant Baltimore Orioles and Indigo Buntings are most obvious in the first three weeks of May, but also nest in the CNA. Scarlet Tanagers and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks can be readily found in May.

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