

Fall Bird Migration in the Lakeshore Nature Preserve

by Roma Lenehan

The Lakeshore Nature Preserve, a Wisconsin Important Bird Area, provides opportunities to see a wide variety of birds during the fall bird migration. Although identifying fall migrants can be challenging, at the Preserve you can study the birds throughout the long season and enjoy the beauty of the fall.

Neotropical Songbird Migration

Perhaps the best known birds of the Preserve, these small songbirds migrate south into Latin America. In contrast to the spring, when breeding males have colorful plumage and often sing, most fall migrants, including many of the warblers, Scarlet Tanagers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, and Indigo Buntings, have molted into a duller plumage and seldom sing. Even in species that retain bright plumage, like Baltimore Oriole and Redstart, the duller juvenile and female birds greatly outnumber the bright males. Other species, such as the thrushes, flycatchers and vireos, also offer identification challenges since they seldom sing.

Fall migration begins as early as July, and by mid-August many species are migrating. Preserve songbird diversity usually peaks in September, but some of these birds linger into October, eating berries and seeds as well as insects. Migration is weather dependent.

Most of these birds occupy the woodlands in the spring, but often prefer the open edges of the prairie and gardens in the fall. Many migrating birds land on Frautschi Point, the northernmost point of the Preserve, resulting in good fall bird diversity at Frautschi Point. As in spring, the birds often feed near the lake unless the winds are from the north.

Sparrows

The Eagle Heights Gardens and Biocore Prairie attract multiple sparrow species from late September to early November. Sparrows are challenging, so picking a rare sparrow from the dozens of other sparrows – mostly Chipping, Song, and White-throated – can take patience. The regularly occurring beautiful White-crowned and Fox Sparrows (woodland edges) and Eastern Towhees reward birders' persistence.

Biocore Prairie Bird Observatory

On most nice Saturdays from April through October, Mara McDonald and her volunteers band birds in Biocore Prairie, giving people an opportunity to see some of the confusing sparrows and warblers up close (see www.wisconsinidea.wisc.edu/profiles/McDonald). The banding station has banded over 1800 birds of more than 70 species in its eight years. Visitors are welcome. In spring and fall the banding station has an open house.

Waterfowl and Other Water Birds

University Bay was named a Game Refuge in 1927. In 1944 the University Bay Game Refuge was expanded to 692 acres. From 1946 to 1980 the Wildlife Management Techniques class counted waterfowl in University Bay, tracing the population trends. William Vander Zouwen, summarizing this work in his thesis, noted that waterfowl visitation decreased during this period (Vander Zouwen, W. 1983. *Waterfowl Use and Habitat Changes of a Refuge in Southern Wisconsin: 1947-1980*).

A diverse set of dabbling ducks usually visit the Preserve for prolonged periods in the fall, feeding in the Class of 1918 Marsh and visiting University Bay. The Blue-winged Teal arrive in August. They are followed by Shovelers, Gadwalls and American Wigeons. The number of dabbling ducks, including the resident Mallards and Wood Ducks, can reach several hundred birds. Smaller numbers of Green-winged Teal and occasional Pintails visit most years. The once common Black Ducks only rarely visit. The “best” viewing places for the obscured Marsh are the berms west of the circular parking lot and the Marsh observation platform.

A diverse set of diving ducks and other water birds visit University Bay. The Coots arrive in late August, increasing into October to a peak of hundreds of birds, then decreasing. Common Loons regularly occur from September through November, sometimes gathering in numbers. Pied-billed Grebes are present most of the fall, but less common Horned Grebes visit only for a short time and other grebes are only rarely seen.

The diving ducks used to be common on University Bay. They still regularly visit in bad weather when Picnic Point shelters the Bay and late in the season when boat traffic decreases. The most common diving duck is the Bufflehead. The Bay was once an important feeding area for Canvasbacks, but now they usually visit only briefly. Usually small numbers of Ruddy Ducks, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck and Redheads appear in mid-fall and may linger. After smaller lakes freeze, large numbers of ducks often gather on Lake Mendota, providing the best viewing of the season. The large rafts of diving ducks are dominated by Common Mergansers and Goldeneyes. Often Tundra Swans visit the Bay late in the season and may stay until it freezes.

Fall Visits

Almost any bird that regularly visits Wisconsin can be found in the Preserve, including hawks, shorebirds, terns, and wading birds. (For more information, see waa.uwalumni.com/lakeshorepreserve/birdoverview.html). Enjoy the fall migration, which begins in July and continues until the lake freezes!