

MAY 2020 NEWSLETTER



REASONS TO PARTY

Let's celebrate! This is where you might say, "It's official. Matt has lost it." To be clear, the pandemic demands our serious, clearheaded, and unwavering attention. But there is no yin without yang (and vice versa) and this issue of our quarterly newsletter is chock full of good reasons to break out the party favors. Heck, the great egrets, blue jays, and great blue heron in the photo above got the memo. I hope you enjoy reading about all the new and continued ways we are bringing birds and nature into people's lives.

Madison Audubon also has a lot to celebrate about the future. Thanks to a dedicated board, talented staff, amazing volunteers and a passionate membership, we continue to grow by leaps and bounds

into a more professional, strategic, and effective organization. For example, we're a nationally accredited land trust with a highly unique and meaningful youth education program, we offer a variety of engaging classes, citizen science projects, and experiences, and own and manage the third most acreage (and growing!) of any Audubon chapter. All of this is worth celebrating and worth sustaining. So, while we're excited about where we are, we're even more thrilled about where we are going. Thanks to your support, the stage is set for bigger and better things to come.

On that note, I am delighted to welcome Becky Abel to the Madison Audubon flock as our new director of philanthropy. Alongside our team and members, Becky will help build and execute a variety of fundraising strategies to ensure Madison Audubon's financial sustainability into the future. Becky brings decades of experience in nonprofits and natural resource conservation, having served respected organizations like the International Crane Foundation, Wisconsin Wetlands Association, and The Nature Conservancy. Becky's experience, enthusiasm, creativity, and genuine interest in people make

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REASONS TO PARTY, continued

her uniquely suited to help lead Madison Audubon toward a strong future. She's also an avid birdwatcher and has fascinating field experience with all sorts of birds including trumpeter swans and Puerto Rican parrots.

Feel free reach out to Becky (babel@madisonaudubon.org) to

welcome her, say hello, or tell her what great birds you're seeing!

Matt Reetz, executive director
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RETURN OF THE HUMMERS

Fun tidbits about the ruby-throated hummingbird:

- It has the fewest number of feathers of any bird, with 940 feathers
- It also has one of the highest density of feathers for any bird
- A ruby-throated hummingbird beats its wings 55 times per second
- Each hummingbird egg is smaller than a jelly bean
- There are 325+ species of hummingbirds throughout the world
- Hummingbirds can fly 25-30 miles per hour



WAYS TO ENJOY

- Feed: 1 part sugar, 4 parts boiled water. No food coloring, refresh often
- Watch: Check out a nestcam: madisonaudubon.org/hbird
- Draw: 5 min. video tutorial: madisonaudubon.org/sketch
- Support: Support hummers and many other byrs by visiting madisonaudubon.org/donate



BURNING IS GONE WITH THE WIND

One of the great reassurances this spring, as I hope many of you have found during the current pandemic, is the continued rhythm of the natural world. In the third week of March, just as Wisconsinites were hunkering down, swamp sparrows returned to Faville Grove Sanctuary, perhaps to call Faville Marsh home, or perhaps to continue north—their sole concern to stake a territory on an open bog or shrubby sedge meadow.

At Faville Grove, while spring remains steadfast, our usual spring routine of prescribed burning was almost entirely shut down early by a county-wide burning ban through April (see post-script on page four). As a result, this change to our restoration work and the landscape as a result provides an interesting lens for observing the natural environment. What

consequences might we see in the coming months?

The most apparent result of the absence of fire will be fewer blooming prairie wildflowers. We have collected flowering data at Faville Grove and found that, in an average square meter of prairie, 73 percent of the species will flower in burned prairie versus 53 percent in unburned. Decreased flowering, together with poorer seed set, will increase the difficulty of finding seeds needed to establish new prairies this fall. And as you may remember, we have three new parcels, two of which need restoration.

Burns also alter the structure of grasslands by removing dead plant material, a change to which many birds are sensitive.

BURNING IS GONE, continued

The state-threatened Henslow's sparrow, for example, breeds almost exclusively in unburned prairie, and we hope to see many of these sparrows across the landscape this summer.

Sedge wrens also love unburned lowland prairie. In point counts conducted in 2019, we saw that sedge wrens rarely occurred in burned prairie at Faville Grove, while they thrived in unburned patches. We might see an abundance of sedge wrens this summer.

On the other hand, common yellowthroats seem to prefer burned prairie, and our data show that burned prairie averaged about three yellowthroats compared to two in unburned patches. We might notice a smaller population of yellowthroats this summer.

The cascading effects of a lack of fire are harder to predict but may be interesting to observe. The leftover thatch from prairie grasses could encourage a population explosion of mice and voles. Might we see multiple pairs of breeding northern harriers this summer as a result of their favorite prey source increasing?

Now, consider this series of food web ponderings—stay with me here: Dominant grasses like Indian grass and big bluestem could increase in the absence of fire. In turn, we may see grasshopper abundance increase since grasses are their favorite menu item. And one step further, grasshoppers are preyed on by spiders, which will make the abundance of arachnids an interesting development to watch. With more

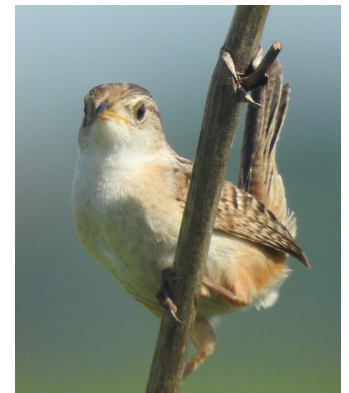
spiders, grasshoppers will likely feed more on forb species due to their complex foliage, which hides grasshoppers from spiders. As a result, forb species like Canada goldenrod that tend to dominate a prairie, but are frequently grazed by grasshoppers, can become less abundant and can open a niche for a higher diversity of plants.

As always, the complexities of the natural world provide endless drama and intrigue, and the study and observation of nature can be a welcome distraction during these difficult times.

Drew Harry, land steward
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Post-script:

The Jefferson County burn ban was lifted on May 1, and since then, the Faville Grove team—with the help of socially-distanced volunteers—has burned about 200 acres. These burns occurred later in the spring than in a typical year, but still accomplished our goals of garlic mustard and brush control, and increasing seed set. It will be interesting to study the effects of these oddly timed burns in addition to the unburned prairies.





SPRING ACTIVITIES AT GOOSE POND

Even when you live at a rural wildlife sanctuary, it is surprising how many things change when social distancing comes into practice! We have been working to complete much-needed restoration work while not putting our staff or volunteers at risk and also observing a DNR-imposed ban on burning that affected Columbia County.

However, lots of visitors have still been able to visit Goose Pond and the surrounding hundreds of acres of protected land to enjoy spring migration. Abnormally high water levels continue to provide excellent habitat for ducks and other birds. As of mid-April, we've seen five species of geese and 20 species of ducks. Notable sightings include 2,200 white-fronted geese (a record, seen by Tom and Wendy Schultz), 1,800 tundra swans (Mark and Sue), 305 cackling geese (Steve Theissen), 380 canvasback (Cari Sprague), 102 northern shovelers, 85 ruddy ducks,

350 Bonaparte's gulls (Galen Hasler), four northern harriers (JD Arnston), and three yellow-headed blackbirds at the Prairie Lane feeders.

The Kestrel and Songbird Nest Box Monitoring programs are both underway this spring. Brand Smith coordinates 38 volunteers monitoring 178 kestrel nest boxes in eight counties—and safely, of course. Pat Ready found a very early incubating female on March 27, and volunteers found many more kestrels laying eggs and incubating in mid-April. We still hope to band kestrel young in June with our partners at Central Wisconsin Kestrel Research program and assistance from volunteers. In addition, eight volunteers are monitoring 115 tree swallow nest boxes on nine different trails at Goose Pond.

While all of this excitement is around incoming birds, there is one departing

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SPRING ACTIVITIES, continued

bird we've kept an an eye on, too. In January, we outfitted Columbia, the snowy owl, with a GPS unit that uses cell phone towers to transmit location data. Columbia was last heard from on her way back to the Arctic in Cando, North Dakota, about 30 miles south of the Canada border. We wish her a nice summer and hope she calls back next winter.

Goose Pond will soon have its own bird tracking tower, in construction now and to be erected once the Safer at Home order is lifted. This tower, part of the Motus network (motus.org/faq), will be one of 873 radio telemetry receiver stations across the world that collects data with a focus on migrating birds. It's a great research project and we are grateful to Don Schmidt, who is doing the construction, and our wonderful donors for their support.

Of course, restoration is always in season at Goose Pond. UW Farms Prairie is a prairie remnant with high quality species like downy gentian, shooting star, and wood lily. On the hill overlooking Goose Pond is our only oak savanna. Both sites were heavily invaded by non-native shrubs. We've

made significant progress in removing them, and our goal is to have all shrub removal work done by June.

The Safer at Home order has allowed us to also work on the 2019 Annual Management, Research and Education Report, writing Friday Feathered Features, compiling a list of our Friday Feathered Features from 2013 to present, producing monthly Goose Pond Updates, and revising our informational signs to have them reprinted. We are also working on updating our five-year management plans for Goose Pond, Erstad Prairie, and Otsego Marsh.

There is always something to do at Goose Pond Sanctuary and we are thankful for your support that allows us to do it. Stay well and we hope to see you at Goose Pond this summer.

Mark Martin and Sue Foote-Martin,
resident managers

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Graham Steinhauer, land steward
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SAFER AND FUNNER AT HOME



This spring has been wildly different than we all expected, but a few things remain the same: birds are still singing, flowers are still blooming, and Madison Audubon is still teaching kids about nature.

Our education programming has switched from in-person to online. We get less hugs and high-fives from kids, but just as many smiles. Our new webpage “Safer and Funner at Home” has it all—activities and games for staying inside, getting outside, and running out some energy. All of these lessons are great for one kid or the whole family, and all of them will help you connect with nature while keeping a safe distance.

Live Online Lessons

I have been having SO much fun teaching live online lessons. All of these lessons are available on our website if you missed them live. You can join me in learning about mammal furs, bird adaptations, skulls, and even meet our tiger salamander. Do bird yoga with me, or learn how to start a nature journal. We'll be adding more lessons throughout the spring, so check our

“Special Events” page for the schedule. Send us an email at education@madisonaudubon.org if you have a lesson suggestion.

Supporting Teachers

Teachers are making monumental transitions this year. Usually, spring is the sweet spot in a classroom: kids understand the routines, they're in the learning groove, and aren't yet getting antsy for summer. This year, teachers have had to pivot and teach in an entirely new way. We're helping teachers create fun and easy lessons to continue outdoor learning at home—even if parents are working and kids are mostly solo.

My favorite so far has been “Find, Follow, and Share a Bug.” Kids find a bug inside or outside, follow it for five minutes, and then share the bug's activities with a friend or adult. Kids can write and draw about the bug or video chat with someone to share. Try it at home!

Connecting with Classrooms

The sweetest part about this spring has

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SAFER AND FUNNER, continued

been connecting with the kids we used to see in person. I have regular video chats with classrooms from Muir, Lincoln, and Midvale Elementary Schools. We talk about the nature we've been seeing, share art projects, and make silly faces at each other. But most importantly, we let those kids know that we care.

We'll be back to teaching in person as soon as we're able. But until then we'll use every tool we have to keep connecting with kids!

Carolyn Byers, education director
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P.S. Explore the Safer and Funner at Home webpage:
madisonaudubon.org/at-home

Thank you to our major education program donors:



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BIRD COLLISION CORPS UPDATE

Our BCC volunteers, partners, and we had big plans for this spring's program to study bird-window collisions on the UW-Madison and American Family Insurance campuses, which were both canceled due to COVID-19. We will pick the program up again in the fall. Thank you to all of our volunteers!

Learn more about BCC at madisonaudubon.org/bcc

BOARD CANDIDATES APPROVED

Thanks to all of you who voted in our spring 2020 election of board members. The four individuals who were up for renewal (Galen Hasler, Joanne Jones, David Rihn, and John Shillinglaw) were all successfully reinstated. We are grateful to them for their time and energy, and to you for helping this important part of our organization's bylaws be fulfilled. Cheers to the next year!

BIRDING THAT GIVES BACK

I never expected that an eagle nest would be what held me together during a pandemic. When I signed up for the Bald Eagle Nest Watch program back in January, I was just thrilled at the chance to monitor a nest and learn about bald eagles. I could not have predicted just how valuable of an experience it would become.

I help monitor a nest on a marsh in Dane County with two other sets of volunteers. We take turns visiting the nest throughout the week, and over the past three months we've collected a lot of data. When I'm out on the marsh, I keep track of the eagles' behaviors and take note of potential disturbances. I've watched them painstakingly add sticks to their nest, arranging them just so. I've watched them vocalize before trading places as they incubate their eggs, pausing first to gently roll the eggs so they warm evenly. I've watched them hunt and return with food for their new, young hatchlings.



Throughout this program, not only have I gotten to know this eagle family, but I've also gotten to know the landscape they rely on. I've seen the marsh transform through the seasons. I can tell you the precise date sandhill cranes, red-winged blackbirds, and Wilson's snipe returned. Or when the ice melted. Or the frogs started singing. Spending an hour each week observing the nest—standing alone with the magical world of the marsh around me—has given me hope, joy, and solace in a time when our worlds have been shaken.

Citizen science programs like Madison Audubon's Bald Eagle Nest Watch are opportunities to give back, to let your observations be part of research that strives to protect birds and the environments they depend on. But you may find, like I have, that you get back more than you give. You'll walk away with more knowledge and more joy than you've ever imagined.

Caitlyn Schuchhardt, BENW volunteer and Communications & Outreach Assistant
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Learn more about the Bald Eagle Nest Watch program at
madisonaudubon.org/benw

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