

madison
AUDUBON
 society

NEWSLETTER OF THE MADISON AUDUBON SOCIETY

SUMMER 2015

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The Ballad of the Bobolink

There's a lot to love about a bobolink. Its eye-catching plumage gives the male the surreal appearance that he has donned a stylish blond wig and a backwards tuxedo. In the spring and summer, the bobolink lends a unique, infectious and bubbling song to the meadows and grasslands where it breeds. Indeed, its charming nesting habits were immortalized by William Cullen Bryant in his lyrical poem "Robert of Lincoln." Yes, there is much to love about this incredible bird. But the bobolink's bright plumage and cheerful song belie a life of hardship. In short, it ain't easy being a bobolink.

The bobolink's scientific name is *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*, or "long-clawed rice-eater," an accurate description of its proclivity for grains. This food preference has made the bobolink a source of scorn where it winters in the pampas of South America. There, swarms of hundreds of thousands of birds may gather in agricultural fields, voraciously destroying rice crops. Local farmers protecting their livelihood have resorted to shooting and trapping, or poisoning birds with a highly toxic organophosphate pesticide. As a result, bobolink populations have halved in the last four decades. Life on the wintering grounds can be a struggle.

If a bobolink is lucky enough to successfully navigate these perils, it then faces one of the world's longest songbird migrations, an astounding 10,000-kilometer trek. One-way. And let me tell you, migration is no picnic. During migration, the words to (literally) live by are fuel, efficiency, and navigation. First, think of the vast amount of fuel needed to make that kind of a trip. Bobolinks preparing for migration are not shy about eating, packing on as much as 50 percent more weight in fat reserves. As they migrate, bobolink flocks follow consistent routes so that they can hope to find enough safe habitats along the way to roost, rest and refuel. To accomplish this feat, they first use a remarkable internal compass calibrated by the earth's magnetic fields to point them in the right direction and then the location of stars as their daily GPS. At times they must feed after dark on bright nights to build enough fat



Photo by Rich Armstrong

to haul their tiny bodies across the vast Gulf of Mexico (fingers crossed that the weather cooperates). Even if all goes according to plan, migration is sometimes just too tough and millions of birds die every year along their route. It ain't easy being a bobolink.

Spring has sprung in Wisconsin and the bobolinks are arriving. They have defied the odds to return to the places of their birth. But summer is no vacation for the bobolink either. There is serious business to attend to with defending territories, making nests, and raising a bobolink family. But, after so many hardships, a group of bobolinks finally catches a break! They have returned again to a refuge, a safe haven, a sanctuary. And it abounds with native grasses, wildflowers, and everything needed to survive and reproduce. That is thanks to you. You have helped Madison Audubon protect hundreds of acres of crucial habitat for bobolinks and many other species. With so much of the deck stacked against them throughout the year, protected natural places are vital to bobolinks' continued survival. No, it ain't easy being a bobolink, but you have helped welcome Robert of Lincoln home one more time.

Matt

Matt Reetz, executive director
 mreetz@madisonaudubon.org

Our mission is to protect and improve habitat for birds and other wildlife through land acquisition and management, education and advocacy.

A snowy owl saga: Crowdfunded transmitter gives new insight on an arctic visitor's movements at Goose Pond Sanctuary

When the first snowy owl of the 2014–15 season was spotted at Goose Pond, no one could predict the flurry of activity that was to come. Not only was this season another record-setting winter for Wisconsin owls, but one local bird's journey has provided new data about relocated snowy owls.

When resident sanctuary managers Mark Martin and Sue Foote-Martin called the Madison Audubon offices to inform us of the arrival of snowies near Goose Pond on Dec. 14, they also planted the seed for an ambitious idea: a Madison Audubon-led fundraiser for an expensive snowy owl GPS transmitter. The inspiration came from Project SNOWstorm, a research initiative that started as a result of the historic 2013–14 irruption year. Project SNOWstorm works to place high-tech transmitters on the backs of wintering snowy owls in the United States. The owls' landscape-level movements to gain new understandings of how these birds fit into the ecosystem at-large, all the while providing online maps of the owls' movements that are accessible to any bird enthusiast with an internet connection.

MAS staff immediately began an online campaign to raise funds for the \$3,000 transmitter. Within three weeks, local community members and bird enthusiasts from as far away as the East Coast had fully funded the 1.5 ounce solar-powered transmitter; the next step was to find it an owner!

Noted Wisconsin raptor biologist Gene Jacobs worked as a liaison between Project SNOWstorm and Madison Audubon. With the transmitter standing by, Jacobs made the journey to Goose Pond. Along with Madison Audubon staff and volunteers, he immediately set to work to capture an owl. Many attempts later, the owls were proving wary of the traps. This season's irruption featured more mature birds than the 2013–14 influx, which may have contributed to the challenging trapping dynamics experienced at Goose Pond. "Adult owls," said Jacobs, "are difficult to trap compared to the mostly immature owls from last year's irruption."

After several attempts trapping and no owl, Jacobs received a serendipitous phone call. Airport managers at the Central Wisconsin Airport near Mosinee were concerned about five snowy owls who had staked their winter claims near busy runways, and were looking to Jacobs for help. A plan was set in motion to trap an airport owl and relocate the bird to Goose Pond.

Thursday, Feb. 12 proved to be a lucky day for Jacobs and MAS staff. After many hours of watching and waiting at the airport, they finally trapped an adult male snowy owl just after sunset. As per Project SNOWstorm requirements, the owl was named after a location near its release site: Goose Pond. MAS staff and owl enthusiasts have taken to calling the owl "Goose" for short.

Since his release on Feb. 13, Goose never returned to the flight path of busy runways. Instead, he took up residence near his release site, on lands adjacent to Goose Pond Sanctuary that are owned and managed by the UW Arlington Agricultural Research Station. Goose the owl and the story of his unique journey gained notoriety outside of the MAS community: He was featured in a National Audubon online magazine piece, the Isthmus, the Portage Daily Register, Wisconsin Outdoor News, and the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. A majestic, slow-motion video of his release has been viewed over 330,000 times on National Audubon's Facebook page.

Owl enthusiasts and transmitter donors have been able to track Goose's movements on a nearly weekly basis thanks to email updates from MAS staff and data on the Project SNOWstorm website. Some lucky observers have even captured photos of him soaring over the open fields, unhindered by the transmitter on his back, looking for his next meal.

With the onset of spring, Goose's departure from the area was inevitable. The most current transmitter data we have tells us that he took a brief tour of the southwestern part of the state. We're waiting to see where his travels take him next, and if he'll return south again next winter.



Mark Martin releases Project SNOWstorm tagged snowy owl "Goose Pond" on Feb. 13. Owl enthusiasts and MAS members donated \$3,000 to fund the solar-powered GPS transmitter to help research these winter visitors. *Photo by Arlene Koziol*



There's more to the story of Goose the Snowy Owl. Visit our website to get all of the details and find out what we're learning from his transmitter data:

madisonaudubon.org/snowy-owls

MAS welcomes first conservation education intern

Springtime means the return of sandhill crane calls rattling overhead, new sprays of color appearing in gardens overnight, and...non-stop conservation education programming at Madison Audubon Society!

Thanks to dedicated volunteers, MAS has continued to expand the reach of our youth education programs.

This spring, we also welcome our first ever education intern. Aubrey Voelker is a senior at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, graduating this spring with a double major in zoology and environmental studies.

Last year, Aubrey helped Madison Audubon jumpstart our pilot programs with AmeriCorps *Partners for After*

School Success (PASS) for Vera Court Neighborhood Center's middle school program. She loved volunteering with Madison Audubon so much that she returned this spring as an intern to create and lead an after-school program for the elementary school group at Vera Court.

The overall goal of Aubrey's new curriculum—called *Everything Has a Purpose*—is to demonstrate the special role individual animals play within an ecosystem as a whole. Through hands-on activities and outdoor exploration, Vera Court elementary students are learning about a range of topics, including the complexity of food webs and nocturnal versus diurnal wildlife in Wisconsin. Thank you, Aubrey, for your terrific contributions towards Madison Audubon's education programming!

BELOW: Madison Audubon education intern Aubrey Voelker introduces students at Vera Court Neighborhood Center to J.J., a red-eared slider turtle, during one of MAS's after-school education programs.

Photo by Emily Meier

“Being an education intern for Madison Audubon Society has allowed me to share my passion for wildlife and the environment with others. My favorite part is seeing students absorb everything I teach them, and the enthusiasm that they have for any game or activity planned for that day!”

– Aubrey Voelker



Springing into summer education with Madison Audubon

Summer is right around the corner! The education team is busy prepping new summer-long programs for kids in kindergarten through eighth-grade at the Vera Court Neighborhood Center, Meadowood Center, and Salvation Army of Dane County. Additionally, we are continuing our Conservation Academy in partnership with Operation Fresh Start (OFS), a Dane County non-profit helping disconnected young adults find a path to self-sufficiency. OFS's Conservation Crews assist in local efforts in Dane County with the City of Madison Parks to restore and repair natural spaces. Madison Audubon's hands-on Conservation Academy will introduce crew participants to experts in the field and hands-on skills related to each career, including wildlife ecology, biodiversity, soil science, water quality, and urban forestry.

We are also excited to invite you to our first-annual Summer Trails Festival on Saturday, June 6—which also happens to be National Trails Day! Kick off your summer with us at this outdoor event: take a guided nature hike, meet face-to-face with a variety of different wildlife (including a peregrine falcon!), make a recycled bird feeder, and more. Enjoy a picnic lunch from local Madison food carts and take a photo with everyone's favorite duck baseball mascot, Maynard the Mallard! See the back of your newsletter or visit our website at madisonaudubon.org/trailsfest for more information.

As always, if you're interested in making a difference in the community, consider volunteering at one of our upcoming education programs. We'll need all hands on deck for our busy summer. Please feel free to contact me at any time if you're interested in lending a hand!

Rebecca

Rebecca Ressler, education director
ressl@madisonaudubon.org

Madison Audubon Society's conservation education programming is made possible by a generous grant from the Theda & Tamblin Clark Smith Family Foundation. Additional support for our Conservation Academy program is provided by the Evjue Foundation and the Friends of MacKenzie Center; and for Summer Trails Festival by Madison Metropolitan Sewerage District, the Dane County Environmental Council, and Willy Street Co-op. Thank you!

HIKING, WALKING, SITTING

*You go on a hike
but you take a walk.*

*Hiking requires a purposeful stride.
Walking lets you meander.*

*Hiking will get you in condition.
Walking will change it.*

*Hiking, you've cut trees to make a trail.
Walking, you might take any tack.*

*Hiking you keep track of the time.
Walking you don't care where it goes.*

*Sitting after hiking you rest.
Sitting after walking you travel.*

— R. Virgil Ellis, MAS member

UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS WITH MADISON AUDUBON

Evening at Nine Springs • Friday, May 1 | 6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.
Birding at Wyalusing State Park • Saturday, May 2 | 5 a.m. – 2 p.m.
Wildflowers, Wood Ducks, & Warblers at Goose Pond • Friday, May 8 | 1:30 p.m. – 4 p.m.
Birding Governor's Island • Saturday, May 9 | 6:30 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.
Birding at Baxter's Hollow • Sunday, May 24 | 6:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.
Birding at Devil's Lake • Saturday, May 30 | 6 a.m. – 12 p.m.
Tour Faville Grove West • Saturday, May 30 | 7:30 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.
WSO Honey Creek State Natural Area • Friday, June 12 | 7 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.
Butterflies and Wildflowers at Pleasant Valley Conservancy • Saturday, June 20 | 11 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.
Butterflies of Cherokee Marsh • Saturday, June 27 | 10 a.m. – 12 p.m.
Evening at Black Earth Prairie • Wednesday, July 8 | 6:30 p.m. – 8:30 p.m.
Birds, Butterflies, and Wildflowers of Schurch-Thompson Prairie • Saturday, July 18 | 10 a.m. – 12 p.m.
Prairie Flowers at Goose Pond • Saturday, August 1 | 9:30 a.m. – 12 p.m.

More information about Madison Audubon field trips can be found on our website:
madisonaudubon.org/education/field-trips

Get our monthly events updates sent
straight to your inbox! Sign up online:
madisonaudubon.org/emails

Morning, for its own sake

BY TONY ABATE

The alarm beats its rhythm off my eardrums with overt enthusiasm—a feeling that isn't mutual—as the artificial gleam of my phone burns a message into my retinas: 4:00 a.m. Today is the 2014 Crane Count and I need to get moving.

I welcome the subdued drone of my wheels on the asphalt as I drive to Goose Pond, still recovering from the early onslaught to my senses. I'll need to be sharp if I'm going to record all of my observations for the next few hours.

I pull myself out of the car, grab my binoculars, notebook, and a pen and begin my trek as the cool crisp air brings me back to life. The sanctuary is still sleeping.

Sitting in the grass on the side of the hill just west of the pond I'll have a great view of much of the sanctuary. It's comfortable too. I take out my notebook and wait for my first observations. Though something moves in the water below, the darkness and fog prevent me from discerning any figures. Still, I enjoy the aural exercise.

The sun begins to gently illuminate the atmosphere with a warm glow while the songbirds reply in soft melodies. The pied-billed grebes are cooing, and the mallards begin delicately quacking. Off in the distance I hear the first prehistoric calls. A pair of cranes flies over the east pond, the sunrise designing a backdrop Monet couldn't have dreamt.

My observations would continue for the next two hours, uninterrupted. Until that morning, I had never sat and taken in the sunrise with no other objective. I had never taken the time to watch the world wake.

I remember sitting on the side of that hill wearing the kind of smile that is only born from the purest form of happiness. I watched waves flow through an ocean of grasses and imagined the prairies extending for miles beyond the horizon. The flood of wildlife brought the experience to life.

At the risk of sounding like the hyper-emotional tree-hugging hippie type: I get it. After that morning on the side of the hill, I understand even more fully that I'm working to preserve those mornings for their own sake, and I enjoy doing so. I don't wake up every morning with the drive to save the planet for others to enjoy, or for future generations that may or may not take the time to watch the world wake. I wake up to help preserve something greater than me; something that, for a few hours that morning, I was just lucky enough to witness.

Some days it's hard to trade the warm embrace of my sheets for the inclement weather, but I often remind myself of that morning on the hill. As long as I wake up and help work to preserve it, those mornings will continue to be, whether I'm there or not. It's a labor of love.

Tony has been working at Goose Pond since summer 2013, when he started as a restoration intern. Now the sanctuary's full-time land steward, Tony spends his mornings (and afternoons, and evenings) completing a variety of tasks to maintain Goose Pond and its adjacent properties as well as monitor the flora and fauna of the area. Tony studied applied environmental ethics and ecology, graduating with a degree from UW-Madison in philosophy and environmental studies.



Spring's heartbeat

BY DREW HARRY

In early spring, spring seems so distant. We clear kestrel boxes and fill them with new wood shavings. A nice new bed for the kestrels. No one is home.

Rotund ephemeral ponds form, but sit unoccupied. The full moon on March 5 casts an icy glow. Spring hasn't tipped its hand. The great horned owl revels in the closing stage of its solitude. Rabbits gnaw on our piles of cut brush, trimming whole branches. Does the owl let its prey gorge so that the owl has more food? Will spring arrive?

Brush cutting. Releasing my ears from their padded orange prison, natural sounds drift into my awareness. Bluebirds, first heard March 8. Sandhill cranes March 11. Woodcocks March 16. My ears are cold. But they are filled with the satisfying sound of sandhills.

Spring's synonym, six hundred over Snapper prairie on March 19.

Spring's heartbeat, strung across every swamp, swale, and slough in Wisconsin.

Once pressed to their threshold, now a nuisance to some. Ha! To kill a crane...I wear blaze orange. Not for killing, rather a helmet to protect my head and protection for my ears.

Nicking buckthorn, black locust, boxelder, burning bush, currant, honeysuckle, multiflora rose, mulberry, and sumac before they burgeon in spring's warmth.

I swap orange protective gear for flaming orange fire, to be avoided, preferably flapped and turned to black. The rabbits and pheasants agree. They flee.

The northern harrier offers dissent as he stiffly teeters along the west edge of the ledge lowlands, looking for exposed mice, perhaps.

Burn season. Starting with a drip of fuel, we rewind succession and burn the burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*). The burning bush is a metaphor for its fall foliage; met with literal fire, it dies.

The dried grasses crackle in the fire and singe the earth black, back to the beginning. An early spring burn damages woody vegetation, cycles nutrients,

and promotes herbaceous growth. But our burns are not and should not be all-consuming. Important refuge remains for dormant invertebrates and amphibians, and patches of standing stems provide structure for grassland birds.

The spring setback (snow) doesn't last the day. Mornings greet me with frost and thinly frozen wetlands. One fat goose found the ice too thin and broke through as it walked away from me. I'm not sure if it flew out or waited for the sun to thaw the frozen pond.

The season marches on. A blue spotted salamander dutifully wobbles along North Shore Road. More brush cutting makes more grassland habitat, more *Quercus macrocarpa*, more warmth for reptiles, and more material for that salamander to slide under.

A Lexus speeds past, one of two cars I've seen all day, the other being my own red Tacoma. I run back and find the salamander unharmed. Herptiles (amphibians and reptiles) risk life and limb along our pestilent network of roads. The asphalt and concrete are a conduit for invasive species. Constriction of water in culverts alters hydrologic regimes. Roadside gravel presents itself as suitable habitat: a good nest for the turtle, a migration corridor for the salamander. Iron, plastic, and rubber roar past at 88 feet per second, 2,700 cars per day along Highway 89. Death traps—rough odds for a herptile.

I apply my ear protection and cut more brush. The brilliant blue sky dazzles against a copse of shag-bark hickories recently freed from the dark grip of buckthorn. What is spring? Geese, sandhill cranes, streams, and woodcocks?

Spring waits, accumulates, and disappears. Spring seems unwelcoming, abundant, and then speeds away. Spring is not slow. Spring is awesomely loud: waterfowl, wind, and water. And brush cutting...bring ear protection.

Drew is the new land steward at Faville Grove Sanctuary. He brings a diverse background of experience to Madison Audubon, including conservation work with piping plovers for the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Ojibwe. Drew graduated in 2014 from UW-Madison with a degree in Environmental Studies and English.



Madison Audubon Donors | January – March 2015

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We would like to extend a special thanks to those who donated to Madison Audubon Society during the Community Shares of Wisconsin "Big Share" event on March 3. Thanks to your donations, we received an additional \$2,500 in matching donations and awards.

Gene Roark to be inducted into Conservation Hall of Fame

Madison Audubon Society congratulates Gene Roark for his 2015 induction into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame. Gene was a charter member of MAS in the late 1940s, as well as the editor of the MAS "CAWS" newsletter for many years. Gene co-founded Wisconsin's Nature Conservancy chapter with Hugh Iltis and Joseph Hickey in 1960. Gene is a World War II veteran, father of two children, and studied to be a conservation writer at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Gene's tireless enthusiasm for Wisconsin's natural resources is reflected in his dedication to numerous local conservation groups, including the Natural Heritage Land Trust, Wisconsin Wetlands Association, Gathering Waters, Dane County Conservation League, and Wisconsin Woodland Owners.

Gene was a member of the Madison Audubon Board of Directors when the organization made its first land purchase of Goose Pond in 1967. This acquisition was a new, bold move for the organization at the time. "We had our hearts in our throats when we decided to go ahead with it. Everybody finally just screwed up their courage and went ahead with it," said Gene. We're continually grateful that you did.



LEFT: Monarch butterfly at Goose Pond. Photo by Arlene Koziol

Leave this world a little better with a legacy gift

Each summer, in order to give our hard-working restoration ecology interns a reprieve from weed control and seed-collecting, and to broaden their knowledge of southern Wisconsin's natural communities, we devote several days to visiting nearby natural areas. When it comes to work, though, they're never totally off the hook. We insist on leaving any site we visit a little better than we found it—even if we spend just 10 minutes pulling an isolated patch of sweet-clover or picking up beer cans and fast-food wrappers in the parking area.

By the time we go on our first field trip, our interns have become so accustomed (addicted?) to the sense of fulfillment that comes with giving back to the land that they jump into these tasks eagerly. Madison Audubon members, of course, understand the rewards of volunteering and contributing financially to the important work of ecological restoration and education. But our tasks are so daunting and governmental support has fallen off so drastically, that we would like to ask all members to consider pledging an estate gift of any size and joining the Madison Audubon Legacy Society.

After all, we know what works in conservation, and we know that good conservation takes resources. We know that when we protect and restore habitat, whether it's wetland, grassland or woodland habitat, wildlife responds. We see it every day at Madison Audubon's sanctuaries. Species that are in steep decline elsewhere are increasing where we have restored habitat for them. For years our nonagenarian neighbor, Dave Tillotson, bemoaned the loss of meadowlarks that were a summertime favorite of his boyhood at Faville Grove. Now they're back and singing as sweetly as ever. But our work is not finished. We still need to acquire more land, restore more habitat and maintain that expanded habitat in perpetuity.



We also know that in conservation, nothing succeeds like success. The next generation will take up the good fight only if they learn to love nature through abundant opportunities to play, learn and work outside. Who will provide these opportunities if not us?

By planning an estate gift, large or small, to Madison Audubon Society you can assure that this work will continue after we're gone. Even if you already have a plan in place to support your heirs, joining the Madison Audubon Legacy Society is one more valuable and long-lasting way to support them and, in turn, their heirs. What better way to spread your wealth—to meadowlarks and to all the future generations they will serenade? That's a task we can all jump into eagerly.

Roger Packard, president
rpackard@uwalumni.com

Setting up your Legacy Society gift is simple: just call or email Matt Reetz at (608) 255-2473 or mreetz@madisonaudubon.org

Remembering Betty

Betty Tillotson Hawkins passed away in April, two days before her 96th birthday. A granddaughter of Stoughton Faville, Betty grew up on the Faville homestead. After Aldo Leopold established the Faville Grove Wildlife Experimental Area, Betty met and eventually married Leopold's first graduate student, Art Hawkins. In addition to raising a family, Betty devoted the next 65 years of her life to supporting the adventures and accomplishments of her wildlife biologist husband, whose travels took them north to Canada and south to Mexico, following the migration of the waterfowl whose populations Art studied. The family asks that memorial gifts be made in Betty's name to Madison Audubon's Faville Grove Sanctuary.



TOP: Eastern meadowlark. Photo by Pat Ready
ABOVE: Betty Tillotson & Art Hawkins together at their wedding on Faville Prairie in 1941.

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Renewal

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Our newsletter is printed with soy ink on recycled paper

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FIRST ANNUAL
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SATURDAY, JUNE 6
11 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Join Madison Audubon, Friends of Capital Springs Recreation Area, and Dane County Parks on NATIONAL TRAILS DAY to kick off your summer outdoor adventures!

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See a bird, save a bird: Participate in the Wisconsin Birdathon

The fourth annual **Great Wisconsin Birdathon** kicked off on April 15 and will continue through June 15. You can participate in the Birdathon on behalf of Madison Audubon Society! Donations earned through this interactive fundraiser will go toward important Wisconsin bird conservation initiatives, such as the protection of Kirtland's warblers, hawk and owl monitoring, the Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas, the Bird City Wisconsin program, as well as Madison Audubon education programming and habitat protection.



Visit madisonaudubon.org/birdathon2015 for more information and helpful fundraising tips!