

WINGTIPS



NORTHERN CARDINAL, photographer Barbara Baudot, taken in Oberlin

DECEMBER 2020

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December 2020 Virtual Program

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

Via Zoom

Chimney Swifts:

Nature's Amazing Aerial Insectivores

Judy Semroc



Judy Semroc at work in the field

Judy Semroc's program discusses the natural history, behavior, human benefits, and reasons for the chimney swift's decline. Learn how our help is needed NOW and how you can be a part of the solution. Ms. Semroc plans to spread the word about the plight of chimney swifts and how people can help by erecting swift towers or keeping their chimneys open for nesting.

Judy works in the Natural Areas Division for The Cleveland Museum of Natural History as a Conservation Specialist. She is the founder of Chrysalis in Time, the first Ohio chapter of the North American Butterfly Association (NABA). Judy also serves on the board of the Ohio Bluebird Society. She has co-authored two natural history guides, "Dragonflies & Damselflies of Northeast Ohio" in 2008, and "Goldenrods of Northeast Ohio: A Field Guide to Identification & Natural History" in 2017.

As a former petroleum geologist and science teacher, Judy loves to learn about and share her passion for the natural world through hikes, interpretive programs, and photography.

*If you haven't registered your email address, go to blackriveraudubon.org and do so at the bottom of the first page under *Subscribe*. You will be sent a Zoom link to this and future meetings.*

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT PLANS

Black River Audubon Society will offer modified Christmas Bird Counts (CBC) this year to its members that are in line with National Audubon's guidelines during the pandemic. In short, chapters are to run a "safe and socially distanced CBC *if* local rules allow."

More specifically, this means 1) there will be no in-person compilation gatherings, 2) social distancing and/or masking are **required** at all times in the field, 3) carpooling may only occur with others you know and are familiar with, and 4) CBC activities must comply with all current state, county, and municipal COVID-19 guidelines.

All who wish to take part must first contact the organizer for the area that they wish to count. To take part in the Elyria area count on Saturday, December 19, contact Marty Ackermann at 608-334-2552.

For the Wellington area count on January 2, 2021, contact Paul Sherwood at 419-202-6080. The organizer will assign areas in which to count. Afterward, call the same organizer to provide him with the bird species and totals counted for each.

In the event local pandemic conditions lead to tighter restrictions or bans on gatherings, call the organizer of your count for updates.

DOWNY WOODPECKER

Dryobates pubescens

By Gina Swindell

We are lucky in northeast Ohio to be able to see several species of woodpeckers including red-headed, red-bellied, northern flicker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, pileated, hairy, and downy. The smallest in North America is the downy woodpecker. These little cuties measure 5-7 inches in length. They are also the most commonly seen, as they occupy much of the U.S. and Canada, which can be seen on the included range map from Audubon. Though these birds are not truly migratory, in colder weather the northern most inhabitants may move a bit south and those in higher elevations may move to a lower elevation. They are pretty easy to find since they are here year-round.



Map from Audubon.org

Downies are common backyard birds and are the most likely of the woodpeckers to visit your feeder. Should you try to attract them, they enjoy suet, sunflower seed, peanuts, and dried fruit, but their main diet is insects. When feeding naturally, the male prefers to forage on the smaller branches that trail away from the main trunk and the female prefers the larger branches closer to the main part of the tree. What a neat observation. I can't wait to see if our resident downies follow this pattern.

The challenge for newer birders may be distinguishing them from the hairy woodpecker. It took me a while to acquire this ability since their markings are nearly identical to the untrained eye. Once you have seen a hairy, it is very obvious. Before I had seen one, it was difficult because downies vary greatly in size. But why do hairy woodpeckers and downy woodpeckers look so similar? Are they closely related or is it a form of evolutionary mimicry?

It seems that these look-a-likes are not closely related, and the downy woodpeckers may actually use the intimidation advantage of hairy woodpeckers to scare off competitors. Hairy woodpeckers can be aggressive and a bit grumpy—and a lot of other birds don't like to deal with them. Research suggests that by looking like a hairy, downies can fool other birds and scare them off at feeders. But who don't they fool? You guessed it, they don't fool the hairy woodpeckers, who are quick to show aggression to their "mini-me's." However, there are a few field marks that you can look for if you are questioning your identification.

Look for black spotting on the outside of downies' white tailfeathers, as these marks are absent on the hairy. Also, note their "mustache." This patch of bristles between their beak and eye is said

to be used to keep woodchips out of their nostrils while excavating cavities. I bet all woodpeckers wish they had such a luxurious “stache.” This feature is much more noticeable on the downy than it is on the other woodpeckers in our region. The ratio of the beak to the head differs as well. A downy’s beak is typically less than half of its head length while the hairy’s beak is as long as its head. I learned through research that the hairy has a small black line that extends out over the shoulder that the downy does not have. Finally, an immature male downy has a rusty, rather than red, patch on the back of its head.

Downies are able to breed at about one year of age. They will pair up in the fall and remain monogamous throughout life. They build a nest together in cavities of dead trees or the bottom-side of a dead limb (on a living tree) that is no longer than 7” in length. This can take between 1-3 weeks to excavate. The pair share the duties equally. In addition, both feed the nestlings who may stay close to their parents for several months. Mom and dad work well together, which might explain their ability to mate “until death do them part.”

If you have never seen a downy, be on the lookout and happy birding!

References: forum.americanexpedition.us/downy-woodpecker-facts;
nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/downy-woodpecker; Audubon.org/field-guide/bird/downy-woodpecker; thespruce.com/downy-or-hairy-woodpecker-37=87335; Audubon.org/news/theres-new-theory-why-downy-and-hairy-woodpeckers-look-so-alike.

Christmas Birds in the U.S. and Europe

By Barbara Baudot

As England was rapidly industrializing in the 1840’s, the first post office, called the penny post, was opened to the general public. Shortly thereafter the custom of sending Christmas cards began. In 1843, Sir Henry Cole and the artist John Horsley designed and printed a thousand commercial cards and sold each for a shilling. The image on the card was secular, “emblematic of old English festivity to perpetuate kind recollections between dear friends.” The industry expanded rapidly and by 1860 many more people were engaged in sending cards as the custom spread across Europe and especially in Germany.

Christmas cards appeared in the U.S. around 1845 but only for the elite. Expensive for ordinary people, it took decades before the cards became widely affordable in 1874. It was then that Louis Prang, a German lithographer who immigrated to the U.S. in 1850, began mass producing and selling the cards to the general public. Prang is called the “Father of the American Christmas Card.”

By the 1880’s Christmas cards were a common part of the holiday season in the U.S. as well as Europe. Aside from the depiction of Christmas festivities, early cards generally featured nativity scenes. From the 1890’s forward European robins and northern cardinals appeared on Christmas cards in Europe and the U.S. respectively.

Although belonging to different families, the robin and the cardinal share attributes and behavior endearing to people at Christmas. Both birds are conspicuously red. Neither bird is migratory. Always visible in their respective habitats, their feathers puffed up, they heartily endure snow, sleet, and cold winds. The melodious songs of solitary robins or cardinals fill the air with lilting music, even if they are only proclaiming their presence and territoriality. The mere sight of these birds offers cheer, hope, and inspiration on dull wintry days. Each bird has been recognized as national or state birds. The robin has recently been affirmed as the national bird of the United Kingdom. The cardinal is the official bird of seven US states. Finally, each bird has a unique Christmas story.

The Northern Cardinal

No one claims to know precisely how the cardinal became the Christmas bird. But the sheer beauty of male cardinals invites artists and artisans to replicate them in Christmas tree ornaments. Christmas cards often portray them perched on pine boughs covered in snow. Cardinal figurines cast warm glows in candlelight.

The crimson red feathers cloaking male cardinals represent the vitality of Christ’s blood and the peace and hope atonement brings. The color is also reflected in the robes and capes worn by Cardinals in the Roman Catholic Church – a connection that gave the bird its name. The red bird reminds the faithful to think of Christ during Christmas.

The cardinal's celebrated loyalty to its partner represents constancy, much like the constancy of God's love.

The European Robin

The robin was linked to home delivery of Christmas cards in the 1880s in the United Kingdom. Royal postmen, dressed in official red coats, delivered the cards. Postmen were called "robins," and artists later featured them on Christmas cards. In 1890, artists designed cards featuring robins dressed as mailmen delivering cards with their beaks.

Even images of dead robins were used on Christmas cards. Death was more frequent in the 1890's and robins were associated with the sick. A Christmas card with a robin in a state of *rigor mortis* was even seen as a good omen for the New Year and a lucky death on St. Steven's Day, the day after Christmas. The image of a dead bird in the snow is closer to the sad legendary tale, "Babes in the Woods." It tells of children in mortal sleep in the forest and can be viewed as a plea for concern. These cards and stories awakened Victorian sympathy for poor children freezing to death on Christmas, tragedies also recalled in "The Little Match Girl" of Hans Christian Anderson.

The Victorian associations of robins with the nativity of Jesus relay a message of love, compassion, and sacrifice. Two days after the birth of Jesus, according to one telling of the legend:

"It was cold in Bethlehem and the embers of the fire warming the stable were dying out, and Mary, Joseph and the baby shivered while sleeping on beds of straw. Watching attentively, God called a little gray and brown bird to come to re-ignite the fire. Perched on a log beside the dying embers, the bird beat its wings like bellows and the embers blazed up. The fire singed its feathers. The flames also revealed the presence of Saint Joseph, who rising to feed the fire, turned to the bird, and said: "To reward you for your devotion, your breast feathers will turn a beautiful shade of red, the color of Christmas."

The virtues of kindness and sacrifice are recalled in Wordsworth's poem, "To a Redbreast."

Stay, little cheerful Robin! Stay ...
The promise in thy song;
A charm that thought cannot destroy, ...
Nor will thy song fail to be the harbinger
Of everlasting Spring.

Merry Christmas to all.

References: [Wikipedia.org/wiki/European_robin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/European_robin); blogs.scientificamerican.com/how-robins-became-the-birds-of-christmas; saga.co.uk/magazine/wildlife/birds/Christmas-robin; quora.com/what-does-the-cardinal-bird-have-to-do-with-christmas; ourfinefeatheredfriends.com/cardinal-makes-a-splendid-symbol-of-christmas-season; houstonchronicle.com/life/article/cardinal-decorations-a-holiday; donna-hatch.com/cardinal-birds-and-the-christmas-connection.

The Deepwater Horizon Disaster "Ten Years Later"

By Jim Jablonski

Deepwater Horizon – it's a name that may ring a bell in our minds yet is largely forgotten after ten years. But during the spring and summer of 2010, we knew it only too well. It was April 10 of that year when the Transocean Ltd. drilling rig, Deepwater Horizon, exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 workers and injuring 17.

The blowout poured nearly 134 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf until it was finally capped five months later, leaving an oil slick that spread over 15,300 square miles.

The American public, of all political persuasions, was outraged. Transocean was drilling on British Petroleum's (BP) behalf and the latter company took most of the blame and penalties for violations of the Clean Water Act, the 1990 Oil Pollution Act, and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

Scott Weidensaul, in his article "Ten Years Later" in **Living Bird** magazine's Autumn 2020 issue, states that "Altogether, some \$8.8 billion from the settlement's funds was targeted for direct ecological restoration, unwinding damage from the spill, and improving Gulf ecosystems and wildlife population."

It is still too early to judge the success of the projects funded by the fines. Weidensaul does point out that some progress has been

made with the money from the Deepwater settlements. Brown pelicans have rebounded in population, for example, but it is difficult to account for others, especially pelagic birds such as black terns, which spend most of their lives at sea. Still, the money has “the potential to make an historic difference for birds in the Gulf,” according to Weidensaul.

A sidebar to the main story struck a dark note, however. In his article “Losing the Law that Saves Birds,” Weidensaul points out that the very laws used to punish the companies that were negligent have been weakened over the last four years as the result of efforts by the American Petroleum Institute. In addition, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, that has served the interests of birds for over a century, is under threat by the federal administration. The government now claims that only the intended killing of birds is forbidden by the Treaty. If that new interpretation is upheld by the courts, negligent actions such as those of BP and Transocean would no longer be viewed as criminal and no fines or penalties would be levied. If so, companies, whose actions kill birds, would go unpunished.

References: Weidensaul, Scott, “Ten Years Later,” *Living Bird*, Autumn, 2020; Weidensaul, Scott, “Losing the Law that Saves Birds,” *Living Bird*, Autumn, 2020.

Avian Fact Quiz

1. What bird migrates farther than any other, at a staggering 25,000 miles in one year?
2. What is the largest flying bird in North America?
3. True or False? The English House sparrow is the most common bird in the world?
4. The _____ is the fastest diving bird, reaching speeds at up to 200 mph.
5. True or False? The Albatross can soar without moving its wings for 3 hours?

Answers are at the bottom of the inside back cover.



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European Robin



Photo by Barbara Baudot

Hairy Woodpecker



Photo by Gina Swindell

Compare this photo to the downy woodpecker on the back cover. The most obvious difference may be the hairy's longer beak in relation to its head.

Answers to quiz: 1) arctic tern, 2) California condor, 3) False – chicken, 4) peregrine falcon, 5) False – 6 hours.



DOWNY WOODPECKER, Photographer Gina Swindell, taken in Amherst.



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