Audubon Minnesota’s mission is to conserve and restore natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats, for the benefit of humanity and the earth’s biological diversity.

What’s Happening

- Make a difference for Minnesota’s birds by volunteering for any of the projects highlighted in this issue. As a local nonprofit, our work relies on the generosity of conservation-minded individuals like you.
- Check out our updated website. The new design features eye-catching photos and can be easily accessed on phones, tablets, and desktops alike.
- Project Birdsafe is in its 10th Year. This program is a joint effort to reduce the number of birds killed or injured when they collide with structures in built environments.
- Hoorah for Hastings! On April 23, 2016 Hastings was proclaimed Minnesota’s first Bird City. The city met bird-friendly criteria and passed a resolution demonstrating their commitment to creating bird-friendly habitat.
- A bill supported by Audubon Minnesota, Fresh Energy, and other partners was recently featured in an Audubon.org article. The bill encourages the use of native plants on ground-mounted solar sites to benefit birds and pollinators. Read more: Can Solar Habitats Make Good Bird Habitat by Sarah Gilman.

Donate Today

Your gift is a vital investment in a healthy future for Minnesota’s birds and their habitats. Make a gift today and help us preserve ecosystems that are essential for the continued survival and fitness of native bird populations and engage people of all ages to become stewards of their environment. Audubon is a 501(c)(3) charitable organization and a Better Business Bureau accredited charity.

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Audubon Minnesota
1 Water Street West, Suite 200
Saint Paul MN 55107
651.739.9332
e-mail mnaudubon@audubon.org
website mn.audubon.org
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A Master of Disguise

Birds hiding in Minnesota’s marshes can help answer conservation questions

Looking into a sea of marsh grass, the untrained eye may not see the neutral-colored, elongated neck poking out with beak pointed skywards. American Bitterns have brown and white striping that helps them hide in plain sight, and they are known to sway slightly – mimicking the movement of the reeds and grasses in the wind. When this bittern moves from one fishing spot to another, it crawls low and weaves its slender neck and body in between the tall blades of grass.

American Bitterns are a medium-sized bird and are known for their call, which sounds as though a giant faucet has been left leaking. Depending on who you ask, the call sounds like “booming,” “pumping,” or “plunging.” These birds, as well as many other marshbirds, rely heavily on good water quality and healthy marshes that make ideal nesting habitat and feeding grounds.

The American Bittern is a migratory marshbird in great need of conservation attention due to a number of threats, including the loss of wetlands and shallow marsh. Kristin Hall, Audubon Minnesota’s conservation manager, says these birds help us gain a better understanding of how our wetlands are doing.

“Marshbirds are key indicators of wetland ecosystem health,” says Hall. “Because marshbirds rely heavily on specific wetland characteristics and feed high on the food chain, knowing where these birds are nesting and foraging will tell us a lot about the quality of the wetlands in our state.”

People benefit from the management of wetlands for target bird species as well. When we protect and restore freshwater bird habitat, we enable Minnesota’s wetlands to perform their important function of filtering and cleaning our surface water. However, in order to prioritize wetland management in Minnesota, Hall says biologists need to know more about the American Bittern and other marshbirds’ abundance, distribution, population trends, and habitat relationships in order to determine habitat management needs.

Marshbirds are not well sampled by typical comprehensive bird surveys, such as the Breeding Bird Survey, due to their effective camouflage, secretive nature, and hard-to-access habitat. A new statewide survey effort will provide that information.

Audubon Minnesota is initiating a targeted marshbird survey, using a national protocol to elicit responses from these birds. The overall goal of the Minnesota Marshbird Survey is to create an ongoing, long-term marshbird monitoring program for our state. This will provide natural resource managers the information they need to manage effectively for these secretive birds and their wetland habitats.

Many other states throughout the Midwest started conducting marshbird surveys in 2011, and now Minnesota is joining in the effort to provide a more comprehensive dataset for the region. The marshbird survey team, including a number of volunteers, will disperse into the wetlands, marshlands, and peatlands all across Minnesota. They will monitor more than 600 sites in May and June 2016, with plans to do the same in 2017.

The American Bittern is one of Audubon Minnesota’s 26 target species – species in need of urgent conservation action due to loss of habitat and a range of other serious threats, including climate change. It is one of 73 birds at risk of severe declines by 2050 due to a projected loss of more than 50% of current climatic suitability range.
“Science is the foundation of our conservation efforts,” says Hall. “Wetlands are constantly under assault due to habitat change and invasive aquatic plants. Without data to show where birds are and how they are using these wetland habitats, it can be very difficult for us to know what they need to thrive and how we can help.”

According to the *Blueprint for Minnesota Bird Conservation*, American Bitterns are in decline and are listed as highest level priority across all biomes in Minnesota. Many of Minnesota’s Important Bird Areas include marsh habitats due to their significance for breeding birds. Marshes also serve as excellent habitat for fish and bugs, on which birds love to feed.

**DID YOU KNOW?**

- Marshes are a type of low-lying wetland that tend to stay waterlogged throughout the year.
- There are about 10.6 million acres of wetlands remaining in Minnesota today. **We have lost more than 50% of Minnesota's original wetlands**, according to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.
- Not long ago, marshes and wetlands were seen as wastelands. However, the more scientists learn about the complexity and ecological function of wetlands, the more wetlands are valued as essential to biodiversity, air quality, and water quality.
- Marshes and other types of wetlands are natural filters. By slowing the flow of water, **marshes trap sediment and retain excess nutrients** before water drains into a river or lake.
- Wetland protection is a priority for Audubon Minnesota. **Our policy initiatives include protecting lands that are in or adjacent to wetlands**, such as School Trust Lands and Wildlife Management Areas.
Spring has arrived and Minnesotans are flocking to areas like Frontenac State Park in southeast Minnesota to see budding trees and migrating warblers. Frontenac offers spectacular views of Lake Pepin, the Mississippi River, and the surrounding bluffs and forests.

To the north and south of Frontenac and Lake Pepin are floodplain forests – unique and important river ecosystems. Birds, along with a host of other wildlife, benefit from the lush vegetation, dense canopy of woods, interspersed sloughs, and wetlands found within these areas. More than a hundred bird species are found within floodplain forests including cavity-nesting birds like the Prothonotary Warbler, Wood Duck, and Hooded Merganser. Those birds need the dead snags and tree cavities within those forests to breed and nest.

In addition to providing important habitat, floodplains along the Mississippi River help provide flood protection to nearby towns and cities. Floodplain forests also help improve water quality by filtering excess pollutants, sediment, and nutrients from our water before it continues south in the Mississippi River.

Much of today’s floodplain forest is mature silver maple, and in 50-70 years many of these trees are expected to die from natural causes. As these trees disappear, the canopy will open up and provide ideal conditions for the spread of reed canary grass, an invasive plant that prevents natural regeneration of trees. Without action, we can expect a significant loss of floodplain forest along the upper Mississippi Flyway. This loss will put wildlife at great risk, including species in decline like Red-shouldered Hawks and Cerulean Warblers which require large tracts of floodplain forest to survive.

Tim Schlagenhaft, upper Mississippi River program manager, is dedicated to understanding how we can effectively sustain our floodplain forests long-term and restore those that have already disappeared. During the next 18 months, Schlagenhaft, along with Audubon Forest Ecologist Andy Beebe, will coordinate the restoration of 300 acres along the Mississippi River from Red Wing to the Iowa border.

“These are not easy areas to restore,” says Schlagenhaft, “and it
has been a team effort. We’re working with state and federal agencies, universities, local organizations, and many others to discuss, research, and test out the best way to preserve and revive these forests.”

Schlagenhaft says this is the beginning of a long-term effort to combat key reasons for floodplain forest loss. Invasive species, like reed canary grass, and locks and dams that maintain artificially high water levels are two primary causes, but approaches to fixing these issues are challenging and can range wildly in effectiveness.

Over the course of next three years, a team of biologists and graduate students will perform on-the-ground conservation trials to determine the best approach to regenerating trees and controlling reed canary grass. The results from that research will help improve the effectiveness of future restoration.

Audubon Minnesota welcomes volunteers! To learn about the ways you can volunteer, email Katie or call 651-739-9332, ext 120. Volunteer projects include planting trees, removing invasive species, helping with special events, and much more.

Floodplain forests along the Mississippi River in southeast Minnesota have been designated as Important Bird Areas because they are critical to many species of nesting, migrating, and resident birds. The area is also part of a significant avian highway – the Mississippi Flyway – through which 60 percent of North American birds migrate.

Optimistic conversations about climate are essential

Monica Bryand, an Audubon Minnesota outreach team member, began birding 12 years ago and picked up photography along the way. A year ago, she set a goal of photographing all 166 of Minnesota’s climate-threatened birds. She is currently at 110.

She wasn’t always passionate about birds and climate though.

“The gloom and doom about climate change used to overwhelm me,” she says. “Then, I realized I needed to focus on how I can feel good about my personal choices.”

She believes in encouraging individuals to have a positive attitude about environmental responsibility.

Bryand has talked to hundreds of people in the Twin Cities about National Audubon Society’s Birds and Climate Change Report, why birds matter, and how people can help.

She leads by example and talks about her own actions like biking wherever she can, replacing incandescent lightbulbs, and putting solar panels on her house. She focuses on speaking to diverse audiences and helps urban residents appreciate the natural beauty in their own backyard or in a nearby park. That appreciation can lead to caring more about nature and, in turn, it can inspire personal action to help reduce the impacts of climate change.

The Wilder Foundation has chosen to highlight Bryand’s photography of climate-threatened birds at their center on Lexington and University in St. Paul. Her work can be seen at the center through June 30, 2016. Read more about Monica on Audubon.org: How Birding Can Lead to Climate Action by Liz Bergstrom.

Creating a Positive Climate
In this issue, we recognize Brad Johnson, an Audubon Minnesota volunteer, who recently retired from 22 years as a Department of Natural Resources conservation officer. Throughout his career, Johnson was sometimes called when sick or injured wildlife was found and he helped transport wild birds to a rehabilitation center. Birds like Bald Eagles and Great Horned Owls may not fully recover from eye injuries or broken wings and would not survive if released back into the wild. The raptors are then cared for and become the stars of educational programs.

Johnson occasionally helps with educational raptor programs and is also an avid birder. He has assisted with a number of Audubon Minnesota events, teaching people of all ages about birds. He also regularly participates in Audubon’s Christmas Bird Count and other opportunities for citizens to contribute to scientific studies.

Johnson’s willingness to share his extensive bird knowledge is invaluable, and we look forward to seeing him at future events.

Birds have a powerful ability to inspire and motivate people to action, and we are building a better future for our state by bringing people together to appreciate and protect birds.

Learn how you can volunteer to help protect birds. Email Katie Burns, Outreach Coordinator.

Brad Johnson, volunteer, teaches a young boy to identify birds and use binoculars. Volunteers are invaluable to the success of Audubon Minnesota’s conservation programming.