



Volume 29, Issue 4  
January, 2018

**January 16**

**7:00 P.M.**

**Ephemeral Wildflowers: Remarkable Blooming Wonders of Spring**

Presented by Carla Kocher, (OIAS) and President of Conservation Outreach Solutions, LLC

Ephemeral wildflowers provide early and welcome signs of spring. These small and mighty plants complete the above-ground part of their life cycle in a matter of weeks, making it seem as though they disappear as quickly as they appear. This program will highlight remarkable, and sometimes surprising characteristics of these blooming wonders, and describe the types of places wildflower watchers might go to see them.

With a Master's Degree in Public Administration, and work experience in the public and private sectors, Carla Kocher is an accidental naturalist. Her life-long appreciation for nature led to opportunities to share her enthusiasm for natural history and conservation with people of all ages. Carla has been a Master Naturalist since 2015, and is president and project manager at Conservation Outreach Solutions, LLC.

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*We welcome everyone to OIAS's free programs.*

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<http://www.oias.org>

## 2017-2018 Programs



February 20: *Ornithology and Taxidermy*, Roger Tharp, OIAS Member

March 20: *Nest Wars: Research on Eastern Bluebirds and their Nestbox Competitors*, Kathy Winnett-Murray, Professor of Biology, Hope College

April 17: *A Birder's Guide to Muskegon County*, Ric Pedler & Charlie DeWitt, Muskegon Nature Club

May 15:

**6:00:** Potluck, Annual Meeting, and Member Photos

**7:00:** *Feather Brained – My Bumbling Quest to Become a Birder and Find a Rare Bird on My Own*, Bob Tarte, Author to talk about his latest book




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## Muskegon Wastewater Field Trip Report

Four members participated in the November 24<sup>th</sup> field trip to Muskegon Wastewater. We saw 23 species on this beautiful day.

The highlight was watching the Northern Shovelers forming circles in search of food and watching them go from circle to circle.



Other species spotted were American Wigeon, Northern Pintail, Hooded Merganser,

All of my Snowy Owl photos were taken at a distance with a 400 mm lens



## Harlequin Duck

Judi Manning

*Histrionicus histrionicus*



This medium-sized diving duck has a small bill, short neck, and long tail, with a round white ear spot and white patch in front of the eyes. The breeding adult male is unmistakable with his blue-gray body, chestnut flanks and white patches on the head and body. A non-breeding male is brown with a subtle white shoulder stripe on the wing. Females have a brown body and white belly and immature males have a brown body and a darker belly.



In winter, they are primarily in turbulent coastal, rocky region waters. They swim against the current. At the pier we watched them get immersed in the water crashing against the rocks (like in a washing machine). They pop up again a short distance from the rocks unruffled. We were mesmerized watching them repeatedly doing this - hidden under the rocks and sometimes surfing down with the water as it retreated from the rocks. Love to be out and watching the habits of a bird.

Short-distance migrants, more than half of the eastern North American population winters in coastal Maine. Ottawa County has been lucky. The last few years a Harlequin could be found at the Pigeon Lake intake which is almost impossible to get to. This year a female arrived at Holland State Park on October 28<sup>th</sup>. There is currently a non-breeding male often seen--weather permitting.

They dive for food on or near the bottom and also walk along the bottom. They eat insects, fish, aquatic insects, especially larva attached to river bottom rocks. We have been watching a Harlequin since October 28<sup>th</sup> whenever we went to the park. December 31<sup>st</sup> is the first time we watched it eat a fish. Fascinating to watch as he worked it around and finally swallowed it. He took a few dives with the fish to escape a gull after his food.



Females breed at the age of two; males at the age of three with low breeding success until they are five years old. They form a pair in winter and spring and breed near fast-flowing mountain streams and rivers in rocky terrain in forested areas. Males leave the female and breeding territory when she begins incubation. He heads to the ocean to undergo his annual molt.

They remain vigilant and fly or swim to escape threats. Predators include Bald Eagles, jaegers, ravens, river otters on adults, and mink, fox and wolves on nests.

Currently it is of Least Concern on the IUCN Red list, but wintering populations are currently much smaller than historical numbers (late 1800s). It is listed as endangered in Canada, threatened in Maine and species of special concern in the western states.

References: Cornell Lab, All About Birds, [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Harlequin\\_Duck/id#](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Harlequin_Duck/id#), Bird Web, Seattle Audubon Club, [http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/bird/harlequin\\_duck](http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/bird/harlequin_duck), Riley, A.; M. Johnson; A. Riley and M. Johnson 2010. "Histrionicus histrionicus" (On-line), Animal Diversity Web. Accessed December 31, 2017 at [http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Histrionicus\\_histrionicus/](http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Histrionicus_histrionicus/)

Look at the two birds on the right.  
They look very similar:  
brown, facial spots, in water.



Look again:  
different size bird and bill.  
Do you know what they are?

## Snowy Owls arrive amid new concerns for the global population

**BirdWatching**  
www.BirdWatchingDaily.com

Reprinted/excerpted with permission of editor,

<https://www.birdwatchingdaily.com/blog/2017/12/07/snowy-owls-new-concerns-population/>

Just as a significant irruption of Snowy Owls takes place in the United States and southern Canada, the organizers of the international Red List of threats to wildlife reported that they uplisted the iconic large owl from Least Concern to **Vulnerable**. [Emphasis added]

A new [summary](#) of the species from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature reads: “It is undergoing rapid population declines in North America and probably also in northern Europe and Russia. Drivers of the decline are uncertain but likely include climate change effecting prey availability, as well as collisions with vehicles and infrastructure. There remains some uncertainty about the overall rate of decline, and if it proves to be even higher the species may be eligible for further uplisting to Endangered.”



The global population size was previously estimated to number approximately 200,000 individuals, but the IUCN say recent estimates are much lower — around 14,000 pairs or even as low as 7,000-8,000 pairs.

. . . This winter’s irruption, so far, has been concentrated around the Great Lakes and on the New England coast.

. . . Author and bird bander [Scott Weidensaul](#), one of the coordinators of [Project SNOWstorm](#), agrees that this year’s irruption is very large, but he isn’t sure if it will reach or exceed the overall magnitude of the 2013-14 irruption, which was the largest irruption in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions in perhaps a century. “The birds have definitely arrived earlier than they did in 2013,” he says, adding that it’s too soon “to judge the overall flight, since it’s clear there are still owls coming south. Based on what I’ve heard, this will be one of the best (if not the best) winter in the upper Midwest in recent memory.” Just how many owls have moved south is anyone’s guess at this point. They move fairly consistently, so it’s easy to count the same bird twice.

. . . “The reason for the irruption seems pretty clear,” Weidensaul explains. “As in the summer of 2013, there was a major breeding event in northern Quebec’s Ungava Peninsula. That year, the lemming population in that region boomed, and Snowy Owls gathered there (from how far away, we can’t say) and nested in large numbers. More to the point, we know they had extremely large broods that year because Canadian scientists were on the ground there, checking productivity. Some nests that year had up to nine chicks.

“This year there was — right on schedule, since lemming cycles average four years — another lemming boom and another big Snowy Owl breeding event in the Ungava, as well as at least some Snowies nesting along the northwest side of Hudson Bay. What we don’t know, in the case of the Ungava, was how productive the nests were. The reports we had were from helicopter surveys for big game, and reports from large mining operations in the region, of many nesting owls, but there was no one on the ground this summer checking nest productivity. As we’d expect, the vast majority of the owls we’ve been able to age this winter have been young birds, and as is usually the case with this kind of irruption, most of them are in good health. The few that get picked up thin or starving are very much the exception.”



**How birders can help** Birders can help in a couple of ways, says Weidensaul. “The most important thing is: Enjoy the experience! For a lot of birders, seeing a Snowy is a lifetime event. **But it’s important to respect the owls; keep your distance and don’t disturb them, tempting as it is to try to get real close.** [Emphasis added] All our tracking data confirms what scientists have long known — despite the assumption that they’re diurnal, Snowies are nocturnal birds at this time of the year, and getting bumped off their roosts again and again all day by birders and photographers isn’t what they want or need. If the bird is watching you, staring at you, fidgeting, and moving around, you’re likely too close.

(Cont. pg. 5)

cont. from  
pg. 4

“Photographers who get good, clear photos showing the spread wings and tail (\*without\* flushing the owl for the photo) can [upload](#) their geo-tagged photos to our website. After the last irruption we analyzed thousands of photos and mapped the age/sex class distribution across the irruption zone, and would like to do that again.”

Project SNOWstorm is tagging birds in many places. [synopsized] We’re looking to tag 12-15 owls this winter, with a particular focus on tagging them quickly, so we can track their early-season movements before they settle down; tagging birds on adjacent territories so we can track interactions between them; and balancing our sample sizes of age and sex classes and habitat types.”

You can follow Project SNOWstorm at [www.projectsnowstorm.org](http://www.projectsnowstorm.org) and on [Facebook](#), and if you’re so moved, support the research with a tax-deductible donation. — [Matt Mendenhall](#), Editor

### Tips for Enjoyable (and Responsible!) Snowy Owl Viewing

*Presented by Black Swamp Bird Observatory & Kaufman Field Guides*

Snowy Owls are uncommon and irregular winter visitors from the Arctic. They favor open areas that look most like the tundra, and are often seen perched on the ground or on barns, buildings, or utility poles. These special visitors are in unfamiliar surroundings and are often stressed and hungry. Typically these owls hunt at night and rest in the daytime. Approaching too closely can make them fly, depleting critical energy reserves. Our actions should not add to their stress in any way.

- ◆ Keep quiet and maintain a respectful distance at all times. If the owl reacts to your presence, you’re too close!
- ◆ Never approach or harass an owl with the intention of making it fly
- ◆ Do not attempt to call, lure, or bait an owl to get it to come closer
- ◆ Be respectful of private property boundaries and nearby residents
- ◆ Be respectful of fellow observers
- ◆ Do not create a hazard to yourself and others by stopping on or along roadways
- ◆ If you witness someone harassing an owl, contact the local authorities
- ◆ Be an ambassador. Help educate beginners on how to enjoy these magnificent birds responsibly!
- ◆ Remember: no picture or closer view is worth jeopardizing the welfare of the owl or your reputation in the birding community!

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The Snowy Owl to the right came from who knows where on the freighter to the left. We were on the Holland State Park pier when the freighter came in. Imagine our surprise when the captain blew the horn and the Snowy Owl flew off landing a short distance away on the pier. It was soon harassed by crows and headed out.



## Feathered Friends Coping With Winter Cold

Judi Manning

Cold wintry weather came quickly after enjoying the nice fall. Many birds migrate to warmer areas. Many familiar yard birds stay here year-round. Birds migrate here from further north.

Birds, being warm blooded, maintain a constant temperature around 106 degrees. To keep warm sparrows huddle together in dense foliage or cavities and try to minimize the surface area by sticking up their feathers and tucking in their head and feet. Cardinals and other smaller birds puff up like a little ball to minimize heat loss. Geese grow an extra set of insulating downy feathers.

Chickadees and finches put on fat to act as an energy source and to help insulate them. The extra fat can be more than 10% of their winter body weight. Some birds shiver to generate heat. They activate opposing muscle groups to create muscle contractions. Many species, like gulls, keep warm blood circulating near vital organs while the extremities cool down so the feet are near freezing and the body core is warm.

Night Time: Temperatures drop. Some birds internal thermostat drops to save energy. Species including the Black-capped Chickadee reduce the body temperature by as much as 22 degrees called regulated hypothermia.

Finding food makes a big difference when conditions become severe. To help birds especially in the winter:

**Feeders:** A variety of types like tube, platform, tray, window:

Each feeder should have a separate type of food to attract more species:

- a good seed mix
- oil sunflower seeds
- thistle
- peanuts
- sunflower hearts
- dried mealworms
- grapes

Suet – make sure the fat content is at least 30%



**Water Source:** A heated bird bath is important as natural water is frozen and birds need water. We have many birds that drink from ours. We also have a Carolina Wren that drinks often every day from our heated bird bath. I assume the warm water helps warm him up during the day.



**Shelter:** Lots of evergreen trees and shrubs provide excellent protection. Build and keep brush piles throughout the winter for a great shelter. Clean out bird boxes and leave up year-round.

It may take them a week or so for the birds to find your food and use the other things you put out for them. They will appreciate whatever you do.

Hint for next fall: Clean bird houses in fall and block the ventilation holes to keep the cold drafty winds out. Remember to unblock in spring when the winter inhabitants have vacated.



References: How Do Birds Cope With Cold in Winter, Audubon, <http://www.audubon.org/how-do-birds-cope-cold-winter>, Inexpensive Tips for Helping Birds in Winter, Esther Lutz, East Central Illinois Master Naturalist, U. of Illinois Extension, <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/ccdms/wildthings/111222.html>

# What Might a Bird See When it looks at you?

Did you ever think about what a bird may see when it looks at you if you have your scope pointing at it and it is bright out. One day I was walking toward the NOAA Station at Holland State Park and two birders were at the NOAA Station with the scopes pointed in my general direction. I did not take a picture at that time, but tried to recreate what I saw in a different park.



White-winged Scoter

Harlequin Duck

## 2017-2018 OIAS Membership Application Date \_\_\_\_\_

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Far Flowing Water is published eight times per year. If you would like to contribute a complete article for the next issue, please have your articles to me by February 1st

**Mission Statement**  
**Owashtanong Islands Audubon Society**  
 a 501(c)(3) Nonprofit Corporation

Provide stewardship of local Grand River island wildlife sanctuaries owned by the Michigan Audubon Society;  
 Achieve through education, public recognition of the value and need for protecting and preserving wildlife, plants, soil, water and other natural resources as well as an understanding of their interdependence;  
 Promote an interest in our native birds and as well as native flora and fauna, and their habitats because of their great economic, cultural and recreational value; and  
 Aid the Michigan Audubon Society in its study, conservation and research efforts.



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**JANUARY 16, 2018**  
**7:00 Ephemeral**  
**Wildflowers: Remarkable**  
**Blooming Wonders of**  
**Spring**  
  
**Carla Kocher**