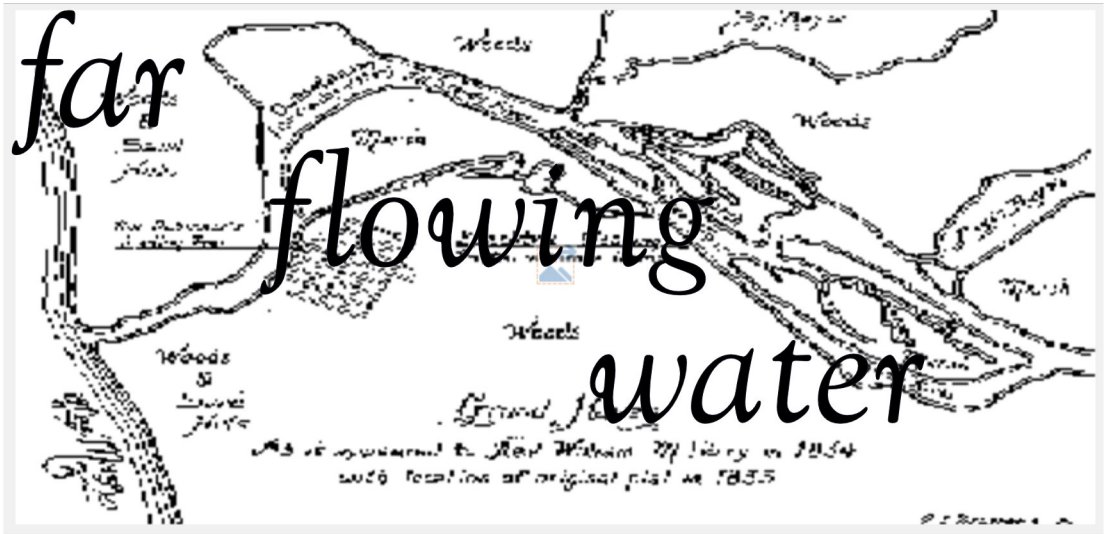
Vol. 38 - Issue 3

November, 2026

OWASHTANONG ISLANDS AUDUBON SOCIETY

Grand Haven, Michigan



October 17 - 6:00 P.M.

Birds Doing Stuff

Presented by: Steve Jessmore, Photographer, and Photojournalist

Steve shares how 35 years as a photojournalist shaped his approach to photographing birds as characters with behaviors and stories. His program features endangered Great Lakes Piping Plovers, Michigan wetlands and freshwater habitats, and the story behind his new book, The Splendor Next Door: An Invitation to Discover Birds and Nature Close to Home. Created over five years and more than 250 mornings at Reeds Lake, the book encourages us to slow down, notice the small changes and find a nearby place worth knowing—and protecting.

Steve Jessmore is an award-winning Michigan bird and conservation photographer and creator of Birds Doing Stuff®. He documents bird behavior and the habitats birds depend on, inspiring people to notice and protect nature close to home. A five-time Michigan Photographer of the Year and recipient of three National Audubon Photography Awards, his images have appeared in National Audubon, Smithsonian, Ducks Unlimited and other national publications. His ongoing conservation work includes documenting endangered Great Lakes Piping Plovers and the efforts supporting their recovery.

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From the President's Desk - November 2026

As many of you are aware, bird populations in North America have suffered serious declines since the 1970s. Grassland birds have suffered the largest declines losing about 53% of their populations. When I was conducting Tree Swallow research in old fields on the GVSU campus, it was not uncommon to find Eastern Meadowlark nests. I did not keep records of meadowlark nests, but I do know that we did not see any meadowlarks or find any meadowlark nests the last few years of my studies that ended in 2018. We also noticed the gradual disappearance of Eastern Kingbirds and Savannah and Song Sparrows breeding in those fields. One year was particularly sad. We watched a male Bobolink sing his heart out every day trying to attract a mate, but no female ever appeared. Northern Harriers and Sedge Wrens also bred in those fields in the 1990s. Breeding habitat for those birds was lost as GVSU land-use changes occurred in those fields including the establishment of walking/jogging trails through the fields and the construction of several water retention ponds. Tree Swallows responded very well to these changes, especially the new ponds, but grassland breeding birds did not.

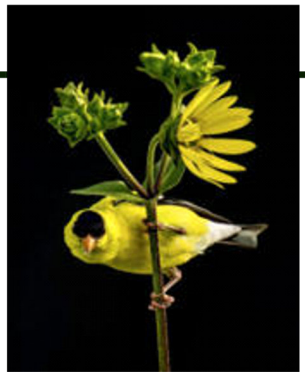
Helder Park in Holland Charter Township is one of only a few pieces of public land in Ottawa County where Bobolinks and Eastern Meadowlarks breed reliably. These birds are losing habitat because of rapidly expanding populations of the invasive woody plant Autumn Olive (*Elaeagnus umbellate*) which fills grasslands destroying the breeding areas of grassland breeding birds. Autumn Olive is often planted for wildlife food and cover, but it eventually becomes apparent that the plant will come to fill grasslands. Ironically, birds feed on Autumn Olive fruits and widely disperse its seeds. Together with the Holland Audubon Club, OIAS has requested that Holland Charter Township (HCT) take action to control Autumn Olive in Helder Park. We have written a letter to HCT requesting a place on the agenda of their 19 November meeting to discuss this problem. OIAS sent out an email to members with copy of the letter sent to HCT. I encourage you to send an email to the following council members indicating your support of the removal of Autumn Olive from Helder Park. Also, consider attending the Thursday, November 19 board meeting at 7 PM at HCT where they will hopefully allow us to present on this issue and take a vote on protecting this valuable grassland habitat. Here are the emails we request you email to HCT's executive committee: russt@hct.holland.mi.us, miked@hct.holland.mi.us, vinceb@hct.holland.mi.us,manager@hct.holland.mi.us

Thanks for being a voice for our birds!

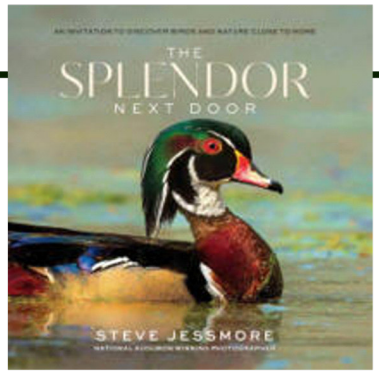
Please be sure to attend November's program "Birds doing stuff" by Dr. Steve Jessmore. Steve is an award-winning Michigan photographer. Invite your friends! The OIAS Board of Directors has put together an excellent set of programs for our 2026-2027 program year. The list of programs can be found in this issue of *Far Flowing Water* and on the OIAS website (www.oias.org).

Please visit our website http://www.oias.org, and like our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/oias.org. We will post birding information and information about OIAS and upcoming events there.

Good birding,
Michael P. Lombardo



Steve Jessmore's Photos



Lessons of a Young Birder: The Humphrey-Parkes-Howell Age Classification System

Malcolm Oosting-Sineath with assistance from Karl Sineath

In my previous article, I discussed how Humphrey and Parkes (1959) helped ornithologists make a huge leap in classifying ages, molts, and plumages. They realized that across each cycle, every bird has to replace all of its feathers, or nearly all of them, in order to survive. This is "basal" to all birds, so they called this *basic* plumage, which would be acquired through a prebasic molt. Humphrey and Parkes also realized that many birds will replace some feathers in between these prebasic molts. For example, male Indigo Buntings replace all of their feathers every fall to go into their basic plumage (relatively drab), but they also replace some of their feathers in early spring to go into their alternate plumage (bright blue). They molt twice per cycle instead of once.

Further, in their paper, Humphrey and Parkes actually invite other ornithologists to critique and improve their system. As researchers learned more about birds in the succeeding decades, some revisions were necessary. Humphrey and Parkes had defined a bird's first "basic plumage" as the one that the bird molted into after it left the nest. Black-capped Chickadees begin this molt soon after leaving the nest, as most birds do, but albatrosses or petrels may not start to molt until the end of its first year of life (or longer). Further, unlike the complete molts later in the bird's life, this first molt after leaving the nest is often highly variable in extent. Clearly, some further research and clarification was necessary.

In their article, "The First Basic Problem," Steve Howell et al. (2003) show that this first molt that occurs after birds leave the nest is not actually very similar across all species. In other words, if the first molt that birds go through after leaving the nest is so variable that it is not similar across all birds, this molt should not be defined as basic. But if basic plumage does not occur right after the bird leaves the nest, when does it occur?

To address this problem, Howell and his colleagues looked very carefully at how birds molt across many bird families (from ducks to cardinals). They concluded that Humphrey and Parkes were correct in saying that every bird has a basic plumage, and many birds have an alternate plumage. However, Howell et al. (2003) also show that the first basic plumage that all birds must have is actually their juvenile plumage. Put simply, all of the birds in the world must have a first generation of (non-downy) feathers.

What an elegant solution! Basal to all birds is their first generation of feathers, so we call this the first basic plumage. Every subsequent cycle, all birds will also replace all (or almost all) of their feathers. Now, we have a clear, consistent definition of basic plumage common to all birds.

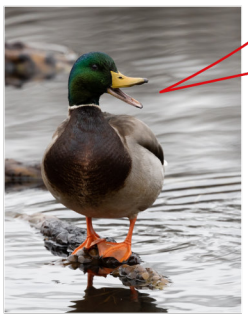
We still have a problem, though. Our Black-capped Chickadees, as well as many other species, start a molt soon after leaving the nest, but this is the only time in their lives that they molt twice in a cycle. After that first cycle, they molt just once per cycle and look pretty much the same year round. As mentioned above, Indigo Buntings typically molt twice per cycle–a prebasic molt and a prealternate molt. In this way, they are different from chickadees. However, buntings also have an additional molt in their first cycle, also right after leaving the nest. In this way, these two birds are similar. What do we call this additional molt during the first cycle that actually occurs in the vast majority of birds?

Howell et al. (2003) step in with a solution again. This additional molt occurs during a time in the bird's development that is very important for its survival, so they call it "formative." This means that the "juvenile" Black-capped Chickadee, Indigo Bunting, American Goldfinch, or even Mallard you see in the summer might actually already be molting out of juvenile plumage into *formative* plumage. Look for those molting head and body feathers in your binoculars and scopes! The birds are not keeping much of their juvenile plumage for very long. This is important for us birders to understand because the birds must be doing this for an adaptive reason. In a later article, I will consider these reasons, but in the meantime, I challenge myself–and you–to think about how birds live and why they live that way, not how we think they live based on our preconceptions.

2026-2027 Programs

January 19: Wildlife Diseases - Alynn Martin, GVSU, Biology Department
February 16: Dr. Kelly Ronald from Hope College, Bird Behaviors: How the Sensory World Shapes Behavioral Decisions
March 16: Attracting Bluebirds to Your Yard - Bernie Place, Michigan Bluebird Society, Muskegon County Coordinator
April 20: Technology for Birding & Annual Business Meeting - OIAS Board Members

Christmas Bird Count



December 19

This year the Hudsonville Christmas Bird Count will be held December 19. The count typically runs from dawn to about 5:00 PM. There are opportunities to count, both as a counter on a team, and likely a sector team leader. If interested, let Carl know at oias@oias.org to count or if you have questions.

Snow Policy

The Board will decide and notify members via email, the website and Facebook.

Thank you to Malcolm, Karl, Michael and Carl who contributed to this issue of the *far flowing water* newsletter.

Judi, Editor

Eared Grebe

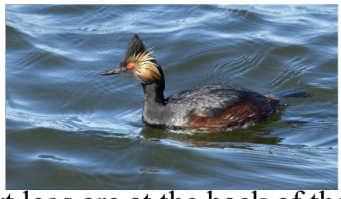
Podiceps nigricollis

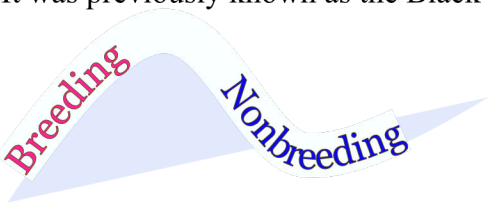
Judi Manning

The fossil lineage of grebes indicates they have been around for 70 million years. The Eared Grebe is a small waterbird and is the most abundant grebe in the world and only migrates at night.

On a cold, sunny morning, it sunbathes with its back to the sun and raises its rump to expose dark underlying skin to the light.

Eared Grebes get their name from the striking fan of thin, golden-yellow "ear" plumes on the side of its black head during the breeding season. Its black bill is slightly upturned (concave). The plumage entirely changes between breeding and nonbreeding. It was previously known as the Black-necked Grebe and may be again.





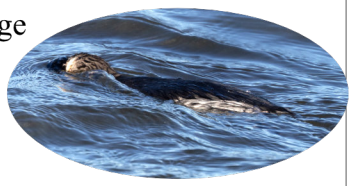


The short legs are at the back of their compact body making it challenging to walk on land. If they accidentally land on land, they are unable to take off. They need to run across the surface of water to launch into flight.



The feet are lobed rather than webbed like ducks. Each lobed toe has a flexible flap of skin. When they kick, the lobes open wide creating natural underwater propellers for a strong thrust with minimal effort to dive fast, chase prey with precision, and even rocket out of the water when startled. When the foot retracts, the lobes collapse to reduce drag, allowing for rapid, smooth strokes.

When alarmed or after prey, they sink quietly into the water by compressing their thick plumage along with internal air reservoirs. A reduced tail, dense bones, and flattened lower leg bones are instrumental to this sinking.



They eat aquatic invertebrates, small fish, mollusk, or amphibians. They use their large flesh tongue to crush prey against the palate to squeeze out the salty water.

They use various tactics in search of prey. Their head skims the surface for prey, peck items on rocks or vegetations, and pluck airborne insects. Searching for underwater prey, they have keen underwater vision, razor-sharp reflexes, lightning-fast maneuvers stalking prey below the surface like miniature torpedoes in feathers.

During the first stage of migration, they head by the hundreds and thousands to feast on brine shrimp and alkali flies in Mono Lake in California or the Great Salt Lake in Utah. These two areas support up to 95% of the North American population during post-breeding molt migration. Here they more than double their weight, the chest muscles shrink and they become flightless while the digestive organs grow significantly and they accumulate large fat deposits.

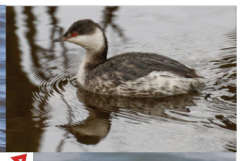
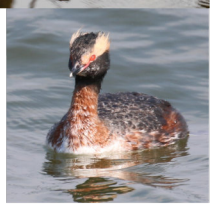
Before migration can continue to the wintering grounds, they need to fast to shrink the digestive organs back to about one-fourth their peak size and exercise the wings to quickly increase the flight muscles and heart. During this time, they remain flightless for up to four months. This species is flightless for 9 – 10 months each year and is the longest flightless period of any flying bird in the world. Cooler weather causes prey to disappear and the fast begins. They repeat this in the spring before heading north.

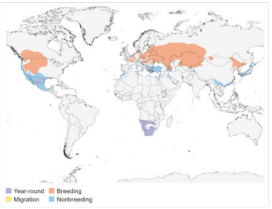
Grebes are chemical digesters and are unique by regularly ingesting their own downy feathers. Feathers (1) help them retain food until it is fully digested, (2) lines their stomach to protect it from sharp fish bones, hard pieces of shell, and (3) filters bone fragments and other indigestible items from entering the intestine to enable pellet formation that is coughed up. Most birds eat grit to break down hard foods.

Cont. Pg 6

Pied-billed Grebe	Horned Grebe	Eared Grebe
Length: 11.8-15.0 in	Length: 12.2-15.0 in	Length: 12.5 to 13 in
Weight: 8.9-20.0 oz	Weight: 10.6-20.1 oz	Weight: 11 oz
Wingspan: 17.7-24.4 in	Wingspan: 17.3-18.1 in	Wingspan: 16 in



Breeding

Nonbreeding

They breed in colonies in shallow saline lakes and marshes in western N. America that are fish-free. The nest is a well-concealed floating platform anchored to vegetation. The whole nest is wet, and the center may be below water when the adult is not in it causing the lower half of each egg to stay wet. The eggs begin a bluish-white and soon become nest-stained and brown. The first hatched chicks are brooded on the back of the incubating parent and fed by the other parent. After all the eggs are hatched, they leave the nest. They are also fed feathers soon after hatching.

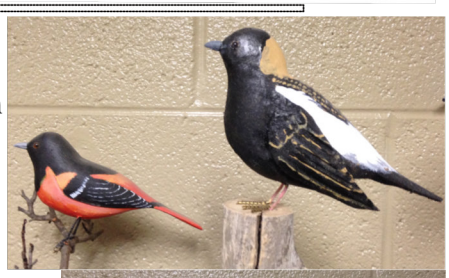
A group of grebes are collectively known as a “water dance" of grebes.

A threat to them is climate driven habitat shifts, drought, loss of habitat from draining wetlands, water used for irrigation and maintaining high water levels for fishing.

References: https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Eared_Grebe/id, https://nwlfd.org/species/eared-grebe, https://sanctuarysimon.org/dbtools/species-database/id/328/podiceps/nigricollis/eared-grebe/, *Feather-Eating In Grebes: A 500-Year Conundrum*, Joseph R. Jehl Jr., https://doi.org/10.1676/16-196.1, *15 Fascinating Characteristics of Grebes*, https://birdsology.com/15-fascinating-characteristics-of-grebes/#google_vignette

Jim Ponshair Called Me

Judi Manning



Jim is a Life Member of OIAS. He wanted me to spread the word that someone from Outdoor Discovery Center contacted Jim so they could get his nearly 70 volumes of detailed field logs, photos and artwork digitized and online. These records document West Michigan’s bird populations since 1951. Someone from Hope College on behalf of Outdoor Discovery Center prepared the **Ponshair Avian Archive.**



Jim joined Grand Rapids Audubon Club at just 14 years old and continues to bird watch.

Under “About Jim Ponshair” click on “Audio” and listen to Jim Ponshair share stories from a lifetime of birding, recording observations, and connecting people with the natural world. Jamie Krupka interviewed Jim.

Jim also has carved many species of birds over the years. At one time, some were on display at Muskegon Wastewater. I do not know if they are still on display.

Please check out the following website to see the extremely detailed records, photos, and drawings Jim has kept.

https://sites.google.com/outdoordiscovery.org/ponshairavianarchive/home

Online membership renewal is now available! You can now mail a check, pay in person at a meeting, or pay online using Cheddar Up. Cheddar Up is a popular group payment and fundraising platform that scores high marks (around 4.9/5 on review sites like Capterra)

Follow the link below or scan the QR code: https://nonprofit-membership-dues-8344.cheddarup.com

2026-2027 OIAS Membership Application/Renewal *Date*_____

Send by Email_____ Email _____

Name_____

Street_____

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Phone_____ How did you hear about OIAS_____

Membership Type ___$20 Family _____$30 Contributing ___$100 Individual Life

My contribution to speaker fees and activism projects $_____

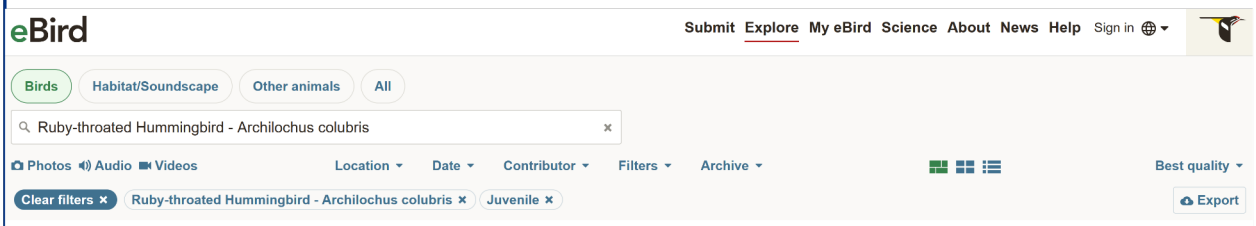
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Thank you for your support! *(11/26)*

Easy Way to View Photos in eBird

Judi Manning

Type in a species name and click on the bird in the drop-down menu; Like magic photos and records appear.



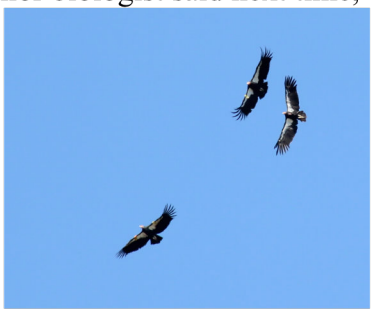
https://media.ebird.org/catalog?birdOnly=true&taxonCode=rthhum&sort=rating_rank_desc&age=juvenile

A California Condor Flew to Oregon

Judi Manning

On May 12, 2026, a 2-year-old female California condor known as B9 was tracked by a satellite transmitter leaving Northern California's Humboldt County. She flew to Brookings on the Oregon coast following a zigzagging 80-mile flight. This is the first time a condor was sighted in Oregon since 1904. Four days later, flying a total of 380 miles in a loop she returned to the area in California where she was released.

Chris West, the restoration program manager and Yurok Wildlife Department senior biologist said next time, "I imagine B9 will explore more and take other birds with her." He also said they "teach each other their parents' territories before settling on a home range." B9 is part of a flock of 23 birds managed by the Yurok Tribe and the Redwood National and State Parks.



September 17, 2011

There were 22 C. Condors in California in 1989. As of 2025 there were 392 flying free due to the reintroduction program.

In 2022 the first birds released through the Yurok Tribe reintroduction effort hatched at the Oregon Zoo. B9 hatched April 3, 2024, at the World Center for Birds of Prey in Boise, Idaho and released last fall into the redwood area of California.

A second major milestone in 2026, condors A0 (Ney-gem' 'Ne-chween-kah) and A1 (Hlow Hoo-let) established the flock's first nest and deposited an egg in a hollowed-out cavity near the top of a redwood tree. It is unknown why the egg failed but is likely the result of an infertile egg, inadequate incubation, or a hatching issue. The second season usually produces a young bird.

Learn more about the NCCRP and California Condor Recovery Program at www.yuroktribe.org/yurok-condor-restoration-program.

References: *Endangered California Condor Flies into Oregon for the First Time in 122 Years*, Andy Corbley. 6/8/26, https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/endangered-california-condor-flies-into-oregon-for-the-first-time-in-122-years/, *Condor flies into Oregon for first time in over 120 years*, Janet Eastman, https://www.oregonlive.com/environment/2026/06/condor-flies-into-oregon-for-first-time-in-over-120-years.html

Far Flowing Water
is published seven times per year.

If you would like to contribute a complete article for the next issue, please have your article to me ***by January 1st.***

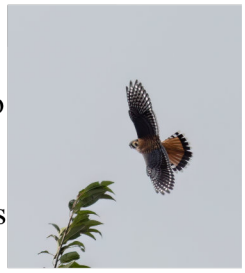
far flowing water

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Protector of Cherry Orchards

Judi Manning



Sweet cherry growers in Michigan, Washington, California, and Oregon lose between 5% to 30% of their crop to pest birds [robins, grackles, and starlings] that have a big appetite and cause crop damage. Dr. Catherine Lindell, an avian ecologist and associate professor at MI State Univ., heard from many fruit farmers about birds eating their crops. American Kestrels use already existing cavities. To lure them to orchards, it was suggested they install nest boxes. For over ten years Leelanau County farmers have had nest boxes along the edges of their orchards that lured American Kestrels to their property.



The kestrels hover above the orchards looking for prey below. They will manage the smaller birds, mice and voles that peck and spoil ripening fruit.

In 2018, Dr. Olivia Smith, assistant professor at MSU's Dept. of Horticulture, investigated how birds contribute to food borne illness outbreaks. *Salmonella, E. coli, Listeri*a and *Campylobacter*—are contracted through ingestion of dried fecal matter which becomes a food safety issue.

The research team monitored orchards with and without kestrel nest boxes and tracked bird activity, measured crop damage, and examined fruit and foliage for fecal contamination. Data showed kestrels helped farmers grow safer and healthier foods. Kestrels may carry food borne pathogens however their presence reduced the abundance of flocks of disease carrying birds. Researchers recorded a 66% decrease in branches marked by bird feces.

American Kestrels work better than artificial deterrents like pesticides, nets over trees, or scarecrows which are an added cost to farmers and are not very effective. It is low cost and low maintenance to lure in kestrels. This also helps the declining population of American Kestrels due to habitat loss. The orchard becomes a refuge and workplace for the kestrel.

Some blueberry farmers in Ottawa County installed A. Kestrel boxes a few years ago in their fields.

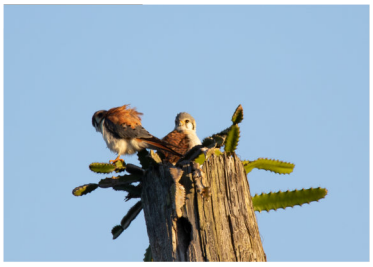
References: *The New Farmhands Protecting Michigan's Cherry Orchards*, by Nicole Lane, 5/8/26, https://mynorth.com/outdoors/kestrel-nestboxes-crop-protection/, *Michigan cherry farmers find a surprising food safety ally: falcons*, MSU Today, 12/20/25, https://innovationcenter.msu.edu/michigan-cherry-farmers-and-falcons/



Male Female

6/6/16 A pair at a local farm





A nesting pair in Jamaica

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.

Owashtanong Islands Audubon Society
Judi Manning, Editor
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