

The Future of Sassafras Audubon Society

by Don Allen, Vice President, SAS (donandchar2@gmail.com)

In early November I sent an e-mail to the members of the SAS board, to the Friends of SAS, and to several former board members airing my concerns about our organization. Because most of the people who receive the *Leaflet* cannot be contacted by e-mail, I repeat my message here.

Subject: Has SAS run its course?

• **Leadership:** For the last four or five board meetings a pressing issue has been the lack of anyone interested in becoming the next president, treasurer*, and *Leaflet* editor. While we have filled the *Leaflet* editor position, we still do not have a president or a treasurer. In our quest to fill these positions we have learned that there are a number of long-term members who have served their time, but there seems to be no new blood to carry on. This continuing problem of leadership prompts us to ask some searching questions about the future of SAS.

• **Membership:** Consider the membership of SAS: It is true that we mail 800+ *Leaflets* six times a year. It is also true that 600+ of those *Leaflets* go to people who joined the National Audubon Society and are automatically added to the *Leaflet* mailing list. Many of these “subscribers” probably wonder where the *Leaflet* came from and what the Sassafras Audubon Society is.

In contrast, “Friends of SAS” is a group of people who actively support the local chapter, but this group numbers less than 200 (maybe less than 150), and some of them do not live in Indiana.

• **Website:** We have an excellent website that serves the birding community well. It informs interested visitors about upcoming programs and outings, among other things. A loss of our website manager would be more devastating than a loss of our board of directors. We post outings and programs on the website, in the local newspaper, and on the Bloomington-birds listserv. Do these activities — outing and programs — require the more elaborate, formal structure of an organization with officers, board of directors, monthly meetings, and so forth to continue? Or could they function more informally — and efficiently — via the website?

• **Purpose:** As we discussed these things candidly at our most recent board meeting, it seemed to be an open question whether there was sufficient energy in the birding community to warrant the continued existence of SAS. Activists created SAS more than 30 years ago in response to fighting the proposed nuclear power plant at Marble Hill. This activist spirit and involvement in causes no

continued on page 3

Electronic Version of *Leaflet* newsletter

by John Eakin and Jim Mitchell

The *Leaflet* has been available on the SAS website for several years now. Recently, it has been posted in Portable Document Format (PDF) that is easily transferred from computer to computer or printed. The SAS Board of Directors has been discussing the possibility of having only the electronic version or a mix of electronic and fewer paper *Leaflets* mailed. SAS mails about 800 issues bimonthly. The printing and mailing costs are the biggest expense SAS has on a continuing basis (\$6,000/year). Cutting down the number of copies mailed will save SAS money (money that could go toward conservation and education projects) and many trees could be saved, too.

At its December meeting, the SAS board voted to limit distribution of the *Leaflet* to members of the Friends of SAS. If you are not a Friend of SAS and would like to continue to receive a paper copy of the *Leaflet*, please write indicating your wishes and mailing address to sas@sassafrasaudubon.org early in the new year. 

Spring Banquet 2010 Set for March 28

Mark your calendars today for the annual SAS spring banquet. As always, we'll have a great guest speaker as well as the awarding of the Barbara Restle Lifetime Achievement Award and the Don Whitehead Conservationist of the Year Award. This year's event will take place on Sunday, March 28 — location and guest speaker to be announced. 

CAN YOU NAME THAT BIRD?

Don't expect to see this bird around until March or April. Notice the long wings. His back is an iridescent black. You won't find him at your feeder, but he and his mate might take up residence in your bluebird house. Answer on page 5.

Photo by Jeff Hammond



A Decade of Eagles

Eagle Watch Weekend, Feb. 5–7, 2010

On Feb. 5–7, Eagle Watch Weekend will return for its 10th Anniversary Celebration. Reserve the dates NOW for a very special, fun-filled, educational event, presented by BirdCountry.US, with sponsorship from Sassafras Audubon Society, Eagle Pointe Golf Resort, and the Bloomington–Monroe County Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Several new programs and products are on the schedule for this year. *Bird Songs of the Brown County Hill Country*, a new two-CD set by Geoff Keller, makes its Eagle Watch Weekend debut, and Keller will be there to regale us with tales of what it takes to make quality recordings of audible avifauna for Cornell Lab of Ornithology and his own label, SORA Productions. Joanne Kelly will bring her “ornamental” bird art, as featured on the BirdCountry.US website, and Hammond Photography will return

with Jeff Hammond’s always-breathtaking photos. Scheduled programs include the return of Nature’s Night Lights and the Owl Prowl; two programs Just for Kids; and of course, the Eagle Watch caravans and live raptors from Return to the Wild. As always, SAS members will bring their expertise and their quality optics to share with you on the caravans. New this year are “How Birds Sing” with SAS member Susan Hengeveld, PhD, and a falconry demonstration (weather permitting) by Laura Edmunds.

Plan on joining us at the Eagle Pointe Golf Resort at Lake Monroe. Often imitated but never duplicated, Eagle Watch Weekend STILL costs only \$10 for adults and \$4 for children under 13. One fee admits you to any and all events for the entire weekend! The complete schedule and pre-registration are available at www.eaglesatlakemonroe.com, along with a link to lodging at Eagle Pointe.

Sassafras Audubon Society

Board of Directors

President
Vacant

Vice President

Don Allen (donandchar2@gmail.com)

Treasurer

Laura Hammond (laura@jghphoto.com)

Secretary

Tom Platt (tgplatt@indiana.edu)

Brittany Davis (bluemoosey8@yahoo.com)

David Drutt (chefdave101@gmail.com)

John Eakin (eakin@indiana.edu)

Stephen Friesen (sfriesen@indiana.edu)

Ann Maxwell (ndrew@att.net)

Jeff Riegel (jkriegel@birdcountry.us)

Committee Chairs

The committees welcome help from volunteers.

Conservation Chair

Stephen Friesen

Database Manager/Membership Chair

Ann Maxwell

Education Chair

Tom Platt

Field Trip Chair

Don Allen

Fundraising Chair

Bob Kissel

Program Chair

Brittany Davis

Publicity Chair

Vacant

The board normally meets on the first Monday of each month at 6:30 p.m. All SAS members are welcome to attend. Contact the president or another board member to learn more details and meeting locations, or e-mail SAS@sassafrasaudubon.org.

SAS Website

www.sassafrasaudubon.org

Webmaster

Susan Hengeveld (shengeve@indiana.edu)

Leaflet Staff

Co-editors John Eakin, Jim Mitchell

Designer Julie Dales

Mailing Ann Maxwell

Direct address changes and requests for single issues to: Ann Maxwell, Database Manager; P.O. Box 85; Bloomington, IN 47402.

We invite readers to submit material for consideration for publication. Contact the editors at eakin@indiana.edu and jl Mitchell33@comcast.net.

The SAS *Leaflet* is printed by Fine Print on tree-free paper. The *Leaflet* is published six times per year by the Sassafras Audubon Society on approximately the first of January, March, May, July, September, and November.

JOIN SAS

Support Sassafras Audubon Society local educational programs, outings, and conservation projects by being a Friend of SAS. Friends receive membership in SAS, the Leaflet bimonthly newsletter, and a 10 percent discount on selected items at the Bloomington Wild Birds Unlimited and Bloomington Hardware stores. Support national conservation efforts through the National Audubon Society and receive Audubon magazine along with automatic chapter membership in SAS. But, because NAS dues primarily support national projects, we encourage you to also become a Friend of SAS. As a Friend, you will have the satisfaction of supporting your local chapter and its local projects!

Sassafras Audubon Society Membership Application

Name: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

E-Mail Address: _____

- Friend of the Sassafras Audubon Society \$20/year x ___ year(s) \$ _____
Includes chapter membership in SAS
 - National Audubon Society Membership \$20 for first year \$ _____
Special introductory offer (regularly \$35/year)
(Renewals go through National Audubon Society)
 - Additional Contribution to SAS \$ _____
- Total enclosed \$ _____

Mail your completed application along with your check to: Sassafras Audubon Society, Attention Membership Coordinator, P.O. Box 85, Bloomington, IN 47402.

Thank you for supporting Sassafras Audubon Society!

For more information about membership, e-mail us at SAS@sassafrasaudubon.org.



SAS Calendar

January/February 2010

All SAS-sponsored outings and programs are free and open to nonmembers. Watch our website (www.sassafrasaudubon.org) and the *Bloomington Birds* e-mail list for announcements about other upcoming events.

Saturday, Jan. 30: Eagle Watch Preview

Join Jeff Riegel for a warm-up trip before Eagle Watch Weekend. We will meet at K-Mart East in the northeast corner of the parking lot (near Bloomingsoods). We will leave at 8 a.m. and return around noon. Direct inquiries to jkriegel@BirdCountry.US.

Friday, Feb. 5, through Sunday, Feb. 7: Eagle Watch Weekend

See article in this *Leaflet* for details. Contact Jeff Riegel at jkriegel@BirdCountry.US.

Friday, Feb. 12, through Monday, Feb. 15: Great Backyard Bird Count

Join birders all across the nation for a bit of citizen science. Count on just one day or on all four days. For information on how you can participate, see article in this *Leaflet* for details. Also consult www.birdsource.org.

Saturday, Feb. 27: Goose Pond and Beehunter Marsh

Join us for a trip to Goose Pond and Beehunter Marsh. We will meet at the northeast corner of the Super Walmart on Bloomfield Road (near gas station). We will leave at 7 a.m. (sunrise is 7:22). We will carpool to GPFWA and return in early afternoon. Contact Don Allen at donandchar2@gmail.com or (812) 327-0543. 

Hill Country Warbler Fest, April 30 through May 2

We here in south-central Indiana are blessed with being able to live in the third-largest tract of basically contiguous deciduous forest in the eastern United States. It is what makes us birders go nuts with spring migration and the return of numerous species of warblers, vireos, tanagers, and a whole lot more. Our own birding mecca will be featured in a new event April 30–May 2, the Hill Country Warbler Fest. Partners for the event include Sassafras Audubon Society, the Nature Conservancy, SORA Productions, and BirdCountry.US. While the schedule is still being finalized, we are proud to be able to announce our featured keynote speaker for the weekend, Don Kroodsma, known to many as the “Dean of Birdsong.” Kroodsma is a professor emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, visiting fellow at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and the author of *The Singing Life of Birds — The Art and Science of Listening to Birdsong*. Look for more information in the next issue of the *Leaflet* or go to www.BirdCountry.US/warblerfest/. 



Editors' Note: Thanks, Leaflet staff!

by John Eakin and Jim Mitchell

Thanks to all the people who have been and are on the Leaflet staff. We new editors have begun to really appreciate all the hard work you do. We will certainly miss Bob Dodd as editor. He did a great job. 

Future of SAS *continued from page 1*

longer seems to provide the rationale for the group's existence. What remains is birding, and the kinds of activities featured on the website. Organizations, like the human beings who create them, have a life span, and this one may have run its course.

Give me a reason why we don't just close this thing down and go birding.

**Editors' note: Laura Hammond has agreed to continue as treasurer.*

.....

My e-mail of this message to 110 people resulted in eight replies with no volunteers, one outright refusal to serve, and one admission (after the fact) that these e-mails are routinely deleted without being read.

Dawn Hewitt wrote an article in the Nov. 16 edition of the Bloomington *Herald-Times* that described our plight, and she included my e-mail address so that anyone with any suggestions might contact me. No one did.

Perhaps some of you saw this article because the Sunday *Herald-Times* covers roughly the same area that the National Audubon

Society selects our members from (you automatically become a member of SAS when you pay your NAS dues).

It seems clear that the time has come for SAS to take stock of its present mission and to reflect on the viability of the organization in the time to come. To that end, I have organized a **general meeting on Tuesday, Jan. 19, at 6:30 p.m.** The purpose of the meeting is to “brainstorm” about the future of SAS. Everyone is welcome to attend.

The meeting will be held at The Eye Center of Southern Indiana at 1011 W. Second St. in Bloomington. Park in the upper parking lot and enter through the side door on the northeast corner of the building. At this time we will also vote on an amendment to the bylaws concerning term limits for officers and members of the board, and to confirm a new president as recommended by the board. 

General Meeting!
Tuesday, Jan. 19
6:30 p.m.



Banner Year at Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area in 2009

by Lee Sterrenburg

Back when the Goose Pond wetland and grassland restoration project work began in 2001, could anyone ever have predicted the birds using the property in the year 2009?

2009 was a year to remember at Goose Pond Fish and Wildlife Area in Greene County, Ind. The restoration adage “build it and they will come” was on display in full force.

The entire WRP/NRCS restoration easement at GFWFA is 7,200 acres. Of that, about 4,000 acres are wetlands. The entire restoration project is now complete. The last 1,993 acres of wetlands were finished in fall 2008. Main Pool West, Main Pool East, and Units GP7 and GP16 filled with water during spring and summer 2009. Many species rapidly found and colonized the newly expanded wetlands.

A bird bonanza ensued. A stunning seven different species produced all-time Indiana state record high counts. They were Northern Pintail, Great Egret, Green Heron, Greater Yellowlegs, Lesser Yellowlegs, White Ibis, and the first confirmed state record of Roseate Spoonbill. Several species had confirmed breeding on the property for the first time, including Great Egret, Cattle Egret, Black-crowned Night-Heron, American Coot, Wilson’s Snipe, and Swamp Sparrow.

The main highlight was the remarkable incursion of southern species during summer and early fall. In addition to the first state record Roseate Spoonbill, the property hosted all three species of ibis for the second straight year, both species of whistling-ducks at the same time, a large contingent of Cattle Egrets, the property’s first three Least Terns, and up to five or six suspected but not confirmed Mottled Ducks. Prolonged drought in southern Texas and Florida may have helped to drive some of these southern birds northward.

Here is an inventory of some significant one-day high counts arranged by taxonomic group. High waterfowl tallies included three Black-bellied Whistling-Ducks, five Fulvous Whistling-Ducks, 600 Gadwalls, 1,281 Blue-winged Teal (state record high for spring), 9,120 Northern Pintails (all-time state record high), 780 Northern Shovelers, 811 Green-winged Teal (highest state fall season count in 20 years), and 1,821 Ring-necked Ducks. Other counts included 266 Double-crested Cormorants and 22 long-staying American White Pelicans.

Wading birds were spectacular. High counts included 14 American Bitterns (second-highest state record), 397 Great Blue Herons, 1,324 Great Egrets (all-time state record high), 11 Little Blue Herons, 55 Cattle Egrets (third-highest state record), 56 Green Herons (all-time state high), 42 Black-crowned Night-Herons, five Yellow-crowned Night-Herons, 16 White Ibises (all-time state high), two Glossy Ibises, and one White-faced Ibis. Indiana’s first confirmed Roseate Spoonbill showed up in early June and stayed for an amazing 97 days. In early December the property hosted the first-ever winter-season Plegadis ibis sp in Indiana history. Raptor highlights were many and included a new property high count of 17 Bald Eagles.



Above — Roseate Spoonbill. Photo by Jim Sullivan



Left — Juvenile White Ibis. Photo by Marty Jones

All five species of Indiana rails once again visited the Goose Pond FWA wetlands. Single Yellow Rails were found on two occasions and single Black Rails on four occasions. King Rails probably had seven known breeding pairs or territories on the

property, with downy young or feathered juveniles observed for either three or four of the King Rail pairs. Virginia Rails were recorded in four different units during the summer season. Soras were found at several places during summer. Sandhill Cranes recorded a high tally of 5,500 in March. The high count of nine Whooping Cranes in March represented more than 10 percent of the entire eastern free-flying population of this federally endangered species.

The property recorded 27 species of shorebirds this year. The newly graded mudflat areas in Main Pool West helped to produce new all-time Indiana state record high counts of 497 Greater Yellowlegs and 1,300 Lesser Yellowlegs during April. Other shorebird high tallies of note included 33 Black-necked Stilts, 357 American Golden-Plovers, six Willets, two Marbled Godwits, one Ruddy Turnstone, two Western Sandpipers, Baird’s Sandpipers in both spring and fall, a new property high of 48 Stilt Sandpipers, 369 Wilson’s Snipe, and one Red-necked Phalarope.

The wetland restoration project includes a nesting island for federally endangered interior Least Terns. The three Least Terns that showed up during mid-June and stayed for a week were thus a noteworthy development. Black Tern registered a new property high of 42 in May; up to five adult Black Terns were present in June and July but no evidence of breeding activity was found. Migrating Common Terns produced a new property high of 107 in May.

Land birds had some gratifying results. The property’s first Loggerhead Shrike made an appearance in March. Sassafras Audubon Society conducted a grassland rapid survey on June 13. Multiple parties walking transects tallied a very impressive 192 Henslow’s Sparrows. Fire-managed grasslands like those at GPFWA may offer some of the best hope for this rapidly declining sparrow species. Bobolinks fared well with a one-day high of 138 in fall.

The restoration project has been a resounding success. 2009 was the best year so far for bird numbers and diversity at Goose Pond FWA.

A Dream Comes True: Fairview Swift Tower Complete

by Bob Dodd

At last the dream has come true. The efforts of many people, SAS members and others, have been answered with completion of the Chimney Swift tower at Fairview School. All that remains now is design and attachment of two plaques and formal dedication of the tower. Actually I guess the real dedication will take place when the first swifts discover the tower and decide to make it their home.

It all started early in 2008 when we learned from Marti Crouch, who lives near Fairview School, that as part of the construction of a new school, the old building and its chimney would be destroyed. Some SAS members and neighborhood residents were dismayed because the old Fairview chimney has been a roosting site for Chimney Swifts for many years. Roosting sites of this type are becoming scarce in Bloomington and for that matter in most cities and towns across the country. Populations of Chimney Swifts have been in decline in recent years, probably in part because of lack of suitable nesting and roosting sites.

During the summer of 2008 Marti Crouch and Dawn Hewitt attended a meeting of the Bloomington Planning Commission to express their concern about loss of the chimney. Chris Sturbaum was at the meeting and began looking for a solution. Also during that summer a few SAS members (Dawn Hewitt, Nancy Martin, and myself) plus Fairview neighbors (especially Marti Crouch) attended MCCSC school board meetings to ask that the old chimney be preserved as a freestanding structure or that a swift-friendly chimney be included as part of the new construction. Although the board gave us a sympathetic hearing, they indicated that they were already over budget and no funds were available for modifying existing plans for the building. Further, the architect indicated that preserving the old chimney as a freestanding structure was not practical.

Somewhere along the process that summer, with the encouragement of Lois Sabo-Skelton, Chris Sturbaum became interested, not just in preserving a roost for the swifts

Populations of Chimney Swifts have been in decline in recent years, probably in part because of lack of suitable nesting and roosting sites.

but also in preserving a bit of the history of the school. Sturbaum prepared a plan for a freestanding swift tower. He obtained an estimate from a local contractor for about \$10,500 for building the tower. We informed the SAS board of directors of developments and they agreed to donate \$500 to the project.

At this point we had a meeting of interested parties to see if we could in some way fund construction of the tower. Dawn Hewitt and I were at the meeting as unofficial representatives of SAS. Lois Sabo-Skelton, a member of the MCCSC School Board, attended the meeting, as did Chris Sturbaum. All people at the meeting were enthusiastic about the project and felt that we should be able to raise the money. Hewitt and I agreed to work through SAS to raise \$3,500, Sturbaum was confident that he could get \$3,500 from Bloomington Urban Enterprise Association, and Sabo-Skelton said she would work with MCCSC sources (perhaps through the MCCSC Foundation) to raise \$3,500. That would give us the \$10,500.

Hewitt made a big push through her *Herald-Times* column and we both pushed for it in the *Leaflet*. Contributions started to roll in, and before long we reached and exceeded our \$3,500 goal. Some of the contributions we received were probably from people more interested in the educational value of the tower than strictly conservation. This likely contributed to the MCCSC Foundation not reaching its goal. Through Chris Sturbaum's efforts the city agreed to contribute \$3,500, using funds from their 2008 budget.

We had raised about \$8,000–\$9,000 as time for construction approached. So we began to look for other sources and decided to “go back to the well” again to see if we could get more contributions. The Bloomington Board of Realtors agreed to



Chimney Swift tower. Photo by Bob Dodd

contribute \$500. Although the \$3,500 from the city “substituted” for the money we had originally hoped to get from BUEA, that organization agreed to grant \$1,000 for the project. Several SAS members contributed additional funds at this time. We especially appreciate the \$500 contributions from Bob Kissel's and Bernie Sloan's foundations. Hewitt contacted the Raymond Foundation, which had previously expressed interest in the project, and they agreed to contribute \$2,000. We ultimately secured a total of \$13,537 for constructing the tower.

The general contractor for the Fairview School project wanted far more than our budget would allow. Whaley Construction agreed to build the tower at cost, \$13,000. Sturbaum and Whaley Construction negotiated with various suppliers to contribute services and materials gratis. The value of these contributions was almost \$7,000. The “official” cost of the tower was \$13,000, but the actual cost was closer to \$20,000. The estimate for the plaques, not included in the construction cost, is \$300. One of the plaques will focus on the natural history of Chimney Swifts and the other will outline the history of Fairview School and thank the contributors to the tower. So in the end we had enough money to complete the project.

Congratulations and our most sincere thanks to the many SAS members and others who made this magnificent project happen. 🐦

Answer to Name That Bird:
Tree Swallow



Great Backyard Bird Count, Feb. 12–15



Northern Cardinal. Photo by Susan Hengeveld

Backyard birders, be prepared. Feb. 12–15 is the big weekend for the 2010 Great Backyard Bird Count. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon

Society jointly lead the project with support from sponsors Wild Birds Unlimited, National Conservation Resource Service, and

Cornell Information Technologies. To participate, all you need to do is identify and count the birds in your yard (back, front, or side will do). You can easily report your results online at www.birdcount.org. It takes less than five minutes to submit your list (unless you have a very large number of birds to report!). The data collected from thousands of submitted lists help researchers track trends in bird numbers and migration. This is your chance to make a valuable contribution to an important scientific project. Rob Fergus, senior scientist, National Audubon Society, says, “Each year the GBBC provides the most detailed snapshot of bird distribution across North America, and we see how birds are responding to changing weather patterns, available food sources, and other factors.”

If you’re more ambitious, you can expand your backyard to include local parks, lakes, or country roadsides. Those data expand the value of the survey beyond the urban or suburban setting. That would also be a way of increasing our local species totals. You may also submit photos of birds seen in your count. There are several categories. All participants in the photo contest will be entered in a drawing for prizes such as binoculars and bird feeders. Check out the GBBC website at www.birdcount.org for the simple rules and directions.

Last year, Bloomington counters submitted 224 GBBC lists, the highest total in the state, well above the 151 lists sent in by Indianapolis birders. The Bloomington total of 83 species was below

the 89 totaled by Evansville. Bloomington birdwatchers, do not let our championship in Indiana list totals slip away this year. In fact, let’s try to be in the top 10 lists for the country. Last year Wilmington, N.C., was No. 10 with 250 lists, so we are within striking distance. Mentor, Ohio, was first with 762 checklists. Indiana participants submitted a total of 1,794 checklists, and a total of 131 species were identified. The state with the most checklists was Pennsylvania (5,519). Texas reported the most species (341). Dugger, Ind., the locality nearest Hawthorn Mine area, was the locality with the most birds identified (162,036). Florida had the most birds (925,863) while Indiana came in 10th in the category with 356,360 birds identified.

We would like to see other communities in our area join the competition. The following cities and towns in our area submitted lists last year (in order of number of lists): Columbus, Mitchell, Ellettsville, Unionville, Bedford, Bloomfield, Martinsville, Gosport, Linton, Nashville, Heltonville, Spencer, Avoca, Dugger, Solsberry, Crane, Harrodsburg, Monroe Lake, and Oolitic.

Participation by school children as class projects is one of the reasons for the large number of lists from Bloomington. School teachers: why not try participation in the GBBC as a way to teach your students an appreciation of nature. And parents: this is a way you can encourage your children to share in your love of birds and nature. 

Fall Feeder Cleaning Success

Last Oct. 24 SAS conducted a successful fall feeder cleaning project. This semi-annual project raised a total of \$572. That was \$201 more than we earned in fall 2008. This project not only raised needed funds but also made many feeders healthier for the birds. Co-chairpersons Nancy Martin and Jim Mitchell wish to thank all who volunteered to spend part of their day power-washing and scrubbing feeders. Participants included Don Allen, Bob Dodd, Dawn Hewitt, Cathy Meyers, Tom Platt, and Jeff Riegel.

And SAS board member Ann Maxwell adds this note of thanks: On behalf of the board and the membership, recognition and thanks go to David Daniels, Nancy Martin, and Jim Mitchell for yet another successful feeder cleaning event this fall. For many years, David has been a consistent and reliable volunteer. Although he could not be there for this one, he has been part of the backbone of this event and even allowed us to hold these events several times at his retail establishment in Bloomington, the local Wild Birds Unlimited store. David and Nancy have been the driving forces for the feeder cleanings. Nancy generously loans us her steam-cleaning equipment at no charge, and she, David, and Jim have donated countless hours of their time to organizing and running this important fundraiser. No matter what the weather, their smiling faces and willing hands are always there for us. In every organization, a small percentage of the members are the ones who keep the organization running smoothly, who work hard to support us. Jim, Nancy, and David are three of these people for Sassafras Audubon Society. Please, let them know how much we appreciate them! 

SAS Helps with HEE Project

by Jeff Riegel

“Who-cooks-for-you, who-cooks-for-you-all,” the familiar call of the Barred Owl, can be heard throughout the year, but the earlier in the year, the better — at least for a team of local citizen scientists and research personnel from Purdue University. Dec. 1, 2009, marked the beginning of the winter owl survey season as a new arm of the Hardwood Ecosystem Experiment in Morgan–Monroe and Yellowwood State Forests as well as Brown County State Park. Surveys will continue through the end of February.

The HEE project is studying the regeneration of oak trees in our local state forests and the impacts that various management practices have on a wide variety of forest life including songbirds, timber rattlesnakes, long-horned beetles, moths, Eastern box turtles, Cerulean Warblers, whitetail deer, Eastern chipmunks and numerous other small mammals such as mice, voles, and shrews ... and now, Barred Owls and Eastern Screech Owls.

continued on page 7

The 2009 Northern Saw-whet Owl Migration Season

by Ross Brittain

The eighth year of the migration study of the Northern Saw-whet Owl (*Aegolius acadicus*), sponsored by SAS, started on Oct. 17 this fall and ended on Dec. 4 with the slowest season we have ever experienced. This study is part of Project OwlNet (www.projectowl.net) and is designed to analyze the migratory population dynamics of these secretive little owls in southern Indiana by capturing and banding migrating owls in Yellowwood State Forest (YSF, Brown County) and in Newark (Greene County). The saw-whet owl is the smallest of all the birds of prey that occur in Indiana, weighing only about 85 grams on average. They may breed in northern Indiana, but breeding pairs are extremely rare in southern Indiana.

We captured only nine individual saw-whet owls this year in YSF, compared to our seven-year average of 80 owls per season. Additionally, Jess Gwinn had 26 saw-whet owls in Newark compared to his six-year average of 76. However, the results of this year's banding operations had different demographics than the previous years, likely due to the low numbers of owls captured. Typically we have around 55-60 percent hatch-year birds migrating through southern Indiana, but this year there were only 45 percent hatch-

year saw-whets. The sex ratios showed the usual high percentage of females (65 percent) compared to males (15 percent), but the percent of females was a little lower than years past (80 percent).

There were no recaptures of owls banded at other stations across the continent this year, but that was not surprising given the paucity of owls. Local recaptures (birds captured at one station and then recaptured at the same station later in the season) were nonexistent in YSF, but Gwinn did have one local recapture at Newark this year.

The reason for the lack of owls this year in southern Indiana is largely speculative. However, we know that this year was supposed to be a down year in the four-year cycle of saw-whet owl populations in the eastern half of the continent. Thus, we had expected a slow year, but not necessarily this slow. Contributing factors included an extremely warm October and November with week after week of nights with southerly winds that likely discouraged the owls from moving further south. Additionally, the tree mast (nuts and seeds) was extremely low in the area this year. What does tree mast have to do with owl populations, you ask? Tree mast provides food for small mammal prey species, such as deer mice, that saw-whets prefer to eat. The lack of tree mast likely caused a crash in potential prey animals such that saw-whets moving into the area were discouraged from staying, which likely explains the lack of local recaptures this year. Those of you surveying for saw-whet owls this winter should know that their populations are down in Indiana this year.

As the coordinator for the Yellowwood State Forest NSWOW Banding Station, I would like to thank my colleagues, Jeffrey Hammond, Jim Hengeveld, Susan Hengeveld, Vicky Meretsky, Gary Miller, and Jeff Riegel, for all of their hard work and dedication in being willing to spend some long, cold nights in the woods ... especially with so few owls this year. Also, I would like to thank all of the volunteers who came out to help us set up and check the nets on those slow nights. There are too many of you to mention by name, but your efforts were greatly appreciated. Most of all, I would like to thank Sassafras Audubon Society for your continued support of this project. Without the contributions of those who donate to our Owl Adoption Fund, this study would not be possible. 🐦

IU Campus Bird Surveys

by Stephen Friesen

I wrote to you several months ago concerning the development of a campuswide bird survey, intended to document migratory visitors as well as summer and winter residents at Indiana University. This effort would be Sassafras Audubon's contribution to the IU Office of Sustainability and their efforts to improve and create natural areas on campus. Some of the management plans are quite specific: to improve the ecological integrity of the Jordan River system, for example. Other initiatives are broader in scope, such as a substantial increase in the tree canopy cover over the next 25 years. These management plans give our proposed bird census something of an experimental flavor, as changes to the campus environment might influence (even if modestly) the distribution and abundance of various species on campus. We also hope that the data we accumulate may encourage further management initiatives aimed at creating better habitats for birds.

Our conservation committee has discussed the viability and desirability of a campus bird survey with faculty from SPEA and the Department of Biology. Everyone thought it was an idea worth pursuing. We also learned that students and faculty at SPEA have been analyzing habitats and taking a tree inventory of areas in and around campus. In addition to our census, this data may provide valuable information about bird life at IU. We have also discussed ways in which students and Sassafras members could be involved.

For now I'm asking that you stay tuned as our committee works with the Office of Sustainability and faculty from IU to develop some structure for a spring, summer, and winter census. Ultimately, we would like this to be a community project. Let us know if this is something you want to be a part of. 🐦

HEE Project *continued from page 6*

The first module of the three-module study will survey for Barred Owls four times during December and January at 90 points in the state forests, Brown County State Park, and Hoosier National Forest. The second module will see two surveys for Eastern Screech Owls at another 90 points in February. The Barred Owl surveys will be repeated in May and June to look at their productivity. Other nocturnal birds, such as Whip-poor-wills and Chuck-will's-widows, will be included in those surveys. The third module, scheduled to begin in 2011, will involve an extensive look at habitat selection and prey abundance of Eastern Screech Owls.

"It's clear that a project of this size could not happen without the help of volunteers from the local community," says Jeff Riegel, Purdue University field supervisor. "We now have 23 people working on these surveys. I can't say enough about these folks and their dedication." For more information, check out www.HEEForestStudy.org. 🐦

Green Birding 2009 by Bernie Sloan

I became interested in “green” birding by accident. Literally. A tumble down a flight of stairs in late 2007 left me with a broken arm. I was unable to drive, and even getting in and out of a car on the passenger side was painful. I soon grew tired of sitting in a recliner watching the birds at my feeders. I was anxious to go birding again, even though my injury pretty much ruled out driving to my usual birding sites. That December Jim Hengeveld posted a note to the B-BIRDS e-mail list about a new kind of birding — the Big Green Big Year. The BIGBY involves keeping track of the birds you see while not using the internal combustion engine.

Intrigued, I decided to do a BIGBY for 2008, walking through my neighborhood, the nearby Indiana University cross country course, and the wooded hills north of the XC course. I started with short walks, gradually increasing the distance as the pain in my arm subsided. By the end of 2008 I had tallied 161 BIGBY species.

As 2009 began, I set a goal of 170 species. By the end of November my 2009 BIGBY count stood at 178 species. Highlights included seven woodpecker species, 10 flycatchers, 17 sparrows, and more than 30 warbler species. Earlier in 2009 my BIGBY highlight was several White-winged Crossbills. But THE highlight of the year was the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher that appeared on the IU XC course at the end of October. There are fewer than 20 Indiana records for this bird, and very few fall records.

But green birding is more than simply keeping a list of BIGBY birds. When you focus your energies on a local piece of land, you start to notice more than birds. You begin to pay closer attention to the local ecosystem. Prior to 2008, IU regularly mowed the whole XC course, destroying nesting habitat for grassland birds in the process. Early in 2008 I lobbied IU to limit its mowing to just the XC running trails. The bulk of the XC course (40+ acres) has not been mowed since mid-May 2008, resulting in a big increase in nesting grassland birds like the Eastern Meadowlark. (For some “before” and “after” mowing photos, see <http://tinyurl.com/XC-photos>.) The presence of the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in October was due in part to this change in mowing policy. Grasshoppers are a mainstay in this bird’s diet, and the XC course has been loaded with grasshoppers since the mowing stopped.

Finally, green birding can go a long way toward reducing a birder’s carbon footprint. I recently calculated how many miles I used to drive while birding in Brown, Monroe, and Owen counties. I was surprised to find that I’d been driving an average of 700 miles a month while birding “locally.” By walking to do most of my birding, I estimate I’ve reduced my carbon dioxide output by 6.5 TONS since January 2008.

I’m certainly not recommending that birders forego the use of the internal combustion engine while pursuing their avocation. I’m simply suggesting that people think twice before hopping into the car to go birding. Maybe, just maybe, you might find some real birding gems in your own back yards. 

DISCOUNT COUPON

Show this coupon with your address label to receive a 10% discount on purchases (excluding books and optical equipment) from the Wild Birds Unlimited Store in Bloomington, Indiana, or for a 10% discount on items in the bird department at Bloomington Hardware. Please keep the coupon for future purchases. Coupon expires Feb. 28, 2010.



DISCOUNT COUPON

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Non-Profit
Organization
US Postage
PAID
Permit No. 193
Bloomington, IN

SASSAFRAS
AUDUBON
SOCIETY
P.O. Box 85
Bloomington,
Indiana 47402-0085
The Leaflet is printed
on tree-free paper.

