



the
almanac

Newsletter of the Aldo Leopold Audubon Society, Inc.

September 2024

Aldo Leopold Audubon Society
presents

A Sand County Almanac: Behind the Essays

Dr. Stan Temple
speaker

Wednesday
Sept 16
7 p.m.

In person: Lincoln Center
1519 Water Street, Stevens Point

Zoom: <https://tinyurl.com/ALAS2024Oct16>



Upcoming Events

| | | |
|--------|-----------------|--|
| Oct 11 | ALAS field trip | <i>Saw-whet Owl Banding</i> |
| Nov 13 | ALAS | <i>November board meeting</i> |
| Nov 20 | ALAS program | <i>Bridging the Gap: Black Bear Science and Policy</i> |

www.aldoleopoldaudubon.org

UPCOMING EVENTS



ALAS Field Trip *Saw-whet Owl Banding* Friday, Oct 11 7:30 PM

Join us for a really special evening learning about North America's smallest owl. Gene Jacobs and Brad Branwell will cover their natural history, band recoveries, sexing, and aging and banding saw-whets. We will take a walk out to one of the nets where "Scruffy", the Saw-whet, will give you a demonstration on how the mist nets work. Then we'll go through the banding process back in the research station with live owls. After taking some questions from the audience, you can join us back outdoors, where we will release the owls back into their nocturnal environment. Be prepared for a surprise visit from Wisconsin's largest nesting owl.

This event is on the west side of the Wisconsin River at Linwood Springs Research Station 1601 Brown Deer Ln. Stevens Point.

Pre-registration is required. www.aldoleopoldaudubon.org/event-details/northern-saw-whet-owl-banding-at-linwood-springs-1

For more information Karen Dostal 715-592-4706

STEVENS POINT WEEKLY BIRD WALK SCHEDULE AUTUMN 2024

Starting in September, the Stevens Point Bird Walks will be taking every third weekend off. For specific details and location information, please visit the ALAS website <https://www.aldoleopoldaudubon.org/weeklywalks> or follow Portage Co Birding on Facebook. November schedule is below:

Sunday, Nov 3 - Lake DuBay

Nov 9/10 - No Walk

Saturday, Nov 16 - Iverson Park

Sunday, Nov 24 - Iverson Park

Nov 30/Dec 1 - No Walk (Holiday Weekend)

More Jewels of Nature will be available at the October meeting and online, or send in the order form in this newsletter. Start your holiday shopping now, and get one for yourself!

Aldo Leopold Audubon programs and field trips are free and open to the public.

STORIES BEHIND THE ESSAYS: A SAND COUNTY ALMANAC



Aldo Leopold is best known for his 1949 book, *A Sand County Almanac*, but the story of how that famous contribution to conservation literature came to be is unknown to most. Few know that the book had been rejected by several publishers who concluded there would be no readership for such a book. Leopold learned that his book would be published only weeks before he died in 1948, and he never saw it in print. It took almost 20 years for the book to finally gain an appreciative readership when the modern environmental movement emerged in the 1960s. Since then, *A Sand County Almanac* has been considered the movement's bible. Professor Stan Temple reveals dozens of engaging stories behind Leopold's essays, and explains why the book's timeless, yet timely message still resonates 70 years after it was first published.

Stanley (Stan) Temple is the Beers-Bascom Professor Emeritus in Conservation in the Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology and former Chairman of the Conservation Biology and Sustainable Development Program in the Gaylord Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at UW-Madison. For 32 years, he held the academic position once occupied by Aldo Leopold. He is currently a Senior Fellow with the Aldo Leopold Foundation. He has received major conservation awards from the Society for Conservation Biology, The Wildlife Society, and the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology. Among other recognition of his achievements, he is a Fellow of the American Ornithologists' Union, Explorers Club, Wildlife Conservation Society, American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters. He has been President of the Society for Conservation Biology, and Chairman of the Board of The Nature Conservancy in Wisconsin.

Join us for Dr. Temple's presentation on Wednesday, October 16 at 7 pm. ALAS programs for the 2024-25 season will continue to be hybrid with the in-person presentation held at the Lincoln Center (1519 Water St., Stevens Point, Wisconsin) and available to view remotely live via Zoom. To view via Zoom, register at <https://tinyurl.com/ALAS2024Oct16> Find this link on our website under the Events-Presentations tab.

**Dates are correct as of press time.
Always be sure to check the ALAS website before you leave!**

DELIGHTFUL BIRDS I HAVE KNOWN

Yellow-headed Blackbird (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*)

Alan Haney



Yellow-headed Blackbird.

Photo courtesy National Park Service.

Why do some deep-water marshes hold a population of Yellow-headed Blackbirds one year, and not the next? Why would nature select for a brilliantly yellow head on an otherwise nicely camouflaged blackbird? There is mystery and wonder in every facet of nature.

Poking with a canoe through the dense reeds and cattails, we were delighted to discover a colony of nesting Yellow-headed Blackbirds, where we had not in previous years found them. Overseeing his harem of six females, each with her nest,

the spectacular male aggressively defended his small aquatic territory. His song, if it might be called such, has been likened to an old, rusty gate hinge; or a “wavering, raucous wail like a chainsaw;” coupled with “a slow, raucous rattle;” and a “whistled trill.” I, however, find his vocalization rather pleasing to my ear, although certainly not musical.

Like the Brewer’s Blackbird, the Yellow-headed Blackbird is a species of western and prairie wetlands. It expanded eastward in the ‘20s, contracted during droughts in the ‘30s, then continued expansion since, but has remained largely west of the Great Lakes. It has been suggested that the natural range was defined by the eastward extension of tall-grass prairie, where nesting was within prairie sloughs. As natural wetlands were drained, other wetlands were created by dams and levees, opening up other opportunities for the species.

Populations of this bird in Wisconsin come and go without evident cause, although the species is not easy to miss when it is present. Their nesting habitat, selected by the male who establishes a small territory, is in deep water with dense cattails, reeds, or bulrushes. It has been noted that selection of a territory is often close to that of a Forester’s Tern (see page XX), with perhaps a symbiotic benefit of greater protection from predators. Nearly always, the habitat will be shared by Red-winged

Blackbirds. Predators are many, even Marsh Wrens who find the eggs to be a good source of fat and protein.

Females attracted by the male select a location within his territory for their nests, which are always attached to emergent vegetation, over water usually three feet or more deep. She defends a small area around her nest, but tolerates nearby females who may be mated with the same male. First, and even second-year males often remain unmated, and simply roam around. Females sometimes mate with one or more of them when her male is not watching, or with a male from an adjacent territory.

The female uses wet reeds and grass to weave her nest within the emergent vegetation, and as the nest dries, it seems to become even more securely constructed. It is lined with finer grass. She typically lays 3-5 eggs and incubates the clutch for 12-13 days herself. The male usually will assist her in feeding the young, at least those of his first mate. He is much less inclined to feed young hatched by other females who join his harem, leaving the females to provide their food alone.

During the nesting period, Yellow-headed Blackbirds feed primarily on insects or other arthropods of many kinds. In optimal habitat, they forage near their nests, but may need to forage more widely if insufficient food cannot be obtained locally. They sometimes take larger insects such as dragonflies on the wing, and will use their beaks to probe into soil or litter. Fortunately, the productivity of their typical wetland habitat is great, and food is not hard to find. As young mature, they will leave the nest 9-12 days after hatching, but remain within the emergent vegetation nearby, attended by the female. In three weeks, they are ready to leave the habitat and go with adults to nearby fields, their diet gradually shifting to more seeds and grain.

As summer winds down, Yellow-headed Blackbirds begin to flock, very often with other blackbirds, often foraging en masse in grainfields after harvests. They continue to roost in wetlands, and as autumn advances, they move south, eventually to southern Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas, and deep into Mexico, females going farther south. They forage in surrounding fields and rangeland. Those nesting in Wisconsin return beginning in mid-April, males first, followed by females a week or two later.

Never abundant, Yellow-headed Blackbird populations have remained steady in the Midwest, where wetlands now are better protected. Climate change is a clear threat to this delightful species because of changes in precipitation patterns, but Yellow-headed Blackbird populations have always been dynamic, and perhaps they will take these changes in stride.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Karen Dostal

Who can argue that October is a spectacular month in Wisconsin? The colorful array of arboreal autumnal splendor and one of nature's great wonders, bird migration, all packed into the month. Whether you note when the last hummingbird visits your feeders, or when the first Dark-eyed Junco makes itself at home in your backyard, we find fascination with these winged harbingers of seasonal change. Sometimes though, during migration, a bird or a flock of them finds a way to places they don't usually inhabit.

One of my favorite activities is swimming the glacial pothole lakes in the area. Many of these are small no-wake lakes. I take long swims even when the water temperatures become cool. I was swimming one of my very favorite lakes in late September with my friend, Beth, and we saw a largeish bird fly overhead. Beth said, "heron." I looked at the bird with a quizzical eye and said yes but...my mind eliminated Great Blue and Little Green, both common on this favored lake. I said, "It is rare that I don't recognize a bird." Being smack-dab in the middle of fall migration, however, opens possibilities. I took note of the bird's markings: most notable on this rare bird were the white breast and head from underneath, in addition to the very heron-like set to the wings. When I got home, I checked the field guide and discovered that the most likely name to give this rare bird is (drumroll, please) Black-crowned Night Heron!

So, I submitted a report on eBird describing the bird and its location. Our local eBird reviewer and friend, Rob Pendergast, replied with a positive confirmation of the sighting, saying they are not super-out-of-the-ordinary this time of year. Rob also noted that BCNHs may turn up in the eastern half of the United States pretty regularly, and that this observation adds to that suspicion. We decided that this bird's secretive nature may be the reason they are not seen often. I have seen them in Texas and Mexico at night, hunting from piers or shorelines, but I don't think I had ever seen one in flight, especially during daylight hours.

Rare birds fascinate! I'm not one who jumps in the car and drives to where people find rare birds. I didn't even go to Petenwell to see the flamingos a year ago. I understand why people do. I just don't find the time, I guess. However, when a rare bird crosses *my* path I do relish the experience!

Another friend who has spent a lifetime deeply appreciating both the rare, as well as the most common birds is Alan Haney! Please take the time to consider making a purchase of *More Jewels of Nature*, Alan's newest book. It is packed with information about birds found in Wisconsin, with gorgeous photos by Gerry Janz, Jeff Galligan, and others but the loveliest part of the book is Alan's own anecdotes and observations.

FALL FAMILY DAY AT THE MEAD

Karen Dostal

Families gathered at The Mead Wildlife Area on September 8 to learn and have fun outdoors.

We changed up our planned activities just to bit to offer more science-based offerings this year.

Participants made bird feeders designed by Bob Lane. All pieces were precut and children tapped in the nails to create their own durable bird feeders for each family. Bob, along with Amy Powers, helped the children complete their feeders.

Children were able to collect prairie seeds from the gardens around the building, and Scott Reilly helped the children make seed bombs to take home and plant. Many surprises now await spring!

Many fascinating invertebrates were discovered above the water and below as Susan Schuller and Karen Dostal led explorations in both habitats, with a few amphibians and reptiles discovered as well.

Rob Pendergast from ALAS and Craig Ziolkowski took those interested on a wagon ride to find birds along the trails. They had a great time with many species observed, the highlight being a third-year juvenile bald eagle soaring low overhead as they returned to more fun to close the event.

The whole group was captivated by David Stokes, who spent over an hour educating and entertaining everyone on his favorite topic, critters! Out came the turtles, amphibians, and reptiles! Laughter, fascination, and a bit of pandemonium reigned.

Special thanks and our sincere appreciation go to the staff of the Mead and Friends of Mead Wildlife Area for their help and support. Thanks also to Jackie Mather and Amy Powers for extra hands-on support during the event. Special thanks to Craig Ziolkowski and Meleesa Johnson for monetary support donated to ALAS, and to all the ALAS board members who pitched in to create a fun day of learning for so many



Photo by Jackie Mather.

AVIAN KID'S CORNER

Susan Schuller

What makes an owl an owl? We know they are birds, but they have distinct and unique features. Here are some fun facts about owls.

- Many owl species have asymmetrical ears. When located at different heights on the owl's head, their ears are able to pinpoint the location of sounds in multiple dimensions. Ready, aim, strike.
- The eyes of an owl are not true "eyeballs." Their tube-shaped eyes are completely immobile, providing binocular vision which fully focuses on their prey and boosts depth perception.
- Owls can rotate their necks 270 degrees. A blood-pooling system collects blood to power their brains and eyes when neck movement cuts off circulation.
- A group of owls is called a parliament. This originates from C.S. Lewis' description of a meeting of owls in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.
- The tiniest owl in the world is the Elf Owl, which is 5-6 inches tall and weighs about 1 1/2 ounces. The largest North American owl, in appearance, is the Great Gray Owl, which is up to 32 inches tall.
- The Northern Hawk Owl can detect—primarily by sight—a vole to eat up to a half a mile away.
- Barn Owls swallow their prey whole—skin, bones, and all—and they eat up to 1,000 mice each year.
- Not all owls hoot! Barn Owls make hissing sounds, the Eastern Screech-Owl whinnies like a horse, and Saw-whet Owls sound like, well, an old whetstone sharpening a saw. Hence the name.
- Owls are zygodactyl, which means their feet have two forward-facing toes and two backward-facing toes. Unlike most other zygodactyl birds, however, owls can pivot one of their back toes forward to help them grip and walk.

More fun owl facts can be found at <https://www.audubon.org/news/13-fun-facts-about-owls>

Owl Fact or Fiction?

There is a lot of misinformation about owls. Can you tell owl facts from owl fiction? Select "True" or "False" for each statement.

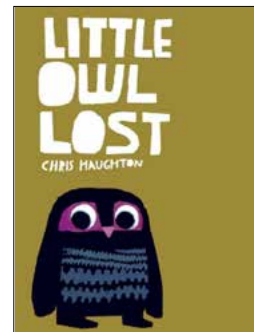
1. Screech-owls screech. _____ TRUE _____ FALSE
2. Burrowing Owls nest in burrows. _____ TRUE _____ FALSE
3. Great Horned Owls have horns. _____ TRUE _____ FALSE
4. Owls have special feathers that help them fly silently. _____ TRUE _____ FALSE

5. Many owls eat mice. _____ TRUE _____ FALSE
6. Some owls eat skunks. _____ TRUE _____ FALSE

Fun Connect the Dots on this Barn Owl and Great Horned Owl



Feathered Friend's Book Recommend:



Little Owl Lost by Chris Haughton (2010). Little Owl has fallen from his nest and landed on the ground. Now he is lost, and his mommy is nowhere to be seen! With the earnest help of his new friend Squirrel, Little Owl goes in search of animals that fit his description of Mommy Owl. A cast of adorable forest critters in neon-bright hues will engage little readers right up to the story's comforting, gently wry conclusion.

ANNUAL BIRDSEED SALE

Steve and Midge want to thank everyone who ordered bird seed this year and also thank the team that helped us get the sale information out: Lora Hagen for the newsletter and the flyer, Susan Schuller and Rob Pendergast for the website and online sales platform, and Karen Dostal for general support. We also want to thank all the volunteers who have signed up to help during the pickup times – their participation is vital.

The bird seed sale pre-orders will be ready for pickup on either Friday, October 18, from 3-6 PM, or on Saturday, October 19, from 9 AM-1 PM. The truck will be in the parking lot at the Pineries Bank in Stevens Point near Metro Market.

If you didn't get your order in on time or want to add to your order, you can still purchase items at the sale on a first-come, first-served basis. Jay-Mar provides us with some extras of the most popular items. Simply show up during the pickup times, fill out an order, and pay using cash or check (no credit cards).

AUDUBON GRANT AWARDS

ALAS has, for several years, awarded grants of up to \$300 to area schools, school forests, camps, and other environmental organizations for environmental programs and restoration projects in the Central Wisconsin region. Grants have been given for planting trees, establishing bird feeders and nest boxes, prairie planting, bird mounts and habitat exhibits, among others. After discussion at a recent meeting, the board decided to expand the grant program.

Grants will now be available for up to \$500, and even more is certain instances. We will also expand the outreach of availability through individual contacts and reaching out to other organizations such as 4H, scouting, and service groups. Board members also agreed to be available to help groups develop and implement projects.

Grant proposals should be submitted as a 1-2 page letter describing the project or program and explaining how the goals of the project meet Audubon's mission and focus. (To foster appreciation and concern for all living things, and to protect and preserve their ecosystems). Include a timeline, budget, people involved, and the intended audience. Find more information here: <https://www.aldoleopoldaudubon.org/about>

Proposals or questions should be directed to: Bob Lane, Education Chair, Aldo Leopold Audubon Society, P.O. Box 126, Amherst, WI 54406 or call 715-572-4028.

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Your dues support local chapter activities and environmental projects exclusively in Central Wisconsin. You will receive *The Almanac* newsletter and invitations to ALAS programs, field trips, and educational events. ALAS will notify you when your annual membership is due.

- \$25/year Supporter Local Chapter Membership. **Local membership expiration date**
- \$50/year Sustainer Local Chapter Membership. **is on the back cover!**
- I'll help conserve resources, protect the environment, and save postage!**
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www.aldoleopoldaudubon.org



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MORE WAYS TO GIVE

We appreciate your additional donations supporting the work of ALAS.

- \$ _____ ALAS Endowment Fund.
Managed by the Community Foundation of Central Wisconsin.
- \$ _____ ALAS Chapter Operations Fund.

ALAS will not distribute your contact information to any other organization.

ALAS and the Community Foundation are 501(c)(3) organizations. Your donation will be tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law.

Please remember ALAS in your estate planning!

Aldo Leopold Audubon Society
P.O. Box 928
Stevens Point WI 54481-0928

In this issue: Birding in Ecuador
Virginia Rail
Avian Kids
and more



the **almanac**

The mission of the Aldo Leopold Audubon Society is to foster appreciation and concern for all living things, and to protect and preserve their ecosystems.