

the WPBO migrant

The Newsletter of Whitefish Point Bird Observatory

Volume 28, Number 2 - November 2011

Sharpies Storm the Beaches (Spring Fling 2011)

What an amazing weekend! With the exception of Sunday morning, the weather was phenomenal. Those arriving on Friday (4/29) were treated to a steady hawk flight, with a record daily count of Osprey (45). Friday night viewers saw many owls from the Hawk Platform and the banders captured 13 Saw-whet owls.

Saturday's workshops were well-attended, with Mike Kielb fascinating folks with dragonfly-watching, and Skye Haas giving a great talk on the Keweenaw Raptor Survey. The Banquet had great food and a humorous presentation by Christian Boix of Tropical Birding on "The Life of a Bird Guide".

Saturday night owl watching and banding was curtailed due to the wind, followed by overnight rain. While somewhat damped, several hearty nature enthusiasts joined us for the 8:30 Sunday morning bird walk.

Those who waited out the rain were rewarded when it cleared up and the skies burst open with hawks! Passerines suddenly became scarce as there were Sharp-shinned hawks everywhere. The sight of sharpies swarming at the Point was simply unforgettable; the only way you could NOT see a hawk was by looking at your feet!

The count for sharp-shinned on this Sunday (5/1) was 6,357. Every driftwood log with a branch had either a sharpie or Kestrel sitting on it. The flight continued in gangbuster style through the brilliant afternoon, with Rough-legged hawks in abundance and several Golden Eagles.

Jason Bojczyk, WPBO Spring Waterbird Counter noted in his daily blog: it was a historic day at Whitefish Point for hawks. While scanning for loons taking the shortcut, over 1,000 hawks were in the air between the lighthouse and the harbor at its peak!!!!

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Lucy's Warbler visits the Point

Three days after the anniversary of the Sinking of the Edmund Fitzgerald, a crowd of birders scoured the dunes and pines of Whitefish Point for the treasure of a rarity. In the late afternoon of November 12th, a diehard group of bird watchers happened upon a truly rare visitor to the Point. Karl Overman, Adam Byrne, Brad Murphy and Ken Mettie went in search of the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher that had been seen behind the Owl's Roost gift shop. Their search led to the trophy sighting of a Lucy's Warbler.



Lucy's Warbler, Karl Overman

The Lucy's Warbler is a south-western bird and the only warbler adapted to desert living. How it found itself in the UP in November, one only knows. This is the first sighting of a Lucy's Warbler in Michigan and only the second sighting east of the Mississippi River. The first occurring at Ipswich, Mass. in Dec. 1979.

The flocks of birders on Nov. 13th left disappointed. The Lucy's turned out to be a one hit wonder, and was not seen again.



Piping Plover, photo: Scott Schuette

Inside this Edition
V.28, N.2

Spring Fling 2011 1
Hawk Count 3
Owl Banding 4
Waterbird Count 5
Bird Tours 2012 6

Mark your Calendars:

Spring Fling
April 27-29, 2012

Guest Speaker:
Richard Crossley

Pre & Post Birding Tours
Workshops
Saturday Night Banquet

Whitefish Point
Bird Observatory

WPBO is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, dedicated to the education and conservation of birds and their habitats.

From the Director...

Last month, I spoke to students of the Fish & Wildlife Club at Lake Superior State University, in Sault Ste. Marie. While many were familiar with Whitefish Point, only a few had visited us. I gave the Club an overview of the research we've been doing and explained the protocols for collecting data. Like true college students they were immersed, invincible and eager to conquer the world. Their questions were great and their interest was refreshing.

Speaking with this group reminded me of my days in the College of Natural Resources at the UW-Stevens Point. My first experiences with bird surveying came in my wildlife classes. I remember one such class, lead by Dr. James Hardin; where we had a to map out the number of birds and distance away as we walked down a section of trail. I didn't do so well. I

wasn't a wildlife major, I didn't understand the point of the survey and I convinced myself I would never need a skill like this.

Well.... Never say never. Twenty years later, I'm surfing my old class notes on survey techniques. At least I was smart enough to save my homework.

For the past six months, I've been immersed with Whitefish Point and I'm eager for what 2012 has to bring.



Happy Holidays!
 ~ Tony Janisch

Spring Fling 2011 continued

For 3-4 hours you could scan over the woods and see at least 500 hawks at any one time. During the earlier part of the day, it was mostly Sharpies, Harriers, Rough-leggeds, and Broad-wingeds, and later in the day a kettle of over 500 Broad-wingeds could be seen. This was only roughly a third of the Broad-wingeds kettle though seen

from the waterbird shack. An unbelievable day for migrants!!!

Join us for Spring Fling 2012 on April 27-29. Enjoy great birding, comradery, workshops, and Saturday's banquet. Our keynote is Richard Crossley, whose new ID book has rocked the birding world.

A Peak Count (Hawk Count, Spring 2011) - James Butch

Nearly 35,000 birds of prey were seen this season. This Spring marked the 33rd consecutive year that an annual hawk count at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. The official total was 34,984 birds, from 16 different species counted. The 10 year average for this site is roughly 16,913 raptors (2001-2010). This year the total count was 52% above average. This season 538.5 hours of observation were conducted, from March 15th to May 31st. This is an average of 65 raptors per hour or 460 per day.

This Spring was the highest total raptor count recorded at WPBO. It was also the highest total count of Sharp-shinned Hawks (27,192) and the highest peak day for this species (6,357, on May 1st). April 29th also marked the highest peak day on record for Osprey with 45 individuals counted. Peregrine Falcon recorded a second highest peak day on May 7th with 14 seen. Their peak high day occurred on May 10, 2003 with 30 Peregrines recorded. Finally, this Spring had the second highest seasonal count for the Bald Eagle, with 510 recorded. Their peak season occurred just 3 years earlier, in 2007, with 579 Bald Eagles counted.

This Spring season there were also higher than average numbers of Sharp-shinned Hawks recorded at the West Skyline Hawk Count, in Duluth Minnesota, and Port Crescent Hawk

Watch, in Michigan. Braddock Bay and Derby Hill, both in New York, too recorded higher than average numbers for this species. A possible boom in population for the Sharp-shinned may have happen in their southern Canada breeding grounds during the Spring/Summer 2010. Fall sites Hawk Ridge, in Duluth Minnesota, and Lake Erie Metro Park, in Michigan north of Detroit, recorded higher than average numbers for the Sharp-shinned Hawk during the 2010 Fall migration.

With the Bald Eagle there may have been a similar story. Port Crescent and Derby Hill recorded higher than average numbers for this species during their Spring 2011 season. Again, Hawk Ridge and Lake Erie Metro Park recorded higher than average numbers of Bald Eagle last year during the Fall 2010 Migration.

There was a poor showing at WPBO for a few species this season. The Red-shouldered Hawk had the lowest numbers in the past ten years. It was a 78% decline compared to the ten year average. The Northern Goshawk had a 43% decrease in numbers, the Rough-legged Hawk had a 33% decline, and the American Kestrel continues to show lower and lower numbers, with a 34% decrease.

It is anyone's guess what happened to the Red-shouldered

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These photos of a swimming Northern Goshawk were taken on Sept 9th. in Whitefish Bay, behind the Paradise Community Center. When the Goshawk reached the shore, it was clutching a Sharp-shinned Hawk.

*photo: Laurie Winkler
General Manager
Best Western Inn - Paradise*



Great Season for Encounters (Owl Banding, Spring 2011) - Chris Neri & Nova Mackentley

As I write this article, it's the first week of June and the spring research season has just ended. The week after the field season is report time and the field staff that just spent months scanning the sky for hawks, watching over the lake for waterfowl, or walking the woods at night for owls can now be found muttering and bleary-eyed at their computers. The effects of entering data and writing reports on field staff often appear worse than those of snowshoeing miles in sub-zero temperatures on a 12 hour night or standing at the Point for 8 hours in 40 mph winds. However, now the field work is done, the reports are complete and the final task is writing the Migrant articles. As I sit and stare at the computer screen beginning this summary my thoughts jump from snow, to northern lights, and of course to the owls.

We banded 820 owls of five species this spring; 706 Northern Saw-whet (NSWO), 2 Boreal (BOOW), 102 Long-eared (LEOW), 1 Short-eared (SEOW), and 9 Barred (BDOW). In addition to the owls banded, 45 previously banded NSWO were also encountered. As expected this was a down season for the northern species. This is the first of my ten springs here that we have not seen at least one Great Gray. However, this was the fourth consecutive spring that BOOW have occurred. During this period 178 BOOW have been reported in MI. One hundred and seventy-four of these records have come from WPBO's owl research. We are obviously at the low point in the cycle of the northern species occurrence at the Point, but are hopeful that next spring will see their numbers increase again.

Despite the lack of northern species, it was a good season for NSWO and LEOW. Actually, as per usual this is the largest spring migration to be recorded for either of these species in North America this year. Whereas, the number of adult NSWO banded the last three springs has remained fairly consistent, we continued to see an increase in the number of young birds this spring. The number of young NSWO increased from 151 in 2009, to 272 last spring, and to 420 this spring. The coming summer season's results will give us a strong indication of what we can expect in regard to young birds next spring. We also captured an unusual NSWO this spring. This bird was a first-year owl, and still had retained juvenal feathers on it's facial disc and top of the head. Based on our conversations with other spring researchers, we believe this is a first-time documentation of an owl retaining some of this plumage into the spring.

This was a great season for encounters (captured owls that have been previously banded either at WPBO or



Short-eared Owl, photo: Chris Neri

elsewhere). The 45 encounters of banded NSWO is the most ever at WPBO in a single season. Of these, 21 were recaptures from WPBO, and 24 were birds banded at other stations. One particularly enjoyable bird was a NSWO that was originally banded in Spring 2004, and then was recaptured in Spring 2007, Spring 2008, and now Spring 2011. This female has the honor of being the second oldest longevity record of a wild NSWO, according to the Federal Bird Banding Lab. She will be turning eight years old this summer and if she returns to us again next year she will break the current wild longevity record. We also recaptured two of our juveniles from last summer and two more from the summer of 2009. We obviously hope that some of the NSWO we banded this spring will produce interesting returns in the coming years. Last year one of our NSWO banded in the spring was encountered in Alabama in the fall!

We were very happy to see LEOW numbers rebound after just one down year. Unlike NSWO, these beautiful birds regularly thrill visitors as they pass over the Point during the evening owl flight. We also had several nights when they were actively hunting the woods throughout the night. It was absolutely amazing to have

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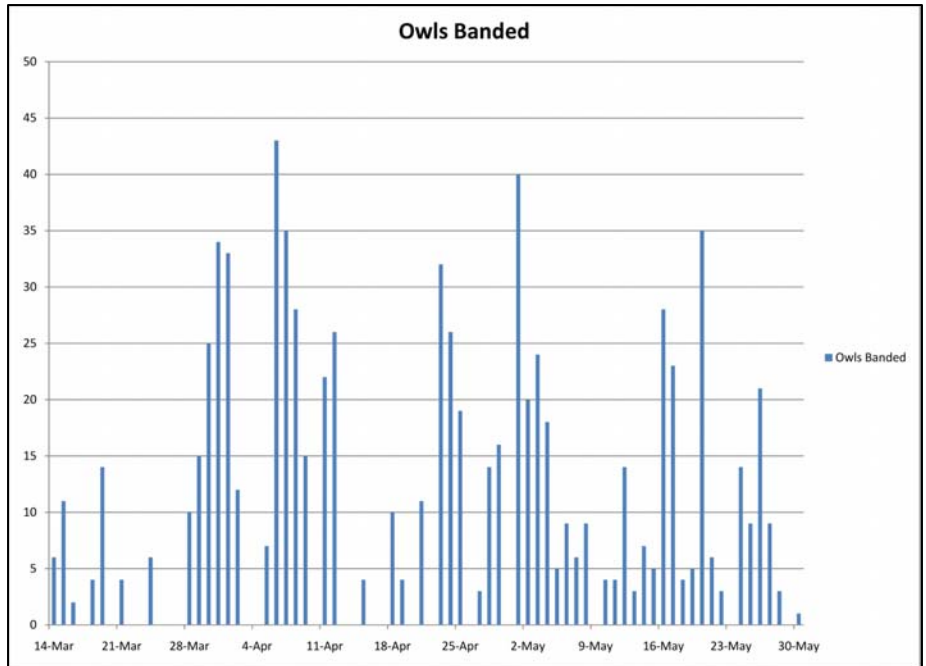
Spring Hawk 2011 continued

Hawk this season. This season at Port Crescent they recorded a 45% increase in the number of this species. Their average being 140 individuals per season, this year they counted 256. Whitefish Points missing Red-shoulder's may have passed through Port Crescent during mid-March. Port Crescent's peak day for this species was on the 17th of that month, with 87 birds. Here at Whitefish Point, freezing temperatures were recorded for that day and the week following. On Port Crescents Peak day, the temperature was 49-63° F and there were favorable Southwest winds.

Spring Owls 2011 continued

several of these birds wheeling around our heads as they sought out a sparrow chipping in the brush. Whether by design or coincidence the peak of LEOW migration often occurs with the peak sparrow migration. While nocturnal migration may spare the sparrows from the Sharp-shinned Hawks, it puts them at a serious disadvantage when it comes to LEOW. We observed 14 LEOW prey species this spring. The majority of these were White-crowned and White-throated sparrows, but also included Winter Wren to American Woodcock. In addition to the Long-eared Owl, we were thrilled to band what is only the third Short-eared Owl to be banded at WPBO.

An owl banding season at the Point comes with a lot of responsibility, requires hard work and offers many rewards. We feel incredibly fortunate to be part of it. We continue to gain



experience personally, and we continue to gain knowledge every season. We feel that educating the public on the importance of Whitefish Point to migratory owls is as important as anything we do. We thank all of you who visited the owl banding this season. Your interest, enthusiasm, and support truly make our experience here a more enjoyable one.

Low Seasonal Numbers provide Peak Days (Waterbird Count, Spring 2011) - Jason Bojczyk

This was the 27th spring waterbird count conducted at Whitefish Point Bird Observatory. 15,624 individuals of 60 species were tallied during the standardized eight-hour daily count period from April 15th to May 31st. This represents the lowest spring seasonal total ever and is over 6,500 birds below the long-term spring waterbird seasonal average. The five most common species in order of decreasing abundance were: Common Loon (n=3405), Red-breasted Merganser (n=2079), Long-tailed Duck (n=1481), Canada Goose (n=897), and Sandhill Crane (n=780).

There are several reasons contributing to the lowest spring waterbird total ever, one of which was the weather. This year was quite the opposite of last year, with temperatures lower than normal, (even if it is Whitefish Point!), and more rainy and/or foggy days than is typical. Twenty-one days of snow, rain, thunderstorms, or fog, had a significant impact on the ability to detect migrants passing by the point. Also, for the first week of the count, there were snow banks blocking the entire view of Lake Superior except for a 75 foot gap. During these days migrants were essentially only picked up coming from the bay, which was not blocked by snow banks.

Perhaps the biggest reason contributing to a low total was

just the lack of migration from species that typically migrate in large numbers in the spring. The most significant below average species were: Canada Goose, nearly 1,500 below average, White-winged Scoter, over 1,300 below average, Red-breasted Merganser, nearly 600 below average, Common Loon, over 2,400 below average, and Bonaparte's Gull, over 1,000 below the average. If these species were in their average numbers, then it would have been an average spring seasonal total.

A total of 3,405 Common Loons were tallied between April 15th and May 31st. This is the fourth lowest seasonal total since the start of the count in 1984 and over 2,400 Common Loons below the average from 1984-2011 of 5,869 birds. This total continues the downward trend of Common Loons migrating by the point, as the past 12 spring waterbird counts have not even met or exceeded the 1984-2011 average. Common Loons peaked on May 5th with 523 individuals. On the other hand, the Red-throated Loon total of 576 continues the trend of increasing seasonal averages and is quite above the long-term average of 395. A total of 187 Red-throated Loons migrated by on May 5th which is the highest single daily total in the history of the spring waterbird count! ~ cont.pg.6 ~

Spring Waterbird 2011 continued

Despite this huge day, there are 7 spring seasonal totals of Red-throated Loons that exceeded this year's seasonal total.

For the most part, waterfowl, other than those mentioned above, were in average or above average numbers. Scaup and Bufflehead were some of the waterfowl species with the largest percentages of above average numbers, with Scaup 33% and Bufflehead 41% above the long-term averages. Common Mergansers were way down with less than half the seasonal average of 279 this year.

Horned Grebes were simply amazing this year and they deserve a paragraph to themselves! There were 133 Horned Grebes this season, which is the highest spring seasonal total, and only the second spring to exceed 100 birds. The peak of 72 on May 2nd is also the highest spring waterbird daily total ever! On May 6th, 30 Horned Grebes migrated by and 86 were seen in the bay after the count, for a daily total of 116 Horned Grebes! There were a few days like this and I was unfortunately unable to pick out an Eared Grebe among them. Those familiar with counting waterbirds at Whitefish Point know how much trouble Long-tailed Ducks can be to count, especially in the fall. I am now convinced that Horned Grebes are the hardest species to count, even when close! There were several groups of over 12, and it is amazing how they are just so jammed together migrating by!

Almost all shorebirds were in below average numbers this spring. The bulk of them arrived 1-2 weeks later

than normal. It was the worst year ever for Semipalmated Plover, with 7 birds this year, while it was the second best total for Piping Plover ever, with 28 birds, though the total involves the same 2-3 birds being seen throughout May. Piping Plovers had a max count of 3 on May 31st, and it appears they will nest again at the Point. Fifty-five Dowitchers, as a whole, is the highest spring seasonal waterbird total ever. All 55 went by in the same day, and four were identified as Short-billed Dowitchers.

There were many highlights this season, with the Red-throated Loon and Horned Grebe peaks being some of the best. Other highlights included: a single drake Canvasback, 12 American White Pelicans, a Willet, 2 unidentified Jaegers, a Laughing Gull, 4 days of Short-eared Owls, a Yellow-headed Blackbird, a Dickcissel, 8 Red Knots, a White-rumped Sandpiper, and a close female Harlequin Duck on the last day of the count, which is only the 4th spring waterbird count one was detected.

I'd like to thank Chris Neri and Nova Mackentley for such an awesome and unforgettable first season at the point. A big thanks to them for helping put up the waterbird shack in the dark before a heavy downpour the next day. Thanks to Phil Chu for a few days off and his knowledge during the last 10 days of May, and thanks to Joe Nault for helping spot Red-throated Loons on their peak day. Finally, thanks to everyone that came out to the shack, to help spot waterbirds, chat, or just keeping me company. It was great to see so many familiar faces, as well as many new ones.

Register Now — 2012 Birding Michigan Field Trips

Winter Birding around the Soo, Jan. 14 – 15; \$70/members, \$95/non-members

Winter birding in the eastern UP can be an amazing experience. Snowy Owls, Sharp-tailed Grouse, Rough-legged Hawks and Northern Shrikes are almost always present. Great Gray Owls, Northern Hawk Owls, Gyrfalcons, Northern Goshawks, Hoary Redpolls, Pine Grosbeaks, Evening Grosbeaks and Bohemian Waxwings are possible.

Birding Shiawassee Nat'l Wildlife Refuge, Mar. 24; \$40/members, \$65/non-members

This tour will provide you with a "behind the scenes" look at this 9,000 acre refuge during a period when thousands of migrating waterfowl, including Tundra Swans, Greater White-fronted and Snow Geese, and most North American ducks will be stopping over on their way North.

Birding in Paradise (Pre-Spring Fling), Apr. 27; \$40/members, \$65/non-members

Plan on attending the 2012 Spring Fling and get the head start to the weekend with this pre-Spring Fling trip? This trip will begin at Whitefish Point with a chance to view any owls caught late in the night by the owl banders. The focus of the trip will be spring migration at the point including raptors, waterbirds and early passerines.

Searching for Spruce Grouse (Post-Spring Fling), Apr. 29; \$40/members, \$65/non-members

Spruce Grouse in on the "most wanted" list for many birders and can be notoriously difficult to find on your own. We will combine our knowledge and expertise, and the advantage of the collective eyes of a group, in an attempt to locate one or more of these birds.

Details at wpbo.org or call (906) 492-3596