

The Newsletter of Whitefish Point Bird Observatory

the WPBO migrant

Volume 28, Number 3— December 2011

Richard Crossley to speak at Spring Fling

This April 27-29 marks the 24th Annual WPBO Spring Fling, when birders “migrate” to Paradise, Michigan and the Whitefish Point area to visit with old friends, both human and avian. Many activities have been planned for another refreshing weekend of birding experiences.

You can expect excellent birding along with opportunities to learn more about avian migration and conservation in the Great Lakes. Attendees will learn from fellow birders, field trip leaders, and guest speakers.

Richard Crossley, the author of the revolutionary *The Crossley ID Guide*, is this year's banquet speaker.

His keynote will tell of lessons learned while growing up in the wild British birding scene - from travels around the world to living in Cape May. A story told in a Yorkshire brogue through a camera lens that loves color and art. With humor and depth it highlights the thoughts behind the revolutionary ‘*The Crossley ID Guide*’ series . But is changing how we look at books and birds enough? ‘Heck, no!’ says Richard. Come listen to his past, perhaps it will change your thoughts on the future!

Richard Crossley is an internationally acclaimed birder and photographer. He first came to the US from England as a 21-year old and almost immediately became well-known for discovering ‘*The Dyke*’ at Cape May and identifying passerines flying overhead.

After 20 years hiding in the business world and raising a family, Richard set himself a huge new goal - to popularize birding and the outdoors through books and multi-media. By making nature more fashionable, he hopes to encourage the youth of today to become the game-changers of tomorrow.

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Northern Gannet takes up Fall residency

On October 6th, a new bird visited Whitefish Point; an adult Northern Gannet. First spotted by Leonard Graf, we all thought this sighting was a fluke. But, a few days later, the bird came back. And a few days after that, the gannet flew by again. Soon, birders were flocking to the Point for a chance to see the Northern Gannet.



Northern Gannet, Google Images

The Northern Gannet is a seabird that calls the North Atlantic it's home. This is the first recorded sighting of a gannet on Lake Superior. And, it liked the Lake so much that it stuck around for a few month.

The gannet has been consistently sporadic. Showing up either in the morning or afternoon, but not necessarily every day. As I write this, because there is still open water, the gannet is probably still here. The gannet was last sighted Christmas weekend.

increasing our knowledge of bird migration in the Great Lakes Region



Trumpeter Swans at Whitefish Point, photo: Scott Schuette

Inside this Edition
V.28, N.3

Spring Fling 1
Northern Gannet 1
Waterbird Count 3
Raptor Conference 4
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.

Spring Fling continued

Based on what we now know about the brain and learning, he believes the design of "The Crossley ID Guide" will help people improve their ID skills and change the design of all nature books. Constantly thinking outside the box and with five books, a TV series on the horizon and other business projects, he believes the future is an adventure – a busy one!

Saturday workshops, scheduled for 11am and 2pm at Whitefish Township Community School include the following:

Budget Bird Photography

Jerry Jourdan

In 2003, Jerry discovered the art of 'digiscoping' or photographing birds through a spotting scope with a point and shoot camera. Learn how to photograph birds without spending thousands of dollars for professional equipment. Jerry will further discuss how the use of photo-processing software can be used to convert a ho-hum image into a vibrant work of art!

Galápagos Islands Adventure

Bob Pettit

The Galápagos Islands are teeming with unique flora and fauna. This is the land that Charles Darwin visited (1831-36) and through his zoological and geological discoveries on the voyage resulted in numerous important scientific discoveries. Join Bob's digital photographic interpretation of our planet's most captivating island wildlife.

Pre and Post Birding Trips are available for an additional fee. They Include: *Birding in Paradise*, Friday, April 27th; and *Searching for Spruce Grouse*, Sunday, April 29th. See page 6 for trip descriptions and fees.

Once again, the Paradise United Methodist Church will be hosting a Northern Michigan Pasty Dinner from 5p to 7:30p on Friday night. Proceeds support the church. Saturday lunch will be available for purchase at the Whitefish Township Community School, from 12p to 2p.

Spring Fling also marks the opening of the Owl's Roost Gift Shop. Use this opportunity to buy the latest WPBO fashions. And remember, WPBO members receive 10% off all merchandise purchases.

Registration includes admittance to Saturday's Workshops, the Banquet & Richard Crossley's Keynote Address. Fees are \$50 per adult, and \$25 per child (13 and under). Separate Banquet tickets can be purchased for \$30. Visit www.wpbo.org, for a schedule of events, further information about Spring Fling Weekend and the registration form.

WPBO receives funding for Headquarters Building

In July, WPBO received \$5000 from the Rollin M. Gerstacker Foundation (Midland, MI) for preservation to the Headquarters building. This funding was used to replace windows in the front offices, which were still single-pane; and replace the floor covering in the kitchen, which was cracking due to age.

The windows were installed just in time for the cold weather that hits Whitefish Point. And the kitchen looks 100% better, which will surely be appreciated by the seasonal staff, when they return in March.



We thank the Gerstacker Foundation for their support of WPBO. However, there is still much work to be done. We need to replace doors and re-carpet work space and staff quarters. If you know of anyone interested in donating materials and time, or dollars to pay for installation, please have them contact Whitefish Point Bird Observatory at 906-492-3596.

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Phenomenal Fall, Spectacular Species (Waterbird Count, Fall 2011) - Scott Schuette

The 23rd annual Fall Waterbird Survey was conducted between August 15th and November 15th and was a resounding success. The final numbers were quite spectacular with 114,743 birds of 76 species counted. This is the largest number of total waterbirds ever for the count since its inception in 1989 and was the 4th largest total of species. It's amazing how numbers can add up with much of the year seemingly below average until late September when the birds really started rolling through.

This season's waterbird numbers were highlighted by two species that were both new to the Fall count but also to Whitefish Point as a whole, Trumpeter Swan and Northern Gannet. The Northern Gannet is perhaps one of the most unexpected waterbird species ever recorded at the point with it being the first record for Lake Superior and one of less than 15 for the state of Michigan. It was also remarkable in the length of its stay after its arrival on October 6th, as I write this with snow on the ground and the winter chill setting in the bird is likely still fishing Whitefish Bay as though it is back home in the North Atlantic. The Trumpeter Swan is less amazing but it establishes the first confirmed

record for this species which has many previous sight records but none that were confirmed. Selected rare species seen this Fall included Pacific Loon, Red Knot, Short-billed Dowitcher, Red-necked Phalarope, Iceland Gull, and Lesser Black-backed Gull among many other "good" species that are annual or close to it. In the end eleven species or groups of species were recorded in record numbers this season.

An increase of over 10,000 birds from the previous best duck total is what propelled this year's count to such historic levels with a total of 85,812 individual ducks seen covering 24 species. This along with a near-record number of grebes and a solid loon flight paved the way for a total that surpassed the previous high of 104,414 set in 2003 on November 2nd, nearly two weeks before the end of the count! For the second straight year geese numbers were well below the long-term average for the season and swan numbers were well above the long-term average. An extremely strong shorebird flight coupled with a solid year for terns also added to this record total.

A sign for hope was the bounce-back year that loons had after several years of very poor numbers. This year's total

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Fall Waterbird 2011 continued

of 3,891 loons (3,412 Commons, 467 Red-throateds, 11 unknowns, and 1 Pacific) is the 6th highest combined total during the 23-year history of the count. Coming close to equaling last year's major grebe flight was this year's totals with a record Horned Grebe count of 949 and the 2nd best year for Red-necked Grebes (only trailing last year's total) with 17,115 recorded. Documenting the movements of Common Loons and Red-necked Grebes was among the many reasons to institute the Fall waterbird count so to have such good year's for these species makes for an extra bonus as a counter.



Short-billed Dowitcher, photo: Scott Schuette

While the ducks, grebes, and loons, seem to get all of the fanfare the forgotten families of birds which make up the majority of species seen each year include the Plovers, Sandpipers, Gulls and Terns, and Jaegers, this year was no different. A total of 42 species covering these and several other under-the-radar families accounted for close to 2/3rds of the total species count. This included

a new family for the count, the Sulids, now represented thanks to the long-staying Northern Gannet.

This was an overall average year for gulls, above-average for terns and jaegers, and downright the best year for shorebirds with high counts for 2 species of shorebirds (Piping Plover and White-rumped Sandpiper) and 2 species of gulls (Iceland and Lesser Black-backed Gull). Common Terns were seen in good numbers, however the other regular species were seen in very small numbers. Gull diversity was quite good with all annual and semi-annual species seen, except for Franklin's Gull, however the numbers were quite low with only one or two of most species seen.

The best activity this year was from mid-October to early November with the period from October 9th to November 9th accounting for close to 60% of the overall total. This period included daily totals of 14895, 10920, and 7097 birds. This late season activity was led by Long-tailed Duck and Red-breasted Merganser with large numbers of Aythya ducks, White-winged Scoters, Bufflehead, and Common Goldeneyes also contributing significantly.

This year's count had many individuals to thank, not least of which are those who counted in my stead so that I could have a few days off every now and then, they are Leonard Graf, Adam Byrne, Brad Murphy, Phil Chu, and Tom Wheeler. A total of 740.6 hours were logged at the point this year which would not have been possible without their help. In general this year was quite remarkable whether for the unusually warm weather, the lack of winter precipitation, or the un-evenness to the waterbird migration for those who spent some time out there this year you'll probably have something to remember for the future, I know I do.

Highlights of the Raptor Research Foundation Conference - Chris Neri & Nova Mackentley

It is likely that many of you who are reading this article have visited the owl banding at WPBO. If you have visited during a recent spring or summer season you undoubtedly have heard us talk about the amazing owl migration that occurs at Whitefish Point. We naturally consider the data gathered by WPBO's long term owl migration research to be of great value. Not only does this research document one of the largest and most diverse owl migrations in North America, but it also provides WPBO with another tool with which to educate the public on the importance of Whitefish Point to migrant birds. Thousands of you have made the after-hours journey to the Point for up close experiences with

these amazing birds. The recent years have been particularly exciting with the addition of the summer research, improvements to the spring season, and the addition of evening educational programs.

We took a break from field work last winter, which allowed us to spend time going over and organizing the owl data. We focused primarily on the summer juvenile research and on flight feather molt patterns in Northern Saw-whet Owls. Nova then collaborated on the molt pattern project with Gene Jacobs from Stevens Point, Wisconsin and Dave Evans from Hawk Ridge in Duluth, Minnesota. Over 45,000 Saw-whets were banded at

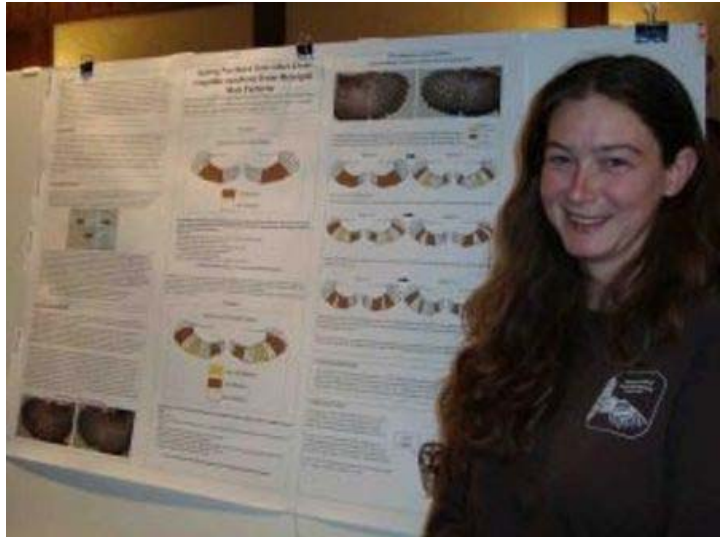
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Raptor Research Foundation Conference continued

these three locations to generate the recapture data used in this collaboration! Volunteering our time last winter to analyze data proved more advantageous than we anticipated. In late spring we found out that we would be spending the fall in Duluth, MN where this year's Raptor Research Foundation Conference was being held. Scheduled in this year's conference was a session of presentations focusing on research on *Aegolius* owls, the genus that includes Saw-whets. This presented a perfect opportunity for WPBO to be represented at the conference. We submitted the two abstracts listed below, which were both accepted. We then developed an oral presentation for the summer research and a poster for the molt project.

Summer Movements of Northern Saw-whet Owl (Aegolius acadicus) at Whitefish Point, Chippewa County, MI. Chris Neri & Nova Mackentley. Whitefish Point Bird Observatory.

During July and August of 2006 Whitefish Point Bird Observatory (WPBO) conducted an exploratory summer owl banding project. This exploration resulted in the banding of 206 Northern Saw-whet Owls (*Aegolius acadicus*) & 2 Long-eared Owls (*Asio otus*) during the period 23 July-12 August. Of the 206 NSWOW banded, 200 were in juvenal plumage. These results represent the first documentation of a significant incursion of juvenile Northern Saw-whet Owl (NSWO) during the post-fledgling period. The study period was expanded in 2007 and mist netting efforts in July and August 2006-2010 have resulted in the banding of 1525 owls; 1511 NSWOW, 13 Long-eared Owl, and 1 Barred Owl (*Strix varia*). The 1511 NSWOW captures are comprised of 239 (16%) adults and 1272 (84%) juveniles. The timing of adult and juvenile movements occur independently, (asynchronously) with adult numbers peaking in early July, prior to the peak passage of juveniles which occurs



Nova Mackentley addresses the Molt Patterns of the Northern Saw-whet

in late July or early August. Significant annual fluctuations in juvenile captures have occurred and have been consistent with those of HY/SY NSWOW experienced during the fall and spring study periods at WPBO. The 1272 banded juveniles have generated sixty-three (5%) encounters. Twenty-three of these are of recaptures made at WPBO during later field seasons, and 40 are encounters from other banding sites. The 40 juvenile encounters have occurred in 11 states and two provinces, documenting both intra and inter-flyway movements. Twenty-five of these 40 encounters have occurred during the fall migration period concurrent to the summer season during which the juvenile was banded. These encounters occurred in 10 states and one province and also demonstrated both intra and inter-flyway movements. The majority of juvenile NSWOW have begun their pre-basic molt during this period and the progression of this molt was recorded for over 1000 individuals on which this molt was detected.

Ageing Northern Saw-whet Owls (Aegolius acadicus) from Remigial Molt Patterns. Nova Mackentley, Whitefish Point Bird Observatory, Whitefish Point, MI, Eugene Jacobs, Linwood Springs Research Station, Stevens Point, WI, and David Evans, Duluth, MN.

Molt patterns of migrant Northern Saw-whets Owls were studied at three locations in the Great Lakes region (Stevens Point, WI, Whitefish Point, MI and Duluth, MN). We used molt patterns of birds recaptured from a previous molt season that were originally aged as hatching-year (no remigial molt). Of the 223 known age individuals 128 (58%) were second-year (SY), 61(27%) were third-year (TY), 30 (14%) were fourth-year (4Y), 12 (5%) were fifth-year (5Y), one (0.45%) was sixth-year (6y), and one (0.45%) was seventh-year (7Y). Using these known age birds, we were able to identify definitive molt patterns for the SY, TY and 4Y age classes.

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Chris Neri presents on the Summer Movement of the Northern Saw-whet

Raptor Research Foundation Conference continued

All (100%) of our 128 known SY birds matched the previously published SY molt pattern. Of the TY birds, 36 (59%) fit our TY molt pattern. Of the 30 known 4Y saw-whets, 19 (63%) were consistent with our 4Y pattern. Birds that exhibited the TY or 4Y patterns were correctly aged (> 95%), but not all birds in those age classes showed these patterns. We encountered some birds that matched an incorrect age category, including one 4Y that matched the SY category, two 5Y that matched the TY category, and one TY, one 5Y, and one 8Y that matched the 4Y category. Out of the entire sample of 223, six birds (2.6%) matched an incorrect age category.

The conference proved to be a very productive experience. The positive feedback on the research being conducted by WPBO began immediately after the presentation on the summer research. The moderator of the Aegolius Owl Session returned to the podium and stated

“Well, that pretty much changes the way we need to think about things”.

The poster Nova and Gene presented on ageing Saw-whets drew a lot of interest and elicited constant conversation with other owl banders during the poster session. Much of the remainder of our time at the conference was filled by useful conversation with other researchers. We received tips on how to proceed effectively with our current efforts to publish the data we presented, advice on developing future research projects, and information on strengths and weaknesses in available technologies. We also established relationships with researchers which could lead to further collaboration between WPBO and other research organizations.

We are grateful to the WPBO board for this opportunity and are especially thankful for the constant encouragement given by Rich and Brenda Keith.



Pine Martin, photo: Ken Mattie Jr.



Lapland Longspur, photo: Scott Schuette

Register Now — 2012 Birding Michigan Field Trips

Winter Birding around the Soo II, Feb 11—12; \$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