



Middlefork Audubon Society

a chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society

The Audubonite

December 2020

Irruption Year!

By: Sue Tinkle

Have you seen any unusual birds lately? This winter will be a very good one here for purple finches, pine siskins, crossbills, pine and evening grosbeaks, and redpolls, along with red breasted nuthatches. Redpolls have already been seen in the Champaign area along with white winged crossbills. One lucky birder in St. Joseph had a flock of evening grosbeaks!

According to ornithologist Steve Bailey, this year has been the biggest irruption year ever of pine siskins for the entire United States! Pine siskins have been reported everywhere it seems; we ourselves have seen flocks of upwards to 80 -90 in our backyard. Last year we did not have a single one. Often a "masting " year is followed by a poor seed production year. Masting occurs when a single species produces a very large number of seeds across thousands of miles of forest in the same year. When the conifers in boreal forests of Canada and Northern U.S. experience this phenomenon, birds breed earlier, have more offspring, and a population boom occurs. This is problematic when a lean year occurs the following year. A masting year is typically followed by a low production year, creating a migration in order to find a new food source. This feast or famine creates irregular winter migrations, i.e. irruptions.



Evening Grosbeak in St. Joseph, IL

Oct 31, 2020 - Photo: Brock Price

The bottom line is that irruptions are triggered by food shortages, such as failure of the coniferous cone crops over a large geographical area. The reasons for all of this stated above is more complex than what I can explain here. With climate change, moisture conditions, global warming, carbon dioxide emissions, etc., affecting why food supplies are fluctuating so erratically compared to normal cycles of the past like every other year for some conifers.

Just a note about one of the birds you might see at your feeders this winter: the purple finch. This is



Purple Finch - Photo: Bob Schifo

a species which has been misidentified a lot and has created confusion among many backyard bird feeder enthusiasts. The house finches we see at our feeders all year round can exhibit a lot of variation in their color and patterns, but one thing never changes. They are all very streaky. Some males are more orangey than others. Some even have similar color to a purple finch but purple finches are not here in the summer. Some years they are not here at all as they live far north into Canada. The first time I saw a female purple finch on my feeder many years ago I thought I had a small rose breasted grosbeak. The head stripe is really a helpful identification tool. If you have to study a male to see if it is a house finch or a purple, it is probably not a purple. Look at a good bird book and learn the difference, as you very well might be lucky this winter to see a purple finch!

Good winter birding everyone!

Birds of a Feather Exhibit

We are pleased to announce that the Danville Art League has chosen birds as the main theme for the winter exhibit at their Braughamin Gallery located at 320 N Franklin Street in Danville. Carol Garver; teacher, artist, and board member, will be announcing this to the public soon, but she wanted to be sure that Middlefork Audubon members were made aware in advance and encouraged to participate in this opportunity to show their work

Anyone can have their original artwork displayed there as long as certain criteria are met. Pieces should be framed and ready to hang with a wire (not a saw tooth hanger). There must be a bird, feathers, or bird theme within the artwork itself. This exhibit is open to 2D and 3D , meaning paintings of any medium, photographs, sculptures, ceramics, carvings, etc. There are display cases and large open tables for artwork not conducive to hanging, such as small paintings on an easel, or 3D pieces.

This is not a contest and there is no entry fee required. It is instead a celebration of our avian friends and the joy they bring into our world. Open house and length of show will be determined by COVID-19 cases in Vermilion County.

The art league is asking that you drop off your art work on Saturday, January 16 between the hours of 10:00 AM and 1:00 PM. If you have a conflict with this time frame and wish to exhibit an original work, please call Sue Tinkle at 217 427-6109 to make other arrangements.

Christmas Bird Count

The first Christmas Bird Count was more than 100 years ago and originally a bird hunt. Thankfully we now just count the birds, not only the number of species, but how many individuals there are of each. The information and data gathered over the years by so many birders participating has been an invaluable tool to ornithologists and scientists as to how well (or not well) our birds are doing. This year our area bird counts are:

Champaign CBC: December 19 - For more info and to be assigned a route, please email: mail@champaigncountyaudubon.org

Forest Glen: December 27 - Compiler: Mary Jane Easterday Contact her at 217 474-0567 or birdeaster@hotmail.com

Middlefork: January 1 - Compiler: Jessie Runner at 217 497-2174 or jal_sa@yahoo.com

If you are not sure which geographic count circle you are in, or wish to participate, please use the contact info above

Birders are encouraged to follow COVID-19 precautions and guidelines such as mask wearing and social distancing, along with limiting car pooling and groups to only family members. Unfortunately due to the pandemic, there will be no compilation dinner as there has been in the past. Hopefully with the Spring Bird Count there will be a return to this popular tradition.

2020 Bird Seed Sale Results

Thanks to everyone who helped contribute to the very successful bird seed sale this October! Between donations and seed profit from the sale itself, our net gain was close to \$1,000! In addition, we doubled the number of orders over last year, which is a good sign for next year's sale (And of course for the birds too!)

Special thanks go to Berry's Garden Center for hosting the sale, to Bob Schifo who manages this special annual event, and to Sam Schifo and Amanda Dudich for their help on bird seed pickup day.

Enjoy your happy backyard birds!

2020 Bluebird Monitoring Season Results

Middlefork Audubon is always pleased to be able to brag a bit about the ongoing nest box monitoring program we oversee in Vermilion County. This project is possible thanks to so many volunteers who weekly check boxes throughout the nesting season at their home, at the Vermilion County Conservation District parks, public golf courses, and farms all around the county. A BIG thank you to all the 2020 volunteers who continued to monitor nest boxes throughout Vermilion County during the global pandemic and, conversely, we greatly respect those who were not comfortable traveling to their trail this year. Hopefully we can all be safely back in the field again next season!

Either way, our feathered friends resumed nesting last spring and fledged young through it all. **For the 2020 nest box monitoring season, 233 nest boxes fledged 438 Eastern Bluebirds.** All native bird species are allowed to remain in a nest box to be tallied along with the Eastern Bluebirds. Following are totals for all fledged species from the Vermilion County project.

A special note: In addition to counting bluebirds, one couple in Potomac monitors 48 gourds at their home where 129 Purple Martins fledged!

For comparison here is some data from a few recent counts:

Year	# Of Boxes	Eastern Bluebirds	Tree Swallow	House Wren	Carolina Wren	Wren	Chickadee	Purple Martin
2020	233	438	267	115	43	86	10	129
2019	374	639	400	273	-	-	5	156
2018	371	799	393	247	-	-	8	118

Thank you again to everyone, including our compiler, Lee Solter, for another great monitoring season together!

-Sue Smith

Volunteer coordinator for the Vermilion County Bluebird Monitoring Project

Middlefork Audubon Society Board

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Middlefork Audubon Society

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	<i>Calendar</i>	
Date & Time	Location	Event
December 19, 2020	-	Champaign Christmas Bird Count
December 27, 2020	-	Forest Glen Christmas Bird Count
January 1, 2021	-	Middlefork Christmas Bird Count



Thanks to Betty's Garden Center in Danville, IL for
hosting our annual Bird Seed Sale.
www.berrysgarden.com • (217)-446-3076