



# Middlefork Audubon Society

a chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society

## The Audubonite

Spring 2023

### Message From the MFA Vice President

Greetings all!

As nature lovers, I expect that you, like me, embrace each season for its own beauty, and here in Vermilion County and the surrounding area we have a lot of wonderful natural areas and home habitats to enjoy. With the recent mild winter, we saw large flocks of greater white-fronted, Canada, and snow geese, as well as tundra swans overwintering here again. It has become a common winter event now, but my 96-year-old father-in-law, Jim Smith, tells me that he had never seen these large flocks here until recently. This prompts me to be more mindful of the subtle changes as the years go by. I am ever grateful for all the times Jim shares his expertise with me as we bird together, and appreciate all birders who share their vast knowledge with others while observing birds and nature together.

At Middlefork Audubon, we love to embrace those surprises nature offers up and, at the same time, engage in annual rituals of data collection through bird counts and nest box monitoring. Interesting birds were seen during the winter bird counts as you will see in the summary later on in this issue, and with the milder conditions, some reports of feeder activity are changing as well. Within this newsletter you will find delightful winter musings from a sunroom window, interesting data from winter bird counts in Vermilion County, updates on the volunteers already preparing the way for spring bluebirds, and a few exciting events for the coming year.

Wishing you all good health and joy with the coming of spring. Those flocks of greater white-fronts are on a possible 6,000-mile journey north to the Arctic region to breed, the hush of winter is being broken by bird song once again, and I am happy to report that migration viewing includes sandhill cranes flying northward, beautiful sky waves of male red-winged blackbirds, grackles, and cowbirds, and timberdoodles (otherwise known as American woodcocks) performing their delightful courtship dance at dusk. And if you have time, don't forget to seek out the skunk cabbage poking through at Howard's Hollow Seep in Forest Glen Preserve and other locations, and get ready to enjoy the emerging spring wildflowers at the Beech Grove handicap trail and throughout Vermilion County.

Happy birding!

Suzanne Smith  
Vice President, Middlefork Audubon



Skunk Cabbage at Forest Glen  
Photo: Sue Tinkle

# Highlights from the 2022-2023 Middlefork Audubon Christmas Bird Counts

By: Connie Cunningham

For the past 123 years, between December 14 and January 5, a nation-wide birding event occurs called Audubon's Christmas Bird Counts (CBC). Audubon chapters across the country select a date within that time frame on which to conduct a tally of local birds seen that day. All are welcome to join in on these tallies which are conducted in-large by volunteer participants. Each tally is contained within a 15-mile diameter circle.

Our local Middlefork Audubon chapter is lucky to conduct two of these tallies each CBC season, the Forest Glen Preserve CBC and the Middle Fork River Valley CBC. The Forest Glen CBC generally occurs early in the CBC season and is centered north-west of Georgetown, expanding outward to incorporate surrounding areas including the Forest Glen Preserve. The Middle Fork Valley CBC usually occurs on January 1 and is centered to incorporate Kickapoo State Park, Kennekuk County Park, Middle Fork State Fish and Wildlife Area, Lake Vermilion, and other areas along the Middle Fork and North Fork Rivers.

This past season, the Forest Glen CBC occurred on December 15, 2022. We had eleven participants working together in eight parties. The day started with high hopes of seeing numerous birds and species. It was an overcast day with moderate temperatures, eventually reaching a high near 35. Unfortunately, the birds had different thoughts and many chose to stay tucked in for the day. By the end of the day, we had a total of 62 species recorded. The most abundant seen were Greater White-fronted Geese with more than 2,000 tallied. Two species of swans were seen, Tundra and Trumpeter Swans. A small flock of Ring-necked Ducks flew in for a nice little surprise for the day. One team was able to track down all 7 species of woodpeckers that can be found in our area: Red-headed, Red-bellied, Downy, Hairy, Pileated, Northern Flicker and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. And another recorded 4 species of owls: Great-horned, Barred, Long-eared, and Northern Saw-whet.



Trumpeter Swans  
Photo: Mike Ward



Sandhill Cranes (left)  
and  
American Tree Sparrow  
(right)

Photos: Rob Kanter



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The Middle Fork CBC dawned foggy and overcast, but temperatures were mild for January 1, rising from a low of about 43 degrees to a high of 55 during the day. We had a nice turnout of volunteers, with 23 participants in 11 parties. Even though conditions stayed overcast and a bit gloomy throughout the day, observers saw a variety of species. The numerous ponds and lakes resulted in observations of several waterfowl species, including 16 different duck species, 3 geese species, and 3 swan species. In addition, 3 different gull species and Sandhill Cranes were also observed.



Harris Sparrow  
Photo: Mike Ward

One team had a splendid vantage point and was able to observe several eagles catching fish where lake ice was freshly thawing. Danville is a known winter roosting area for the American Crow. More than 11,000 crows were counted during the CBC this year. As with the Forest Glen CBC, all seven species of woodpeckers were again accounted for. Four species uncommon for our counts were also reported this year: Great Black-backed Gull, Golden Eagle, Harris' Sparrow, and Merlin. We ended the day with a total of 90 species for this year's CBC.



Merlin  
Photo: Bob Schifo

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## Spring Bird Count

The Spring Bird Count is statewide in Illinois and will be the first Saturday in May (the 6th).

For more information contact Connie Cunningham - [conniejcunningham@gmail.com](mailto:conniejcunningham@gmail.com)

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## The Suet Tree and the Window Ledge

Article and Photos By: Sue Tinkle

Living on a wooded ravine with many bird feeders affords us many species of visiting birds, but in the 7 years of living here we had been unsuccessful in attracting Pileated Woodpeckers to our suet feeders. One day this past winter, the long awaited finally happened and a female Pileated discovered one. Her male companion could not get the knack of landing on the feeder, missing it and looking embarrassed about his unceremonious crash landing on the ground. That is when my husband, Tom, got the idea of putting a wire cage suet holder on the trunk of our shingle oak, attaching it with a bungee cord around the trunk. As they say, Let the Games Begin! The male Pileated quickly accessed the suet on the tree, and Downy woodpeckers and other birds would be beneath him, eating the crumbs that fell. The most amazing visitor though, was a Brown Creeper looking to cash in on this treat as well. The creeper was a daily visitor for almost 2 months, sometimes pecking the suet himself if no other bird was doing the work. (For those of you who may not be familiar with a Brown Creeper, it is a bird of the woods, brown mottled, small, flat looking bird that crawls around tree trunks while ascending, looking for insects on or behind the bark. It does not perch on branches or come to feeders. When it gets so high on a tree, it flies down to the base of a different tree and starts going up all over again.) On January 31st, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker showed up on the tree suet too. On rare occasions, we saw 2 Pileateds feeding at the same time. We agreed that the suet tree feeder was a great idea, even with little drawbacks of starlings and squirrels!



Pileated Woodpecker

Moving on from the drama of the suet tree, brings us to the window sill story. For the 3rd winter in a row, we have had a leucistic fox squirrel (we named her Lucy for short), in our neighborhood. She has a normal brown fox squirrel tail but the rest of her is white except for her brown paws, ear tips, and nose. The window sill in our 4-seasons room overlooking our backyard is just the right size for a squirrel runway. Move over juncos, titmice and Carolina wrens! Peanuts and sunflower seeds placed there provide great photo ops for viewing Lucy up close, and for interactions of the squirrel/cat kind. Lucy is totally unafraid of our cat Sam on the other side of the window. Even his pawing on the glass fails to disturb the happy munching of our peanut offerings. When the preferred food is gone, she stands up, looks directly at us with an expression of disbelief that there isn't anymore. She then scampers off, enabling our other window sill feeders to clean up the smaller seeds. The "grab and go" titmouse or the lingering juncos are common visitors. Once we had a male cardinal (Murphy's law, phone in other room) and even a White-throated sparrow!



"Lucy"

Perhaps this just goes to show us that our feathered and furry friends are very resourceful, opportunistic and entertaining all at the same time. Enjoy all that nature has to offer!

# Bluebird Nest Box Season Gearing Up

By: Sue Smith

Nearly 40 bluebird nest box volunteers are already busy walking their trails around Vermilion County, prepping boxes for another season of monitoring cavity nesters including the Eastern bluebird, tree swallow, Carolina chickadee, and wrens. As volunteer coordinator, it has been my pleasure to meet with many of these volunteers at their trails this year to learn more about them and their trail locations. Some of these trails were established nearly 40 years ago!

Middlefork Audubon is so grateful to all of these dedicated monitors who give of their time to care for the boxes and weekly collect data on nesting and fledging birds which is passed on to the East Central Illinois Bluebird Society, an affiliate of the North American Bluebird Society. This project has provided a great opportunity for Master Gardeners and Master Naturalists, too, as they can count monitoring hours with the MFA nest box project for their service requirements. A win-win for both of our organizations! Below is a chart with results from the past few seasons of nest box monitoring. I am hoping to up our numbers again this season as we have reopened a few trails and started a few new home sites as well.



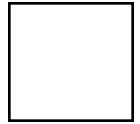
Jim Smith checking Bluebird boxes  
Photo: Sue Smith

Why do we bother to collect this data? First of all, it's fun and a great way to get some good exercise outdoors! The joy of identifying eggs and watching young develop is satisfying and delightful, and each trip becomes an adventure as nature surprises us and teaches us along the way. Ultimately, we do this for the protection of bluebirds and other cavity nesters and the host of plants and animals associated with their habitat. By documenting bird activity in this way, changes or trends develop over time that provide information which can assist in advocating for best management practices and policies for wildlife.

Mark your calendars for Thursday, Aug 24th! All monitors, MFA members, and friends are welcome to join us for a potluck to celebrate the end of another monitoring season at the beautiful White Oak Barn at Kennekuk County Park. Details TBA.

Year	# of boxes	Eastern Bluebirds	Tree Swallows	Misc. Wrens	Chickadees	Purple Martins
2022	320 ***	430	362	194	39	116
2021 (TX Feb. freeze)	359 *	407	376	231	10	153
2020 (Pandemic peak)**	233	438	267	244	10	129
2019	374	639	400	273	5	156
2018	371	799	393	247	8	118

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	<i>Calendar</i>	
Date & Time	Location	Event
Saturday, April 29 9:00 AM bird hike 10:00 AM indoor program	Kennekuk Outdoor Education Center	Spring Bird Identification w/ Matt Hayes
Saturday, May 6	-	Annual Spring bird Count
Saturday, June 17	Kennekuk County Park (Details TBA)	Live Raptor Program w/ Illinois Raptor Center

*More activities are under review and will be announced via the  
Middlefork chapter email mailing list and website.*



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