



the Sand Bluff Birder

the official newsletter of the Sand Bluff Bird Observatory—online edition

March 2021

President's Message

Arrgh! Here we are a year later and still under the thumb of the pandemic! So again, until conditions change, we will remain closed to the public.

Some things are looking up however. With warmer weather on its way, we will soon see the arrival of early spring migrants such as the Eastern Bluebird and Red-winged Blackbird; and before you know it, we will hear the lovely song of the American Robin. So, get outside and enjoy the progression! I know I'm looking forward to it.

____ Ivy Otto, President of SBBO

The White-breasted Nuthatch

____ by Ivy Otto

Bird watching can relieve the doldrums during the long Midwest winter months and in 2021, a pandemic. A favorite winter feeder visitor and year-round resident is the White-breasted Nuthatch; a little gray sparrow-sized bird having a dark cap, white cheeks and breast, and a small amount of rust below. Fairly common in our area at all times of the year, it can be seen working its way down the trunks of older trees, searching the nooks and crannies of aged bark for insects and spiders. Stop to listen and you may hear repeated "hit-tuck" calls used by pairs to maintain contact through the winter and early spring; and later in the season, the rapid low "wha-wha-wha" calls or the short quiet "lk" calls. During winter months, White-breasted Nuthatches may be found moving in mixed flocks with Chickadees, Brown Creepers and Downy Woodpeckers. At Sand Bluff we band an average of about 20 White-breasted Nuthatches per year. This low number is not surprising since the species is considered nonmigratory and pairs maintain a feeding territory during winter, excluding other nuthatches. Banding data from SBBO suggests that Colored Sands has long-time resident individuals, some being re-trapped three to nearly eight years after initial banding at the station.

Courtship begins in winter, the male wooing the female with the repeated "wurrp - wurrp -wurrp" song while bowing and displaying his back. The female initiates mating, squatting low on a perch with wings drooping and quivering, and moving her bill in slow pendulum-like motions while giving "phen-oo" notes. The male dances over and around her, head stretched high and cocked so his black crown faces her in display. Having found him worthy, seven to eight speckled, white to pinkish-white eggs are laid by the end of April or in early May. The female incubates her family alone but is fed by the male. In 12 days, the slightly pink and downy chicks hatch. Fourteen days later, raised on insects and spiders, they leave the nest. Through September, family groups may be found foraging together, but by October the young have gone their own way.



A pair at their cavity

Nests of this little bird are found in natural cavities of large deciduous trees, old woodpecker holes and even man-made nest boxes. The floor of the cavity is covered with strips of bark and lumps of earth. The cup nest is made with fine bark shreds, grasses and rootlets and lined with fur, wool, hair and feathers. The nuthatch is known to sweep the inside and outside of their nests with beetles held in their bills. The beetles exude copious amounts of oily fluids, which are thought to repel squirrels and other nest competitors.



Male White-breasted Nuthatch sweeping around his cavity entrance with an insect.

A pair of nuthatches attempted nesting in a high cavity in a large maple in front of my house in April of 2017. My first observation was on April 6 when I noted removal of debris from the cavity and sweeping behavior with what appeared to be insects and fur, in and around the entrance. Nesting was confirmed April 13 and 14 when the male fed the female. The male called softly or not at all before approaching the nest with food. During my observations, the female left the cavity only a few times to sweep while the male foraged around the tree. The male's duties also included defending his nest from other nuthatches. A male intruder, visiting the site, remained statue-still until discovered by the resident male who then hotly pursued him out of the area.

Life for the nesting pair presents many dangers. Tree cavities are coveted real-estate in the world of wildlife and must be defended from squirrels and others. Furthermore, the nuthatches preference for cavities with large entrance

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Thoughts from the Station Master

Here it is the middle of winter and just a few weeks away from when we will put up nets. As I sit here at home watching the snow pile up, feeders are full, and birds are everywhere picking up seeds. Today we have Red-bellied, Red-headed, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Slate-colored Juncos, finches and assorted sparrows.

Spring opening at the banding station will be coming soon and lot must happen before nets go up. Because of Covid, we will remain closed to the public until further notice. Hopefully by fall, things will be close to normal. We will continue to announce our progress on Facebook and on our website: www.sandbluff.org

Until Covid is over, come out and take a walk in our preserve or any of the other Winnebago County Forest Preserves which have many trails and areas to explore.

____ Mike Eickman

SBBO Annual Meeting

Nineteen volunteers attended the annual meeting at 1:00 pm on January 31 via Zoom. Minutes & treasurer's reports were approved with two volunteers agreeing to complete the yearly audit. The topic of greatest interest was discussion of possibly joining the MOTUS Wildlife Tracking System resulting in an exploratory committee being formed to gather more detailed information to be presented to the board of directors at a future meeting.

One new board member, Steve Reischel, was elected and all other current board members re-elected. Officers, as noted on the back of this newsletter, were re-elected for another year.

Gracie McMahon Interviewed for *Washington Post* Article

Volunteer Gracie McMahon, an American Birding Association 2020 Young Birder of the Year, was interviewed by journalist Melissa Hart for the "Kids Post" section of the *Washington Post* dated Feb. 16, 2021. As a "birding ambassador", Gracie enjoys her role as a mentor for young birders in the ABA as she continues to expand her knowledge and passion for birding at every opportunity. And it all started with a visit to SBBO when she was age 6!

White-breasted Nuthatch, continued from page 1

holes leaves their eggs and nestlings vulnerable to predation. The morning of April 23 at 0730, the pairs frenzied alarm calls alerted me to a gray squirrel who was sitting on a limb close to the nest entrance. Facing the squirrel, the male



Female with sweeping material.

stretched his wings out to the side in a spread-wing display, making himself appear larger. On the evening of April 25, a squirrel was mobbed by a nesting starling in this same tree. This may have elicited the more than half hour of sweeping by the male, with the female joining in near the end. That day was the last I saw the male feed the female. On April 28, my only sighting of the pair together was as they flew away from the nest area in the morning. That evening, the male foraged around the nest area and delivered food to the cavity. I wasn't sure if it was taken or if he ate it himself because I didn't see the female. The following day a nuthatch was calling on the branch above the cavity as a squirrel drew near. The nuthatch

flew off and the squirrel entered the hole. After that, the nuthatches were observed several times at the site but always flew away. Unfortunately nest failure, as often happens in nature, was confirmed.

Although White-breasted Nuthatches face many hardships, the species continues to persevere. We humans can help them by maintaining older stands of "less-than-perfect" trees which provide the cavities they need for nesting and hiding places for their insect food.

In addition to insects, nuthatches also eat nuts and seeds and are known for caching food. I watched an individual stuff peanuts under the shingles of my roof and once found a peanut jammed in an outdoor outlet (I must remember to close the cover next time!). If you think you might enjoy seeing this little delight, fill your feeders with peanuts, sunflower seeds and suet – and *smile*.



White-breasted Nuthatches can be quite tame. This one came close for a sunflower seed treat. All photos provided by Ivy Otto.

References:

Kilham, L. 1968. Reproductive behavior of White-breasted Nuthatches. I. Distraction display, bill-sweeping, and nest hole defense. *Auk*, 85: 477-492

Kilham, L. 1972. Reproductive behavior of White-breasted Nuthatches II. Courtship. *The Auk* 89, 115-129.

PLEASE HELP US ... in any way you can

Our non-profit organization survives because of private contributions of time and money from friends just like you. Please examine the list below and help us continue our important banding program by making your contribution!

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Please return this form to: Sand Bluff Bird Observatory, P. O. Box 2, Seward, Illinois 61077

Contributions Keep SBBO Alive

Sand Bluff Bird Observatory over the years has been very blessed to have the support of public donations. We would like to THANK everyone for the continued support of our scientific studies. We cannot survive without donations to replace nets, maintain our facility and further our knowledge of the avian world.

Many times, we have thought back to where we were in the beginning and where we are now and it's all because of gifts large or small. Whether monetary or an item for our Silent Auctions, it has all been a gift from the heart.

From the volunteers and Board of Directors of Sand Bluff Bird Observatory, we graciously Thank You.

[Between 1986 and 1994 when it was known as Sand Bluff Banding Station, volunteer Tom Little published a newsletter twice a year and usually named contributors. Some of those contributors are still giving in 2020! In 1998-99, the banding station reorganized as Sand Bluff Bird Observatory, Inc. with 501(c)(3) status. Through the following years and several treasurers, an historic list of contributors was not kept, but familiar names appear year after year. In the following list of 2020 contributors, the year they were first mentioned in the oldest newsletters is noted.]

2020

Sebastian & Patricia Aiello
Hazem & Muhammad Alkhan

Robert J. & Kristen Ault

Martha Barclay

Mary Blackmore

Dan & Stacy Burton

Rebecca Christoffel & Andrew H. Williams

Bev Cicolello & Deb Zahniser

Annie Collins

Christian & Denise Cooper

Janis Cooper

Mike & Mary Davis

John & Kay Day

Jane Dennis

Mark & Shari Eggleston

Kara Gallup

Ray & Nina Herzer (1992)

Mary Hughes-Greer

Illinois Ornithological Society

Garnett Johnson (1991)

Suzanne & Robert Kay

Claire & Patrick Killian

Dale & Pam Kindschi

Mary Lou Lafler

Steve & Lynne Landi

Richard Leighton

Jan Lippert

Daniel & Julie Long

Marty Lydon Estate

Dr. Steven, Larissa & Thomas Lyon

Jeff & Linda Madura (1992)

John Malcotte

Bob & Karen Matthews

Connie Matusiak

Melody MacAllister

Scott & Kelly McCleary

North America Bluebird Society

Northwest Illinois Audubon Society (1986)

Diana & Gerald Ogren (1990)

Raylin & Cheryl Olson

Adell Peterson

Dr. Joseph Pittman (1986)

Dave & Sandy Reischel

Mario Rojas

Mark Schneider

Barbara Schuette

John Seeber

Nancy Siepman

Merrie Starr & Gregory Scheuer

Dorothy K. Stokes

Sandra Thompson

Carol & Hazen Tuck

Frederick Weber

Doug & Lisa Wheeler

Nicholas Wyatt (1993)

Lute Wyttenbach

Laurie Yahr & Rich Kahl

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Why net checkers receive training!

A blast from the past caricature of SBBO founder, Lee Johnson, drawn by Darrell Stambaugh in August, 1967. Lee remarked that Darrell was his first full-time volunteer, still in high school, and one of the most brilliant people he has ever known.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR CLASSES AND GROUPS

It is with regret, SBBO must suspend group visits and spring events until the COVID-19 virus is brought under control. When it is possible again, you will be welcomed with open arms.

Weekdays or a weekend group of 10 or more can schedule a "group presentation" with a suggested donation of \$5 per person. Smaller groups may join the general visitors.



Photo by Thelma Bottum

Call Kathy Hoel (pictured), 815-877-2938 or e-mail kathyhoel6@gmail.com/subject: SBBO group visit, for details and to reserve your spot. Allow 1½ hours to watch the banding process and visit the nets.

Here's How To Reach Us!

During Operating Hours: 815-629-2671

Mailing Address: Sand Bluff Bird Observatory
P. O. Box 2
Seward, IL 61077

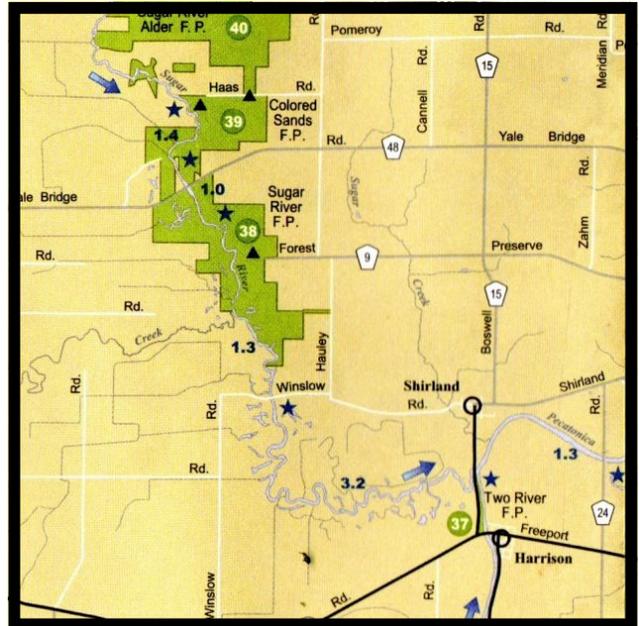
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