



FRIENDS OF  
NACHUSA  
GRASSLANDS

February 2024

Dear Friend,

Bird watching is one of the most enjoyable activities you can experience in nature. Susan Kleiman is one of the very best guides to have in exploring bird watching at Nachusa. Her years of studying birds and love of our avian friends come through in every sentence of this issue of *A Prairie Calling*.

Nachusa, with its many varied habitats, is a perfect place to explore the world of birds. Susan details which birds you are likely to see in each area: grassland, wetland, pond, woodland/savanna. This activity is one that can be enjoyed by people of all ages and with little investment: a pair of binoculars, a guidebook, and/or an app on your phone.

As a bird watcher/photographer myself, I appreciate all that Susan has communicated in this issue. I know you will also.

With warm regards from Nachusa Grasslands,

Charles Larry

# A Prairie Calling

ISSUE 13 - February 2024



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## Embark on the Journey of Winter Bird Watching!

By Susan Kleiman

If you get excited when you see a bird and wish you knew more, then you are ready to start becoming a “bird watcher.” Start with where you see them most...is it your yard, the local park, or at Nachusa Grasslands?

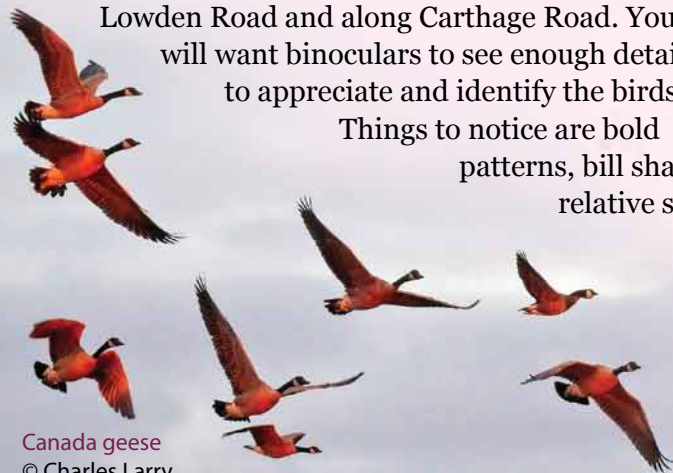


bufflehead  
© Dee Hudson

### PONDSIDE PLUMAGE

At Nachusa Grasslands we have a glorious mix of habitats representative of the Rock River Hill Country. Birds don't hold still much, but some groups stay put a bit longer than others. For example, birds of open wetland ponds often paddle or walk the edges for hours. Start with Nachusa's ponds near the Visitor Center, then to Jay Meiners Wetlands on Naylor Road, or along Stone Barn Road east of Lowden Road and along Carthage Road. You will want binoculars to see enough detail to appreciate and identify the birds.

Things to notice are bold patterns, bill shape, relative size,



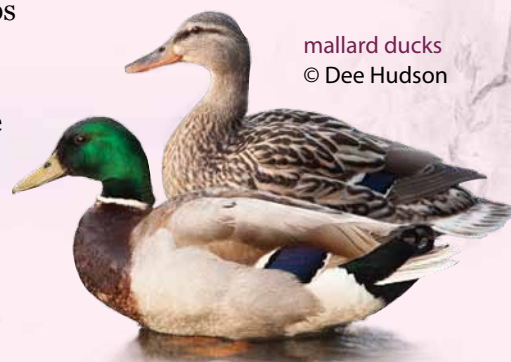
Canada geese  
© Charles Larry



great blue heron  
© Dee Hudson

and behaviors. Are the ducks diving or dabbling? Are the shore birds probing their bills all the way into the mud or picking food from the surface?

In our ponded areas in winter, if not frozen over, you are most likely to see Canada geese and mallard ducks. Sometimes there might be hardy individuals of the following ducks: American black, gadwall, bufflehead, common goldeneye, or common merganser (a duck-like diving bird with serrated teeth for catching fish). One or two great blue herons will also stick around if they can access the fish. And in the grassy or woody edges you might see a pretty swamp sparrow with its rufous back and cap. ❁



mallard ducks  
© Dee Hudson



swamp sparrow  
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## CANOPY: FEATHERED WONDERS

The next easiest habitat to observe birds is in our woodlands and savannas. To find birds, stand still a moment and let your gaze get “fuzzy” and wide. When you catch a movement (other than branches in the breeze) then focus and you may see a bird. Or listen to the birds calling to each other and follow the sound to the bird. You may have to look up in the trees, but woodland birds can be near the ground as well.



black-capped chickadee  
© Dee Hudson



northern cardinal  
© Dee Hudson

In our woodlands and woody edges, you should be able to enjoy northern cardinals (the state bird of Illinois and six other states), black-capped chickadees, blue jays, cedar waxwings, white-breasted and red-breasted nuthatches, tufted titmice, purple and house finches, and many species of



barred owl  
© Dee Hudson

their hunting techniques of swooping from low perches to catch an insect mid-air or from the ground. These omnivores also store food, such as acorns and grasshoppers, in crevices, covering them with bark.

Our woodlands and edges also have wild turkey as well as several woodland hawks, the Cooper’s and sharp-shinned hawks, and if you are lucky, you might spot one of our resident owl species: great-horned, barred, eastern screech or the occasional winter visitor, the tiny saw-whet owl, so named due to one of its alarm calls sounding like the whetting (sharpening) of a hand saw. Other fun finds could be winter wrens, brown creepers, golden-crowned kinglets, or pine siskins. ❁



pileated woodpecker  
© Charles Larry



wild turkey  
© Dee Hudson



red-headed woodpecker  
© Charles Larry

woodpeckers: downy, hairy, red-bellied, northern flicker, pileated, and our savanna specialist...red-headed woodpecker. This last species has become quite rare (overall 60% decline in their range) but the restoration of the open character of our native oak forests has attracted them here. They need open space due to one of



cedar waxwing  
© Charles Larry

brown creeper  
© Charles Larry



Did you know that birds have official common names as well as official scientific names? The American Ornithological Society is the group responsible for the official common names.



## BIRD WATCHING RESOURCES

**Best Practices:** Start early on a calm day, be quiet, dress for the weather.

**Gear:** The best size of binoculars for bird watching that most prefer is 8x42. Larger than 8 is too much magnification, making the image shakier and narrowing field of view, which makes it difficult to locate the bird that you just saw with your eyes.

**Recommended App:** Merlin. This is free and lets you search all birds you are likely to see in your area (you can customize the area). Use it to ID birds by narrowing down choices through questions it asks, such as location, size, color, and bird actions. Then it creates a list with photos of possible birds to choose from and to learn more to help you decide. You can also take photos or record bird sounds to help identify the bird.

**Website:** "All About Birds" from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology (the study of birds). Learn about bird identification, behavior, feeding, and binoculars.

**Bird ID Book:** I prefer National Geographic's Field Guide to Birds of North America. This is because I only need one book no matter where I travel on the continent. The range maps are on the same page as the bird pictures, and having several birds on each page helps in comparing similar birds.



## PRAIRIE WINGS

It is trickiest to observe birds in the open prairies, especially in winter. Pick a low-wind day and walk the trails at the Visitor Center, Thelma Carpenter Prairie, Jay Meiners Wetlands, Big Jump Prairie, or Clear Creek Knolls. Watch the paths and the tops of stiff plants or

shrubs to spot the small birds. At

this time of year, you are likely to see winter residents, such as American tree sparrows, dark-eyed juncos, white-crowned

and white-throated sparrows, as well as year-round residents, such as American goldfinches in winter plumage, cedar waxwings, song sparrows, and ring-necked pheasants (originally brought over from Asia). Overhead you may see year-round resident American crows, red-tailed hawks, American kestrels, blue jays, mourning doves, and bald eagles, as well as winter-resident rough-legged hawks and

northern harriers (also a hawk). And if you are lucky, you might spy a short-eared owl, a prairie specialist that hunts by day and dusk. Perhaps you'll see a northern shrike. These gray, white, and black birds are slightly smaller than blue jays, and even though they have small feet, they can stun

prey with blows from their heavy, hooked bills and impale the item (large grasshopper, mouse, or sparrow) on a thorn or barbed wire where they may eat it later. ❁



northern harrier  
© Charles Larry



dark-eyed junco  
© Dee Hudson



ring-necked pheasant  
© Dee Hudson



white-throated sparrow  
© Charles Larry



American tree sparrows  
© Charles Larry



## WARM WINTERS: A FEATHERED FIESTA

Appearing off and on throughout warm winters we also have American robins, eastern bluebirds, and eastern meadowlarks. As winter recedes in late February, we often start seeing male red-wing blackbirds, common grackles, and Wilson's snipe returning.

eastern meadowlark  
© Charles Larry



eastern bluebird  
© Charles Larry



American robin  
© Dee Hudson



## SUSAN KLEIMAN

Susan considers herself a naturalist. Since she was quite young, Susan was drawn towards animals and nature. She has a bachelors in Forestry and Wildlife Management and a masters in Environmental Education/Interpretation. Susan has worked in 12 states doing environmental education. She has been working and volunteering at Nachusa for three decades, doing many aspects of restoration and monitoring of birds and frogs.

## ROADSIDE BIRDWATCHING

If you drive slowly on the most open, windswept places of our rural roads, you can spot horned larks, sparrow-like snow buntings, and Lapland longspurs.

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winter sunset  
© Dee Hudson

Did you know that birds have calls as well as songs? Calls are to keep track of or convey information between mates or small flocks, and songs are for identifying territory or attracting a mate.

