

Our Wonderful Birdwatching Community

...history and mission of Copper Country Audubon

There are many great reasons to live in the Copper Country, but one of the best is our wonderful birdwatching community. Not only are we fortunate to have over 324 species of birds that have been seen here and a wide variety of habitats and places to visit, but almost everybody in the Copper Country loves nature and is a birdwatcher to some degree.

Copper Country Audubon was started in the early 1970s by a small group of people led by Art Weaver who wrote a book, *Birds of Michigan's Copper Country*, and donated sales of the book to the club. But there have been birdwatchers here long before then, some of who are members of CCA to this very day. Bruce Wolck from the Traverse Bay area and his family were avid bird watchers in the 1960s. Bruce and his family conducted the first Christmas Bird Counts and published them in *The Jack Pine Warbler*.

Before that, in the 1950s Gene Hesterberg, Eric Bourdo, Norm Sloan, and Bob Brown, who were in the early Department of Forestry at Michigan Tech, were bird watchers who kept lists of birds and promoted bird watching with their students. Dr. Brown would take ecology classes to the Keweenaw and Isle Royale and keep lists of birds they saw. Dr. Hesterberg and Dr. Bourdo published an article on nesting Three-toed Woodpeckers, and Dr. Sloan did one on Barred Owls; these also were in *The Jack Pine Warbler*.

Undoubtedly there have been many birdwatchers in the Copper Country that have gone unnoticed, and many records of birds go unreported as well. For example, a new member to CCA from Hancock said he has always loved birds, and one spring day at Hungarian Falls he was thrilled to see a Painted Bunting -- one of the most brilliantly colored birds that is impossible to mistake. This is a rare bird for the Keweenaw with only a few sightings. But not being documented doesn't mean that Painted Bunting was unimportant. Birdwatchers in the Copper Country are having wonderful experiences with birds whether documented or not. One doesn't even need to belong to a bird club or group to be a birdwatcher!

Copper Country Audubon is a small, local birdwatching club with no ties to National Audubon. Sharing the name "Audubon" is sometimes confusing, because some people think they are helping us by getting the national magazine and donating to other Audubon groups. Neither do we get any funding from Michigan Audubon, although we are a partner with them because CCA takes care of the two wildlife sanctuaries in the Keweenaw, part of which we helped purchase several years ago.

Copper Country Audubon was incorporated as a nonprofit organization in 1992. The mission of the Copper Country Audubon Club is *to bring together those interested in the study of wild birds and in the conservation of natural resources; further the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of ecology; and to cooperate with other organizations having similar objectives*. It started with about 30 members, and now has approximately 250 members.

Copper Country Audubon has kept its membership cost low to include all birdwatchers in the community. Basic annual membership was \$10 since the start of the club, and for over thirty years, and has only recently been changed to \$25. Members at all levels are appreciated, but CCA couldn't do all that it does with just the basic membership, which about covers the newsletter, mailing, PO box, etc. We do not take people off the mailing list until several years of not receiving dues, and even then we

check to see if they want to stay on. We also have many courtesy mailings, such as to the local libraries and schools.

All of the organizational work of CCA is done by volunteers. Many of our members donate well above the basic membership with each newsletter. Many of our members are life members who keep giving and giving, for which we thank them over and over, too. These extra donations provide the funds for our projects such as bird surveys, habitat protection, school and library work, etc. Much of that work is volunteer, also, but we are fortunate to be able to pay a few experts for bird surveys and other field work. The correspondence with our members is also a wonderful thing – and most of our members are casual birdwatchers who simply want to support a small local organization doing good things for birds and nature in the Copper Country.

Copper Country Audubon is as much about birds as it is about people who love the birds. Bird populations have suffered over the years because of habitat loss, pollution, cars, windows, lights, towers and introduced predators. They need a group devoted especially to them. The beautiful Copper Country has a viable, flourishing birdwatching group. We are lucky to live here and share this place on our planet – the peninsula that protrudes far into Lake Superior that one can see on a satellite photo. The joy and fascination of birds and nature is an inspiration that together with the people of the Copper Country creates our wonderful birdwatching community.

Below is some early history of Copper Country Audubon as remembered by founder, Art Weaver, who was a mechanical engineering professor at Michigan Tech.

1975 December 3. Organizational meeting at MTU Forestry Bldg. As I remember, a goodly number of people in attendance were students, both graduate and undergraduate. We planned to conduct a Christmas Bird Count but then found that it would have to be unofficial as the deadline for applying had passed. We postponed it until January and planned to run it as a practice.

1976 January 22. The third meeting (and the “first official meeting”) of the group. We elected officers from the 30 people who showed up. I think Frank Isaacs was elected President and perhaps I was elected Treasurer; if not then, but a few years later. I would not have accepted the offer of the Presidency, had it been offered, as I thought it would not be a good idea to have a Tech faculty member in that post, because the perception of non-Tech people would have been, “Oh, that’s another Tech student group”, and there was, as there unfortunately always is in a small college town, a certain amount of anti-Tech feeling in the rest of the community. Also, it would be much better for the “senior students” to run things instead of an older person, and hopefully, before long there might be non-Tech members in some of the offices. Norm Sloan, the current ornithologist in Forestry, never attended after the first meeting.

1976 February 15. Practice Christmas Count. We followed all the specifications of the National Audubon CBC people; I believe we had fixed the center of the 15-mile diameter circle just where it is now, a bit offshore in Portage Lake between Houghton and Chassell. We had cut a paper circle to scale and moved it about on a DNR map until we had included the best-guess mix of habitats. The weather did not look good that Sunday morning; it was 32° and there were several inches of new, heavy snow. I managed to get my car to the Forestry lot to meet my morning group, and then went out with Bob Janke in the afternoon. We got together Thursday for the compilation.

1976 April 17. This was the day of the spectacular Hawk Watch on Brockway. My records show 317 Sharpshins, 147 Roughlegs, 50 Redtails, 22 N. Harrier, 7 Turkey Vultures, 5 Bald Eagles, 1 Peregrine for sure, 5 Ospreys, a few Broadwings, Kestrels and many "unidentified". And that was for less than a full day. Frank Isaacs, an MS student in ornithology, was doing his thesis on the hawk migration, and was very good on identification. He estimated that we saw over 800 hawks in the few hours we were there, but even he could not put names to all of them. We got all excited by what was first thought to be a dark-phase Swainson's, but after we saw 20 of them, we knew something was wrong! A Swainson's of any kind in this region would be unusual, and a dark-phase much more so. A day or so later, someone with more reference books convinced the rest of us that they were "super-dark-phase Roughlegs". I think this was one of the times that we had to slog about three miles on the surface of the old snow, falling through every few steps, to reach the top of Brockway, as the road was open for only a short distance." ... *Arthur S. Weaver*