

BIRD SONGS

Newsletter of the North Lakeland
Discovery Center Bird Club

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President's Message

by Frank Schroyer

Late winter/early spring used to be one of my least favorite times of the year. The melting snowpack, soggy ground, and gray weather makes it difficult to find motivation to get outside. Since birding more seriously though, this time of year has become one of my favorites. The anticipation for spring migration builds, and I enjoy documenting the arrival of some of the earliest migrating species. Birds like Trumpeter Swans, who will stay here all winter, are starting to increase in number. Winter resident species like Dark-eyed Junco and American Tree Sparrow are gearing up to leave the region, and year-round residents like Black-capped Chickadees are preparing for the mating season. It's a really special time to get out and observe changes in nature.

This winter we ended up seeing fewer irruptive species than was projected last fall. Pine Grosbeaks made the best showing in our region, with numbers

appearing to peak shortly after the new year. Other species, like Bohemian Waxwing, Evening Grosbeak, and Redpoll have been present throughout winter, but not in any numbers that rival larger irruptions in past years. Notable sightings in the region this winter have included a Varied Thrush, whose daily presence was carefully documented by club member Dave W. nearly all the way through February. In Forest County, several birders encountered flocks of Canada Jays with some consistency, as the birds readily came to peanut butter and bird seed left out to attract this uncommon species. Along with Canada Jay, there were two Black-backed Woodpeckers being observed in the same area. Both species require expansive boreal forest habitat. Other notable species were observed more sporadically across the region, like American Goshawk and Golden Eagle. I'll be curious to see what spring brings us this year!

A few updates and reminders for club members:

1. We are still seeking a volunteer to coordinate and organize care for the bird feeding enclosure at NLDC. If you're interested, please reach out to me. *We need someone to volunteer as coordinator before May '26!* Without Club members volunteering to coordinate and maintain the feeder station, we may need to seek alternative solutions.
2. Remember to pay your dues (\$10/person) this year.
3. If you're in town, consider joining myself and several other club members for the Bird & Wildlife Festival on May 9th. Sign up for the event is on NLDC's website.
4. Mark your calendars now for our first monthly program May 4th at NLDC. We will send out more details later.

Thank you all for supporting the Bird Club! I look forward to seeing you all at our upcoming programs and outings in 2026!

Happy Birding

Species Profile: Varied Thrush (*Ixoreus naevius*)

Article and Photos by Dave Wittrock

On the Saturday after Thanksgiving, I received a text message and a photo from my neighbors with the question “what kind of bird is this?” I looked at the photo, and even though it wasn’t necessary, I went to my copy of Sibley to be certain. Then I wrote back “I’ll tell you if you let me come over.”



The Varied Thrush is a strikingly colored bird that is pretty much unmistakable. The male has a black head and back, a wide black streak running through the eye, and a black band across its breast. There is a wide orange “eyebrow,” an orange throat and breast, and an intricately patterned underside of orange, gray, and white. The female is similar in pattern, with the colors somewhat muted. The photo I was looking at was a male varied thrush.

Many of us may go our entire life without a rare bird showing up in our yard – or even in our neighborhood. Certainly, I have had birds on my daily list that eBird flags as rare. But this is typically a Baltimore Oriole or Fox Sparrow that is a week late in heading south in the fall or warblers that arrive a week early in the spring. To have a Varied Thrush in the neighborhood was my first experience in having a truly uncommon bird near my home.

Varied Thrushes are birds of the Pacific Northwest. They typically summer in Alaska and British Columbia and winter in central Washington extending down into central California, with a year-round population along much of the northern Pacific coast. But it is a species with a history of wayward individuals. Sibley shows them as rare visitors across much of the United States, all the way to the east coast (except for the Southeast US). eBird abundance maps (look under the

Science tab for Status and Trends and click on the Weekly tab) even show a faint trend for sightings of the birds in Minnesota and Wisconsin during the winter months. Birds of Minnesota and Wisconsin reports that there are about 5-10 sightings each year in those two states. So, while still a rarity, the presence of a Varied Thrush in my neighborhood was not a completely unexpected event. In fact, when I first saw it, there were also reports of a Varied Thrush in Sawyer County and in Bayfield County. Nonetheless, this visitor was quite exciting.

It is not common to be able to observe the behavior of a single bird over a lengthy duration. If you have an eagle nest nearby or loons nesting on your lake, you get a great opportunity to witness nesting and rearing behavior. Yes, we have birds come to our feeders, but it is often difficult to tell one chickadee or woodpecker from another. The long stay of this single thrush did provide me with a chance to observe it and watch how its behavior changed over time. When it first arrived, after a storm that covered the trees in snow and ice, the bird spent a lot of time on the deck where the homeowners scattered sunflower seed – and after a tip from other birders – cracked corn. Birds of Minnesota and Wisconsin states that Varied Thrushes are ground feeders that forage for insects, seeds, and berries. In those early days, this thrush was definitely feeding on seeds and cracked corn, hopping along the deck railing or on the floor of the deck. As the snow melted and the weather grew warmer, the bird spent less time on the deck and became less regular in its behavior patterns and more difficult to see. When I did see it come to the deck, it often came from different directions than it did at first, indicating that it was exploring the area. One day we observed it using its beak to poke in some lichen on a tree, presumably looking for insects or insect larvae. Another round of ice and snow brought the bird back to the deck and a diet of seed and corn. This pattern repeated and with an extended long warm spell at the end of February, neither I nor the homeowners saw the bird for almost 2 weeks. But the most recent snow storms have seen the bird return to the deck.



I am often asked by nonbirders “why birds?” Birds are, as we all know, beautiful creatures. This Varied Thrush is a very attractive bird. The black and orange color pattern is stunning, but the subtle textures of grays and whites along its sides are spectacular. So esthetic pleasure is certainly one aspect of birding. But this bird highlighted some of the other aspects of birding. This bird has become a minor celebrity within the neighborhood - and beyond. I originally helped the homeowners identify the bird and they have enjoyed its presence. I’ve taken several of my neighbors over to help them see the bird, enhancing our sense of community. For me, one of the pleasures of having the bird nearby has been being able to share with it other members of the birding community. I’ve been able to help people see that bird that have helped me find other birds in the past, but I have also met new birders because of their visit to see the thrush. To me, that connection to other birders and our shared interest is a part of birding I find valuable. Finally, in what has been a somewhat challenging winter for me personally, the bird gave me an incentive to get out of the house and to be active. The recent snow has brought the thrush back to the feeders. On Saturday morning I had talked to the homeowners, we all thought he was gone. Then an hour later he was back and has been seen three times since then. What happens to these stray birds that wander far outside of their home range? In most cases, unfortunately, the story probably does not end well. But I think there is reason to be optimistic about this bird. The Varied Thrush is a bird that shows a propensity to roam, as I mentioned earlier. I would hazard a guess that it may be genetically predisposed to roam. Having some birds in a species roam could be advantageous in allowing the species to expand its range or find more favorable habitat during times of climate disruption (e.g. drought). This bird certainly had no trouble surviving the winter, a factor that would have done in many birds. There are records of Varied Thrushes being seen in Wisconsin as late as May. Will the bird eventually find its way back to the Pacific Northwest? The simple answer is that we don’t know. The research that would be necessary to test whether these roaming thrushes get back home has not been conducted. I’m hoping it does. But wouldn’t it be cool if a roaming female thrush would happen by in the next few weeks? Whatever the result, I am grateful for the opportunity to have had this wonderful bird as a neighbor for a few months.

Just a Chickadee

Article and Photos by Mark Westphal

Sometimes when I am searching for a much sought after warbler in the branches of a tall white pine, and the movement I spot turns out to be a Chickadee, my mental, if not verbal response has often been “It’s just a Chickadee”. An equally muted response occurs when I am scanning a newly ice-free pond or river for migrating waterfowl and the only species I spot is a flock of Mallards. I must admit that I have all too often taken some of our resident winter birds for granted. It is easy to dismiss some of our more common residents when we are eagerly anticipating the arrival of our colorful spring migrants.



Black-capped Chickadee

This winter in particular has reminded me to be more appreciative of those common resident species that provide us with company and year-round viewing opportunities. With the exception of the Christmas Bird Count, my winter bird watching has been focused on my own feeders and an occasional visit to the open water near the Woodruff hatchery and the landing on the Wisconsin River near downtown Rhinelander. While I had two notable species, a female Cardinal and a small flock of Pine Grosbeaks visiting my feeders this winter, it was our more common species that provided the foundation of my birdwatching experiences. Chickadees, Red-breasted Nuthatches and the ever-boisterous Blue Jays consumed most of the sunflower seeds. Downy, Hairy, and a single female Pileated Woodpecker along with the other birds ate numerous pounds of suet purchased from the local grocery store. Without these steadfast birds, these winter months would have seemed much longer. The Mallard sightings at the few open water locations were also welcome. The iridescent green heads of the

males brought some much-appreciated color contrast to the white and gray landscape surrounding the open water.



Mallards

As winter gradually gives way to spring, I will indeed welcome back our summer residents and those species that merely pass through to breeding grounds further north. I look forward to the return of Red-winged Blackbirds singing in the marsh, Tree Swallows gliding through the air in search of newly hatched insects, and the morning chorus of Robins and warblers that come with the arrival of spring.

As our summer residents return, I will realize that many of my winter birds will have quietly faded into the woods to establish their own territories and to raise their young. If at some time during the summer I am fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of a little bird with a black cap in the branches of a tall white pine, I will remember when the days were cold and snow covered the ground. I will remember the lively and bold little bird that was more than “Just a Chickadee”. It was a small bundle of puffed-up feathers with a bright pair of eyes that helped to bring life and light to cold winter days. For those of us who choose to spend all four seasons in the Northwoods, that is no small gift.

Life List Quarterly: First Quarter 2026

by Sarah Besadny

As others have noted in their articles in this newsletter, there is much anticipation for the migrants and local breeders that will be returning over these next few months. Our weekly bird walks will pick up again shortly and so begins the creation of a new Annual List for the Discovery Center Bird Club. And every outing affords the opportunity to add a species to our Club's Life List.

In looking back at the number of species we've had on our annual lists for the last 10 years, it averages out to 160 species per season. That's really amazing if you think about it. We typically gather for just a few hours once a week from May through October with a few other outings scheduled during the year. The weather on day of one of our outings might be optimal for birding and we see a nice variety of species of birds, or it might be rainy, windy, poor light, etc., challenging us to find birds. So to think that we see approximately 160 species during our times together over the course of the year really is a feat. Let's see what we spot together on our bird walks in 2026 and build our Annual List.

Photo Journal

Photos and Captions by Mark Westphal



Wild Turkey

Soon the Tom Turkeys will be starting their annual mating ritual displays. Even without their tails spread in a bold, wide fan, their feathers offer a kaleidoscope of colors with every shift in light.



Pine Grosbeak

Every winter it is always interesting to see which northern Finches will appear in the Northwoods. This year a small flock of Pine Grosbeaks made daily visits to our backyard feeders.



Pine Grosbeak