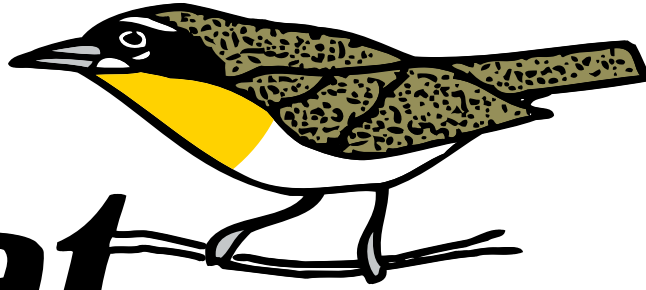


The Chat



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Serving Audrain, Boone, Cooper, Howard, Monroe and Randolph Counties

The mission of the Columbia Audubon Society is to preserve the natural world and its ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and the earth's biological diversity, through education, environmental study, and habitat restoration and protection.

CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 2016

Some times in life you have to make hard decisions. Although it probably didn't equal some of the decisions I had to make running a Newborn Intensive Care Unit, canceling Saturday's Christmas Bird Count was really hard. I'd been warned never to cancel because the event couldn't be put together again. The last time this came up, I stood my ground and told everyone to only go out when and where they felt safe; luckily no one got hurt. This time, by Friday evening, many of us had already sat on wintry main roads for hours, barely avoiding collisions, and getting calls from team members dropping out. I tried to convince myself of an above-freezing window mid-day in which we could count, but by evening my email and phone were full of area leaders suggesting we cancel; I had to agree. Then came the hard part: finding another day in the middle of the holidays to get a dozen teams all out on the same day. Somehow, on Thursday December 22, we did it: some people took days off work, others birded several areas, leaders found helpers old and new. Without the official Chili Supper to calculate results, it'll take a bit longer to know our participation and bird-count numbers for certain. But the birds were counted, and no one was hurt. Thank you to everyone who made it happen. (Editor's note: check out the Tribune story at: <http://ow.ly/YGJa307tvOV>). - by *Laura Hillman*

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Edited by

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LOOK FOR THE EMERALD ASH BORER

Hello, Missouri Birdwatchers! We need your help detecting populations of the invasive emerald ash borer (EAB). This tree-killing beetle has been found in 30 Missouri counties so far, but we suspect it is present in more. EAB kills ash trees in the genus *Fraxinus*, which includes the commonly-planted green ash and white ash. We are most interested in reports from new counties where EAB has not yet been found. While birding, please keep an eye out for bark blanding on ash trees and report tree locations using an online form (link below). What is bark blanding? Woodpeckers searching for insect larvae inside trees often pop off the outer bark. On ash trees, this feeding activity reveals a white inner bark that is highly noticeable. Ash trees with bark blanding may not have EAB, but it is certainly worth reporting these trees for a closer look by trained foresters. Thank you for keeping an eye out!

- by Robbie Doerhoff, Forest Entomologist, Robbie.Doerhoff@mdc.mo.gov

Online form: <http://extension.missouri.edu/treepests/EABbeforereport.aspx>

Birdwatcher's Field Guide to Holes in Trees:

http://www.dontmovefirewood.org/sites/default/files/HolesInTrees2014v2_0.pdf

UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held at the Unitarian-Universalist Church, 2615 Shepard Blvd, Columbia.

Wednesday, January 18th, 2017, 7:00 p.m.

Presenter: Lori McCurdy, Columbia Center for Urban Agriculture

Lori will talk about the programs CUA runs with Columbia Public Schools, as well as her outdoor classroom program.

Wednesday, February 15th, 2017, 7:00 p.m.

Presenter: Brad and Suzanne Wright, Mussel Fork Legacy Marsh, LLC

Brad and Suzanne will talk about buying and managing land for recreational benefits, and the "Life of a Wetland Reserve Program" project (60 days of duck hunting, 305 days of birding).

Wednesday, March 15th, 2017, 7:00 p.m.

Presenter: John Burk, Turkey Federation.

Turkey Federation activities and on-the-ground restoration efforts.

MEETING MINUTES

There are no meeting minutes published this month, because the board does not meet in December due to the Christmas Bird Count. Minutes of the November meeting will therefore be published in the February Chat, after they have been approved at the January meeting.

WATCHING WINTER WOODPECKERS

Bird-watchers are used to cursing squirrels who steal from feeders, but sometimes the tables are turned. On a pleasant December afternoon, Joanna and I watched a Red-Bellied Woodpecker scavenging acorns from squirrel stashes. Standing among clumps of prairie grass on a hillside pasture, we noticed activity near one of our firewood stacks along the forest edge where we'd removed cedars and thinned hardwoods the year before. A female Red-Bellied was energetically examining the split logs, between which squirrels and mice often like to cache acorns and other foods. With a stab of her long bill, she winkled out an acorn and flew up into a nearby oak with it. Choosing a thick, low-angle branch, she wedged the acorn into a crotch and worked it open before feasting on the meat inside. These rodent larders were clearly a great find for her, and we enjoyed knowing that squirrels were subject to the Golden Rule.

Another day, I had the opportunity to closely watch a Downy Woodpecker digging for food, following a very consistent pattern. Clinging to the upper part of a ~25' sapling (I'm not sure what species) 2-3" in diameter, it first carefully excavated a pit, producing the characteristic hammering sounds that drew my notice in the first place. It turned its head this way and that, including nearly upside down, in order to produce what appeared to be a very neat, conical pit in the wood with sides sloping into the tree at the same angle all the way around. Watching him (and the flying wood chips), I realized I had always assumed that woodpeckers just hammered away at chaotic holes, but not this meticulous fellow. Once he'd excavated the pit to his satisfaction, he stopped noisily hammering and switched to quietly digging away at the wood, I assumed extracting insects. No more wood chips flew, and the process was nearly silent; at this stage I would never have known he was there. After a few minutes of such feeding, he hopped about 6" up the trunk and started the process over, again loudly excavating a nice conical pit before quietly feeding for a few minutes. Overall, I watched him do this four times in a row (the last two on a more horizontal branch rather than a vertical trunk), always with about the same timing for each step of the process. Eventually he flew away, leaving me with a greater appreciation for the subtleties of woodpecker feeding behavior.

I've wondered before what birds do for water when the landscape is frozen; during the recent polar cold snap, I had the chance to find out for at least one species. I was taking a break from my home office, walking the woods after a light snowfall looking for deer beds (I found all too many), when I started watching a male Red-Bellied Woodpecker. He flew into a very large, spreading oak tree and landed on a thick, gently-rising branch capped by snow, and began to eat the snow. He used a scooping neck motion much like a duck to repeatedly bury his bill in the snow and come up with a mouthful of the stuff before tilting his neck back to swallow. After a few rounds, he flew off noisily (or is that redundant?). - by Eric Reuter

BARRED OWLS CLOSE UP



- photo by Marjorie Meredith

CAS member Marjorie Meredith sent in photos of a Barred Owl in her Columbia yard. She notes that “the owl is watching a spot where I am pretty sure mice have gotten in my basement, next to the area where seed drops from my bird feeders on the deck above, so mice might be feeding on the dropped sunflower and safflower seed. (I) have never seen an owl here before in the 23 years I have lived here, now twice in several days. Quite a thrill for me.”

Her experience mirrors our own recently, as at least one Barred Owl has been quite active on our land over the past month, including repeatedly perching close to the house during the middle of the day at spots near our own bird feeder. We suspect, along with Marjorie, that it’s more interested in rodents scavenging seed than in songbirds, but the latter aren’t convinced as they

vanish when the owl is near. Marjorie has noticed that pattern, too, stating that “the bird feeder has been very quiet” when the owl is around.

We’ve had at least one breeding pair on our land for many years (see the April 2015 Chat for a cute photo of a fledgling) and see them hunting in our fields at various times. However, we’ve rarely seen them this close to the house and in broad daylight, especially on such a routine basis and in December. Observations of a hunting owl have been common this month, but only of one individual at a time; is this part of a breeding pair, or a young or newly arrived owl? We don’t know; regardless, it’s been a very owly month on the farm.

We also noticed an interesting pattern while enjoying our close-up owl observations: it only seemed to blink while turning its head. It would stare straight at a location for a while, then shift its gaze to another spot while blinking, but we never saw a blink while it was otherwise motionless. We theorized that perhaps it waits to blink until the head is in motion, to minimize disruption of its vision while searching for minute movements on the ground.

- continued on next page



- photo by Marjorie Meredith

BARRED OWLS CLOSE UP, CONTINUED

As I was writing all this, Joanna came up to my office with a large owl pellet she'd just discovered in open ground well away from any perch. We thought back to Mark Glenshaw's presentation to CAS last year about Great Horned Owls in Forest Park (St. Louis), and a video he showed of those owls producing pellets from a high perch. Apparently this Barred Owl was comfortable doing so on the ground.



- photos by Joanna Reuter



We spent an enjoyable evening dissecting and identifying the pellet's contents, which included crayfish pieces and abundant rodent bones. Based on drawings in our copy of *The Wild Mammals of Missouri* and online research, we tentatively identified three mice (probably either Deer Mice or White-Footed Mice) and a possible shrew, based on patterns in the lower jaws and rear leg bones. Most of the jaws shown at right have a small "hook" just behind the molars, pointing up and to the rear like a shark's tooth. This structure is present in voles, too, but seems to be much larger. On the other hand, the jaws shown second and third from the bottom are much straighter than the others and have a different layout of molars; these seemed closer to the structures seen in shrews. The rear leg bones (not shown) also fit this pattern. We were disappointed in the apparent lack of voles, as these rodents are so destructive to vegetable and fruit crops. If any reader has more expertise in rodent bones and would like to offer an opinion on or correction of our analysis, please get in touch (my contact information is on the front page, as always).

It seems that there are some daytime-active Barred Owls out there lately, so keep your eyes peeled. They'll soon enter breeding season and become more vocal, something else to monitor for the owl-lovers among us.

- by Eric Reuter

2016 FIELD TRIPS

Many state parks across Missouri will host First Day hikes on January 1, 2017, including several birding-oriented morning walks at Katy Trail and Rock Bridge State Parks (see below for details). Rock Bridge will also host four other hikes starting at 1 p.m. Read more about these and other state-park-hosted First Day hikes around the state at: <https://mostateparks.com/page/59235/first-day-hikes>

Katy Trail State Park

Date & Time: Sunday, January 1st, 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Departure Point: McBaine trailhead

Leader: John Besser, jbesser1@gmail.com

This is a "First Day Hike" hosted by Katy Trail State Park. Reservations are required; please call 573-449-7400. These events are free. Not recommended for children age four and under unless carried by an adult. Prefer no dogs.

Rock Bridge State Park, Karst Trail

Date & Time: Sunday, January 1st, 10:00 a.m. to noon.

Departure Point: Karst trailhead

Leader: Eric Wood, ewood802@yahoo.com

This is a "First Day Hike" hosted by Rock Bridge State Park. Reservations are required; please call 573-449-7400. These events are free. Not recommended for children age four and under unless carried by an adult. Prefer no dogs.

3M Flat Branch-Hinkson Creek Wetlands

Date & Time: Saturday, January 14th, 8:00 a.m.

Departure Point: Songbird Station, 2010 Chapel Plaza Court #C, Columbia, MO

Leader: Bill Mees, (573) 445-7781

Meet at Songbird Station's parking lot at 8 a.m. We'll walk the 3M Wetlands and then return to the store at 10 a.m.

Rocky Fork Conservation Area

Date & Time: Saturday, January 21st, 8:30 a.m. to ~11:00 a.m.

Departure Point: Meet at parking lot next to fishing pier at Rocky Fork. As we live nearby, we won't be meeting anyone down in Columbia, but rather at Rocky Fork. If anyone would like to lead or join a carpool from town, please let us know.

Leader: Eric & Joanna Reuter, (573) 474-0989, eric@cherthollowfarm.com

We'll explore the mixed habitats of Rocky Fork CA and try to observe winter bird behavior. What are they eating, and what shelter are they using? We'll start with the trails to the north, but may explore other areas, too, if time, bird activity, and interest allow.



Columbia Audobon Society wants to thank our corporate sponsor:

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