



The Trailblazer

Newsletter of the Elkhart County Indiana Master Naturalists

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Issue 1

Winter 2021

Winter Quarterly Meeting Elkhart County IMN Alumni Club

This space would normally go to a recap of the last meeting, but. . .

. . . the last meeting was canceled due to the pandemic, so there's a big hole here.

But the **good** news is:

Next meeting:

Thursday, April 15, 6:30 p.m. at the feedlot building at Bonneyville Mill. (We've changed the location so that we can socially distance and be outside. The Reith Center is too small for us to spread out the necessary amount.) We'll have **elections** and a program on **birds** presented by Bruce Glick.

What have you been doing during the pandemic?

Susan Zook replied: During this pandemic, I've been grateful to volunteer in the Adopt-a-Trail program at the Elkhart Environmental Center (EEC). On my assigned trail, I pick up trash, clear brush, and report to the EEC office about anything I can't do on my own. Being in the woods has always been something I've enjoyed but even more so during COVID. Working on the trail puts me in touch with the underlying rhythm of nature that is especially grounding during this time of unpredictability. To observe the cycles of the migrating birds, the woodland flowers blooming in the spring and then dying back in the fall, and even the coming and going of the mosquitoes (annoying as they are), has been a welcome respite from the COVID news and the busyness of the world in general.



I feel I have a lot of kindred spirits in the Elkhart County IMN group. Although there are many I do not know, I am thankful to belong to such a vibrant group which has similar values and interests as I do. My first hope for the group is that we can begin meeting in person as soon as it is safe to do so and resume the educational presentations which I have always found fascinating. Until then, I am grateful for the emails, newsletters, and Facebook posts that highlight educational and volunteer opportunities.

(Editor's note: That's Susan's trail picture in the masthead of this issue.)

Christmas Bird Count Results

By Ronda DeCaire

Despite a pandemic limiting field counters and freezing rain the night before, the 25th Annual Elkhart Count had much to celebrate with many records including 85 species (beating the old record of 82). Interesting birds found the day of count include White-winged crossbills, Common Redpolls, Merlin, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, Rusty Blackbird, American Pipet, Iceland Gull, Lesser Black-backed Gull, Nelson's gull (Glaucous x Herring) and a first ever Double-crested Cormorant. A grand total of 23,105 birds were counted for the day.

We also had a record number of volunteers assist with feeder/yard counts with more than double the usual participation. In addition, the 24 species listed in bold were at their highest numbers ever in the past 25 years.

Canada Goose 4585, Mute Swan 54, Tundra Swan 5, Gadwall 44, American Black Duck 22, Mallard 1508, **Canvasback 25**, Redhead 143, Ring-necked Duck 2, Lesser Scaup 8, Bufflehead 6, Common Goldeneye 198, Hooded Merganser 25, Common Merganser 4, Red-breasted Merganser 1, **Ruddy Duck 123**, **Wild Turkey 212**, Double-crested Cormorant 1, Great Blue Heron 11, **Bald Eagle 27**, Northern Harrier 1, Sharp-shinned Hawk 1, Cooper's Hawk 16, Red-shouldered Hawk 3, Red-tailed Hawk 47, Rough-legged Hawk 2, American Coot 106, Sandhill Crane 95, Wilson's Snipe 1, **Ring-billed Gull 2919**, Herring Gull 412, Iceland Gull 1, Lesser Black-backed Gull 1, (Nelson's Gull 1) Rock Pigeon 362, Mourning Dove 367, **Eastern Screech Owl 12**, Great-horned Owl 7, **Barred Owl 8**, **Belted Kingfisher 16**, Red-bellied Woodpecker 198, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 2, **Downy Woodpecker 278**, Hairy Woodpecker 51, **Northern Flicker 65**, Pileated Woodpecker 16, American Kestrel 19, Merlin 1, Blue Jay 233, American Crow 501, Horned Lark 46, Black-capped Chickadee 297, **Tufted Titmouse 267**, Red-breasted Nuthatch 27, **White-breasted Nuthatch 267**, Brown Creeper 47, Winter Wren 8, **Carolina Wren 130**, Golden-crowned Kinglet 15, **Ruby-crowned Kinglet 6**, **Eastern Bluebird 246**, **Hermit Thrush 5**, **American Robin 624**, European Starling 2773, American Pipet 2, Cedar Waxwing 177, Snow Bunting 1, Yellow-rumped Warbler 1, Eastern Towhee 1, **American Tree Sparrow 613**, Fox Sparrow 1, **Song Sparrow 150**, Swamp Sparrow 4, **White-throated Sparrow 84**, **White-crowned Sparrow 83**, Dark-eyed Junco 1020, **Northern Cardinal 688**, Rusty Blackbird 1, Brown-headed Cowbird 3, **Purple Finch 31**, **House Finch 766**, White-winged Crossbill 4, Common Redpoll 4, Pine Siskin 60, American Goldfinch 274, House Sparrow 1649

Count Week birds also included the Northern Shoveler, Peregrine Falcon, Red-headed Woodpecker, Snow Goose.

UPDATE: *We had a rare bird report that was accepted by the regional editor for a flyover of the three Trumpeter Swans for the day of the Bird Count. I did not have it in the original data set, but have since added and updated our numbers to reflect the now 86 species.*

A huge thank you to the 90 volunteers (IMNs and IMN leaders in green):

Field Counters: Ronda & David DeCaire, Burne & Jody Miller, Scott Namestnik, Harley Yoder, Maggie Nowicki, Evie Kirkwood, A. Trice Berkley III, Rose Marie Tinder-O'Brien, Ray Troyer, Jared Leaman, Perry Yoder, Glen Dyksen, Merlin Lehman, Annie Aguirre, Poorna Bhagat, Leona Bontreager, Bob Guth, Gary Chupp, Lindsay Grossman, Don Presser, Mary Kauffman-Kennel, Alissa McCarty, Ken Schmidt, Leland Shaum, Thaddaeus Shaum, Laura Gilbert, Aaron Lambright, Steve McCloskey, Ruth Kauffman, Ray Helmuth

Yard/Feeder Counters: Janice Montecalvo, [Krista Daniels](#), Sonntag Family, [Sue Bumgardner](#), [Susan Rowe](#), [Carole Mitchell](#), Jose Chiquito Galvan, Irvin & Marlene Pratt, Darlene & Wendy Eash, Alden & Ruth Beasley, [Suzanne Gray](#), Catherine & Jon Wells-Bentz, [Pat & Dave Watson](#), Joe Foy, [Marsha Eilers](#) & Jane Garoutte, Barbara Gingerich, Robyn Buenger, [R. Kauffman](#), [Susan Zook](#), Dawn VanMeter, [Mark & Kathy Mow](#), Jon Kauffman-Kennel, Heidi Gray, Larry Ford, Mary & Jim Rasp, Carus Shaffer, [Pat Frank](#), [Lois Oyer](#), [Lou Anne Hostetler](#), James Stuckey Weber, Jim & Jean Brosnan, Evan, Marcus & Seth Amrein, [Wilma Harder](#), Gary Keister, [Marilyn Horvath](#), [Elma Chapman](#), Cindy Hartzler-Miller, [Christine Miller](#), John & Elaine Harley, Sylvia & [Michael Steed](#), Lisa Deak, Christine Guth, [Monica Yoder](#), [Judy Preheim](#), Patrick Wheeler

Mark your calendars: The 26th Annual Elkhart County CBC will be held on Saturday, January 1, 2022 !

Carole Mitchell found this great resource from Marion County SWCD and wants to share it with you. Here's the link, but you'll have to view the PDF on your computer. This first one is Native Planting for Beneficial Insects:

<https://marionswcd.org/wp-content/uploads/marionswcd-native-plantings-for-beneficial-insects-and-pollinators.pdf>

With Groundhog Day this month, I feel the need to ask the question:

Groundhog: Harbinger of Spring or Just Another Large Rodent?

by Jackie Horn, IMN



Every year on February 2nd, the folks in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, pull a poor drowsy rodent out of his man-made winter burrow and ask him to tell the world whether Spring is here or if we need to endure six more weeks of winter. Punxsutawney Phil isn't the only groundhog to be abruptly awoken to predict the weather. [Wiarion, Ontario](#); [Sun Prairie, Wisconsin](#); [Dunkirk, New York](#); Staten Island, New York; and Atlanta, Georgia, all have their own woodchuck weathermen. (Sorry ladies, for some reason all the prognosticating whistle pigs are male – or at least have male names.) As a kid I really believed. The groundhog didn't see his shadow? “Get my shorts and sandals out, Spring is just around the corner!” As I got older, and wiser, I questioned why I didn't see any Hoosier woodchucks getting out to check the sun? It seemed to me that winter dragged on regardless of the sky conditions on one early February morning.

So what's up with Groundhog Day and Spring?

The tradition of waking up a groundhog to foretell the end of winter was brought to America with Dutch and German immigrants. February 2nd is the mid-point of winter and in the Old Country, a badger was thought to

be able to predict the coming year's weather. Woodchucks are more common (and a little less feisty) than badgers here, so a groundhog was used.

Groundhogs (which are large ground squirrels or marmots also known as Woodchucks or Whistle Pigs) are one of the few true hibernators. They build a winter den, usually in a brushy or wooded area, below the frost-line. After gorging themselves all summer and fall to put on weight, they enter the den in October and "sleep." While they sleep, their body temperature can drop as low as 35 degrees Fahrenheit and their heart rate falls to 4–10 beats per minute. They breathe once every six minutes. When Spring comes (usually in March or April in Indiana, NOT February) they wake up, emerge from their dens and mate. The 2-6 babies are born about 30 days later. Dad may or may not stick around to help out with rearing the young. By August the young are ready to build their own burrows for the following winter.

The problem I see with trusting the groundhog for weather reporting is visibility. Unless you know where a burrow is and stake it out, or one crosses the road while still drowsy and becomes roadkill, you miss the heralding of Spring's arrival. A much more dependable animal for announcing Spring, in my humble opinion, is the Skunk.

Skunks are not rodents. They are most closely related to weasels. Not a "true" hibernator, the skunk does enter into torpor (think Hibernation Lite). They move into a den (often the same one every year) and enter a dormant phase. They become inactive, eat very little and sleep deeply. Like groundhogs, skunks emerge from their dens in early spring to mate. The females birth 4-7 kits, usually in May, 66 days after conception. (Counting back, the skunks are reappearing and mating about the same time as the groundhogs.) Mom raises the offspring alone. She protects them with the scent that we all associate with skunks.

Interestingly, a skunk will give predators plenty of warning before spraying. Skunks' memorable black and white striped coat is a warning. "Remember me? You don't want to get too close there, Buddy." If that



doesn't work, the skunk will flip its tail around, hiss and stomp its feet. If all else fails, it sprays. A skunk doesn't want to spray. Its limited supply of stinky chemical takes ten days to replenish, rendering them almost defenseless until then.

It's that smelly spray that makes the skunk my favored harbinger of Spring. You don't need to see a skunk (or their shadow) to know their winter slumber is over. Skunks have terrible eyesight. They can't see anything beyond 10 feet away. Add to that, when they first leave their burrows, they're a bit groggy and wander into the road.

Forget groundhog shadows. Use your nose. You'll know when spring is in the air.

Do you have any pictures or a story that you'd like to share with other Elkhart County IMNs? What have you been doing this past year when we haven't been able to gather as regularly as we'd like? I edit the *Trailblazer*; I don't write it. It's YOUR newsletter—what would like to see in it?

Send your contributions to chapman_ej@yahoo.com for the next issue of the *Trailblazer*. I'm happy to help with smoothing things out, fixing misspellings, etc., but I need your input to have a truly creative and interesting newsletter.



The mission of the Indiana Master Naturalist program is to bring together natural resource specialists with adult learners to foster an understanding of Indiana's plants, water, soils and wildlife, and promote natural resource volunteer service within the State of Indiana.

