

# Bird Calls

Newsletter of the Evanston North Shore Bird Club

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Northern Shrike by Nancy Halliday

## THE SEED WE FEED

By Eleonora di Liscia

War breaks out in Ethiopia. Gas prices rise spiking a demand for ethanol. Food producers look to create healthier snacks. The value of the dollar falls.

What does all this have to do with the Cardinal in your backyard? These are some of the factors that affect the availability and price of the seed we feed.

Most commercially available bird food is not grown specifically for birds, said Tim Joyce, Manager and Birdscaper of Wild Birds Unlimited in Glenview. While most bird food comes from the U.S., problems around the world can influence our own supply.

Black Oil Sunflower is primarily farmed in the Great Plains and is prized for its high oil content by both birds and humans. Because the decreased value of the dollar makes the cost of foreign imports prohibitive, most

seed is purchased from the U.S. Russia also produces the seed, however, "Russia didn't even export last year because they had such poor growing conditions, they couldn't satisfy their own demand, so they put a halt to all exports," said Joyce.

Black Oil Sunflower is also under increased demand from the human food market as a healthy alternative for frying foods. Add to that the pressure to use ethanol, which means acres that were formerly devoted to grain are now used to plant corn. The increased demand combined with the limited supply equals higher prices.

"In general, grain prices are increasing at an exponential rate. They're going through the roof right now," said Joyce.

The two largest growers of Nyger Seed are Ethiopia and India, although there are



Sulli Gibson displays wares at Wild Birds Unlimited in Glenview

by Tim Wallace

experiments to grow Nyger in the U.S. The seed is used for lamp oil and food. In the 1950's, caged bird owners noticed that wild birds also enjoyed the seed. Nyger is not related to thistle despite the commercial name.

"They wanted to link it to thistle because people observed birds on the thistle.

It made sense from a marketing standpoint," said Joyce.

Federal law requires that imported Nyger be sterilized through a heat treatment to insure that no alien species take root.

In the past, Nyger seed supplies have been affected by war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. At times, the country holds back supplies in order to increase prices. In fact, there is current talk that Ethiopia might not fulfill its seed contracts, said Joyce.

Suet has traditionally been made from beef kidney fat, however, most commercial cakes use less expensive animal tallow. Woodpeckers prefer suet mixed with nuts, however, manufacturers use milo and oats as filler to reduce the cost.

"Cows are fed corn. The price of corn has gone up so the price of beef has gone up. A big part of it is ethanol, and the reduced value of our dollar. If other countries need corn, they buy more from us," said Joyce.

Again, it's a problem of increased demand and limited supply. Lower dollar value means other countries can buy more with their currency of our stock.

Suet producers primarily buy suet from meat packers and slaughter houses.

"True suet is harder to find because it's getting exported to South East Asia," said Joyce. "You used to go to your local butcher, and they would be happy to give you suet.

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## THE SEED WE FEED CONTINUED FROM COVER

Now beef is coming to the butcher largely pre-trimmed because the slaughterhouses are discovering they can sell the fat for a profit."



*The Seeds of a Global Economy* by Tim Wallace

Peanuts come from the southeast, with Georgia as the lead producer. The vast majority of peanuts are raised for human food, but some are set aside as "not for human consumption."

"Before peanuts are incorporated into our food, they are tested. If they find too many insect parts and/or rodent feces, at that point, it's relegated to animal feed," said Joyce.

Meal worms are the larval phase of the Darkling Beetle (*Tenebrio molitor*) and come from China, where they are used for food. Live meal worms, however, are domestically raised, expensive and difficult to keep alive, said Joyce. They are mostly produced for fishing.

According to Joyce, bird seed is generally not organically grown and is not likely to become so. As more farmers plant for more corn and soybeans, less acreage is used for bird seed grains. Organic practices further reduce the yield per acre, making the cost prohibitive. However, Oregon Suet, a mom and pop operation from Idaho, does strive to make its suet as natural and organic as possible, said Joyce. Oregon Suet combines true kidney fat with home-raised house flies and rosemary oil. The house flies are more nutritious than meal worms. "Songbirds can see in the UV spectrum, and there is such a high concentration of flies that the birds can see it," said Joyce.

# INTERNATIONAL GROUP TO RAISE AWARENESS ON 100-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF PASSENGER PIGEONS' EXTINCTION

By Joel Greenberg

Three to five billion of the now extinct passenger pigeons once crisscrossed the skies of eastern Canada and the United States, making it the most abundant bird on the continent, if not in the world. Audubon recorded a flight in Kentucky that eclipsed the sun for three whole days. In 1860, migrating pigeons near Toronto likely exceeded a billion birds, and there were nestings in the 1870s that surpassed 100,000,000 occupants spread over 850 square miles.

The story of the passenger pigeon is also about the people who experienced this living storm. In their movements, the birds plunged the largest cities of the United States and Canada into deep shadows for hours at a time. Many stared in awe, while others memorialized what they saw in fiction, painting, and music. Mostly, though, people killed the birds almost every time they encountered them and in almost every conceivable way. The birds were killed for recreation, food, to protect crops, and sometimes for no reason at all. With the expansion of the telegraph and railroads in the 1840s, the species became a commodity for newly developed national markets, and vast quantities were sent to help feed the teeming urban masses, for no protein was cheaper. Under this pressure, the last wild birds were virtually gone by 1900 and the last of the species, Martha by name (likely born in Hyde Park in the cotes of a University of Chicago professor), died in the Cincinnati Zoo on September 1, 1914.

Project Passenger Pigeon is an international effort to use the 2014 centenary of the bird's extinction to familiarize as many people as possible with the story of the passenger pigeon and then to use that compelling story as a portal to consideration of current issues related to extinction and sustainability. (So far over 40 organizations are involved.) So this is not merely the retelling of extraordinary historical events- as valuable as that is- but is also an examination of the present and

future: an effort to motivate people to reflect on the need to promote biodiversity and then to take appropriate actions. The many connections this story has to the art and culture of Canada and United States provide unique opportunities to engage people who would not ordinarily be interested in conservation. The principal means for doing this is a documentary film, a book, a web-site, and a wide variety of exhibits and programs across North American and beyond. Here is a link to the documentary trailer:

There is a functioning web-site at [www.passengerpigeon.org](http://www.passengerpigeon.org). We are in the process of upgrading it and should be completed around Labor Day.

Fundraising efforts have started in earnest but anyone with ideas on this critical undertaking (or wanting more information on the project) should please contact Joel Greenberg at [ckermar@earthlink.net](mailto:ckermar@earthlink.net).



*What Sadly Remains of the Passenger Pigeon, Public Domain*

**CONSERVATION COLUMN:****ALIENS: WHY WE LOVE THEM AND HOW THEY ARE KILLING OUR BIRDS***By Lloyd Davidson*

What we consider ornamental plants, including trees and shrubs, are often alien species that originated in other countries around the world. One of the reasons they are considered ornamental, however, besides their unusual (to us) and attractive flowers and growth forms, is the fact that they seem to be immune to attacks by insects and other local pathogens, which means their leaves are usually fully intact and show none of the damage that we see as marring the appearance of many indigenous species. Most oak trees in our local forested areas, for example, have leaves that are often covered in galls, are partially eaten, and are frequently discolored by parasitic infections, even though the trees themselves seem remarkably robust. The leaves of the alien buckthorn, by contrast, seem entirely free of such damage.

The reason for this discrepancy is that imported plants are able to leave behind most of the insects and other pathogens that attack them in their native lands. The consequence of this on bird populations in areas where such alien species are common is, unfortunately, devastating.

Most songbirds depend on insects for feeding their young and for providing the necessary proteins needed for their and their offspring's health. According to Douglas Tallamy (See: Sources, below), a typical oak tree provides potential food for about 550 different species of butterflies and moths alone, not counting the parasitic wasps, beetles, flies and sawflies that feed on it. Similarly, Phragmites, the large common reed that now occupies so many roadside ditches in the Chicago area, supports only five species of plant eating insects in North America while it supported 170 species in Europe, where it originated. Finally, the locally invasive buckthorn supports virtually no local wildlife or insects, probably largely because of the toxin emodine that it contains. Besides warding off insects, this chemical also adversely affects cows, horses and probably deer, so this species is virtually immune to all forms of herbivory in the U.S., which probably accounts in large part for its widespread invasive success.

The problem is that successfully herbivorous insects only arise through a long history of shared evolution with the plants they

feed on, a history they don't share with alien invaders, and so our common insects can't utilize such plants as food and fewer insects results in fewer birds.

Finally, a recent NYTimes opinion piece written by Hugh Raffles (Apr. 2, 2011) touted some of the supposed benefits of alien species, giving as one example the introduction of *Eucalyptus stellulata* in California that supplies nectar for bees and migrating monarch butterflies. What he doesn't mention is that while this tree supports 48 species of insect herbivores in Australia, it only supports one native insect herbivore in California. Nor does he mention the devastating 1991 Oakland firestorm that killed 25 people and was

largely fueled by introduced eucalyptus trees, which contain large amounts of oil, a fire in which one of our in-laws lost her home and nearly lost her life.

While alien species may not lead directly to the complete extinction of native plant species, they often suppress their numbers significantly (attempting to walk through a monocultural thicket of

*Tiger Swallowtail by Lloyd Davidson*

buckthorn or searching for non-existent native species in a field of garlic mustard will easily demonstrate this) and both eucalyptus and buckthorn actively retard the growth of plants in their vicinity by the production of growth suppressant compounds. As noted above, such invasive species frequently lead to a precipitous drop in overall productivity of insects and other herbivores and can, and probably will, help to drive to extinction many of the bird species that are already in decline or are otherwise threatened by habitat destruction, food loss and the changes associated with global warming. After several thousand, or perhaps million, years, such introduced species may well prove to have some long term overall benefit, once local insect species evolve varieties that can utilize them for food, but for the short term their occasional limited benefits are greatly outweighed by their detrimental effects on overall biodiversity.

**What we can do:**

1. Introduce as many native plants into your gardens as possible and in larger areas, accepting the fact that there may be more insect damaged leaves.
2. Severely restrict the use of insecticides on your garden and lawn.

# A GOLDEN REFLECTION

By Kathleen Vogt

On the third Skokie Lagoons' walk this past May, the ENSBC group experienced an unusual bird sighting. The Friday birders were standing in a wooded area by the bank of one of the lagoons. Several people spotted a Prothonotary Warbler across the lagoon on the far shore. Since the shoreline was overrun with fallen logs, tree roots, and vines, it was difficult to catch sight of the bird. Half the birders were oohing and aahing as they watched the brightly-colored yellow swamp canary. After a short while and overcome with the frustration of being what seemed to be the only one who couldn't see the elusive bird, I loudly asked, "Do you still see the bird?" The answer "No," was quickly forthcoming, but then someone said, "Look for the reflection in the water." That was all the guidance I and several others needed.

In the water below the shore's tree roots, stumps, and vines, you could see a reflected yellow orb moving across the water. If you looked about one foot above it, you might see the warbler itself darting in and out of the tangle of tree growth. Watching the reflection was fascinating. You could always see the brilliant golden yellow reflection, but you could see the actual bird only some of the time. We stayed there over ten minutes, mesmerized by the unusual sighting of a not-so-easily seen bird.

Although it wasn't my first sighting of a Prothonotary Warbler, it was certainly the most memorable.



**Prothonotary Warbler**  
by Mike Trahan

## C A L E N D A R

### PROGRAM NIGHTS

Club programs are held on the fourth Tuesday of the month at 7:30 p.m. at the Evanston Ecology Center, 2024 McCormick Blvd., Evanston.

**September 27** – "The Birds of Jo Davies County": Local photographer Rick Remington will share photos of the diverse bird populations that inhabit this amazing area tucked into northwest Illinois. This beautiful land, untouched by glaciers in the last ice age, borders Illinois, Wisconsin and Iowa. He will share his favorite locations based on countless hours of exploration. The big avian attraction here is the mighty Mississippi River, which is largely responsible for the many different species migrating through. Rick will share photos of birds from all seasons with a primary focus on Bald Eagles, White Pelicans and Trumpeter Swans. This incredible resource is only 2.5 hours from Chicago. (See information on accompanying October Field Trip.)

**October 25** – "The Galapagos: Exploring Darwin's Tapestry": The Galapagos archipelago is a forbidding place, even though romantics tend to imbue it with the rosy glow of a Pacific Eden. John Hess, Emeritus Professor of Biology at the University of Central Missouri, is also a photographer who has worked at the interface of art and science throughout his career. In 2009, he published a book of the same title through the University of Missouri Press. In this presentation he will talk about how the Galapagos works – why it is the way it is, and how the lives of some of the "Galapagos Royalty" are woven into the tapestry of life.

### FIELD TRIPS

**SEPTEMBER 11, 2011 - SUNDAY**

**Waukegan and Illinois Beach State Park.** Meet at 7:30 a.m. at McDonald's at Rt. 132 and Sheridan Rd. in Waukegan to see a variety of land and lake migrants. Leaders: Sulli Gibson and Dick Paulson.

**SEPTEMBER 18, 2011 - SUNDAY**

**NEW TRIP! Mississippi Palisades State Park,** wide waters of the Mississippi and Savanna Army Depot. Look for hawks and landbirds. Meet at 5:30 a.m. at the Starbucks at Lake Cook Rd. and Rte 83 for the 2.5 hour drive to the river. Reservations with leader required. Contact leader *Dave Johnson, 224-567-9650* or *djohnsoda@comcast.net*

**SEPTEMBER 24, 2011 – SATURDAY**  
**OCTOBER 1, 2011 - SATURDAY**

**Northwestern Lakefill and Sailing Beach.** This area has long been a stopover for migrants of all kinds headed south. Park on the lakeside of the upper deck of the south parking lot off of Sheridan Rd. and Clark St., north of Clark St. beach, at 8:30 a.m. Sept. 24 Leaders: Sue Robert, Ray Pershing, Libby Hill. Oct. 1 Leaders: Sue Robert and Wayne Svoboda.

**OCTOBER 29 – SATURDAY**  
**OCTOBER 30 – SUNDAY**

**Birds and Birding HotSpots in Galena.** September program speaker Rick Remington will lead this overnight tour of his favorite birding areas in the Galena region. Fall color should be at its height. Watch for details on the web, or contact *Libby Hill at 847-475-2096* or email *libbyhill@comcast.net*.

**INTERNATIONAL TRIP TO SOUTH AFRICA:  
PLAN AHEAD!**

**OCTOBER 31-NOVEMBER 18, 2012.**

**"Fairest Cape to Kruger" - South Africa with Tropical Birding,** Josh Engel guiding. Trip cost, not including international airfare, is \$5,595 per individual. View the itinerary at [www.tropicalbirding.com/africa-tours/south-africa/fairest-cape-to-kruger](http://www.tropicalbirding.com/africa-tours/south-africa/fairest-cape-to-kruger). For further information contact *Libby Hill at libbyhill@comcast.net*. Limit: 6 participants.

**ENSBC GOES TO CHURCHILL**

**Watch for upcoming details.** Take a trip to Churchill, Manitoba, Canada in mid-June, 2012, with leader Dave Johnson.