

Prairie Rapids Audubon Society

General Meeting Minutes

January 10, 2023

Submitted by Kris Rash

None of us had far to travel for our first meeting of 2023 as we once again gathered around our Zoom screens. President Tom Schilke called the January 10th meeting of the Prairie Rapids Audubon Society to order at 7:04 p.m. Fifty-three individuals were in attendance from 42 locations.

One Citizen Science project will have taken place within the last month. Several of our members have driven specified routes counting eastern bluebirds. This is the eighth year for this Climate Watch survey and a follow-up will be conducted in June.

You can participate in the Great Backyard Bird Count happening on February 17-20, 2023 from the comfort of your favorite chair, warm beverage in hand. This doesn't require a huge commitment. Give as little as 15 minutes of your time or more if you'd like. The GBBC is 26 years old this year and has participants from around the world. Check out birdcount.org for more information.

Back to the bluebirds, Pres. Tom informed us that the bluebird boxes at George Wyth Park are in need of replacement. Predators have made them uninhabitable for the birds. There is a need to either buy or make predator proof boxes. Your input is appreciated as we are still in the early stages of this project.

Treasurer, Francis Moore, reported our bank account to show a balance of \$10,431.79. While that may sound like a sizable amount, we will soon be giving a portion of it away in the form of grants. Applications recently went out to our six county conservation boards and are due by March 15th. The board has decided on a \$4,000 limit this year.

The bird feed fund currently has a balance of \$698.63. There is still plenty of winter remaining so donations are always appreciated.

Audubon members have been active in developing the new Cedar Valley Trails map. With over 125 hard surface trails available there are a variety of recreational opportunities. Fifteen birding hot spots are highlighted. A paper map may be obtained at the Cedar Falls Visitor's Center or a handy business card with a QR code enables you to load an interactive map to your smart phone.

One positive outcome of Covid, possibly the only one, was opening our world to Zoom gatherings. Tonight, as we logged onto our devices from home our speaker, Stephanie Schmidt, presented her program, "Whooping Cranes in the Eastern Migratory Population", from the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, WI.

The foundation studies all of the world's 15 species of cranes, ten of which are considered endangered. Cranes inhabit all continents with the exceptions of South America and Antarctica. In the U.S. we are most familiar with the Sandhill cranes with a population of about 800,000 birds.

Stephanie's focus while working at the foundation has been Whooping Cranes and how to save them. While the number of Whoopers was once estimated to be around 10,000 birds in North America the population had plummeted to 20 birds by 1940. Unregulated hunting, egg collecting, habitat loss and wetland drainage nearly brought them to extinction.

We were shown beautiful head photos of each of the 15 crane species. The distinguishing characteristics for the whooping cranes included their height of 5' with a wingspan of an impressive 7-8', white adult plumage with black wing tips, a featherless red patch on the head with a black mustache, yellow eyes and tall, black legs.

Juveniles sport a cinnamon coloration with a grayish pink beak. They are the ones most often seen in Iowa. Calls are loud and can be heard for miles.

Cranes can live from 20-30 years. Unfortunately, they are slow to reproduce and don't reach sexual maturity until they are 3-5 years old. They lay 1-2 eggs and raise one colt each year.

As with many bird species they were ruthlessly hunted for their feathers to be used in women's fashion. The federal government became involved in protecting birds in 1918 with the passage of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Since then the passage of more acts in Congress have ensured that birds and other creatures have safe habitats to live. They include:

- 1934 -The Duck Stamp Act It has raised \$850,000,000 to date
- 1966-The National Wildlife Refuge System One pair of Whoopers needs 1,000 acres.
- 1972-The Clean Water Act
- 1973-The Endangered Species Act

These acts and additional special efforts have enabled whooping crane numbers to grow to 836 total birds today.

Currently there are four distinct populations of Whooping Cranes across N. America. Two are non-migratory and include a flock in Louisiana with 77 birds and one in Florida with only 6 birds. The other two flocks are migratory and include the group that has historically traveled between Wood-Buffalo National Park in Canada and Aransas, TX with 543 Whoopers and the 76 birds in the Eastern Migratory Population. This last group is the one that is studied by the crane foundation.

A great deal of work is done at the foundation to increase the diversity among the breeding birds as well as see that more eggs survive. While the ultimate goal is to build a self-sustaining flock there is only a 15% survival rate for wild chicks. Staff members sometimes dress as cranes to raise chicks (colts) so they can be released into the wild. The cost can approach \$100,000 a bird. Hopefully they make their parents proud, human or avian.

Here are some of Stephanie's suggestions for what you can do to help cranes.

1. Learn to identify and confirm your sighting
2. Are there Whooping Cranes in your area? According to Stephanie they have been reported in 14 Iowa counties with the last one being seen in Bremer County in 2017.
3. Report your sighting. Some have bands or radio transmitters. These two sites are available.
bandedcranes.org or Whoopermap.savingcranes.org
4. Report poaching. Call 1-800-532-2020. If the event is actually in progress call 911.
5. Talk to friends and legislators about cranes and wetlands. Buy a Duck Stamp.
6. Join a crane count.

Thanks to Ken Heiar for arranging tonight's program and especially to Stephanie Schmidt for sharing her vast knowledge of everything Whooping Crane.