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# The Call Note

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**November 2015**

Dedicated to creating a greater awareness, appreciation, and understanding of the interrelatedness of all Michigan's wild places and wildlife and the need for stewardship.

## President's Corner

### Kinglets galore

I don't know about you, but I'm obsessed with ruby-crowned kinglets lately. I seem to be seeing them everywhere—while I'm out birding, yes, but also on a leisurely stroll through the park, in my backyard, in the shrubs by the parking lot at my office.



Migration is the time to see these birds in mid-Michigan. Although kinglets move through here during the spring on their northward journey to their breeding grounds in coniferous or mixed coniferous-deciduous forests, I particularly enjoy them in autumn on their south-bound trek. Perhaps their frenetic flitting reminds me of fall leaves caught in a whirlwind....

As we take pleasure in the passage of birds headed south for warmer climes and more abundant food sources, we should also consider the many critters—both feathered and otherwise—that tough it out here through the winter. This is never an easy endeavor, but some animals are facing additional stressors beyond the usual natural ones. Our November program will highlight one such species, the eastern massasauga rattlesnake, also known as the Michigan rattler (see next article). I hope you will be able to join us for this informative presentation.

Good birding,  
**Barb Hosler**

## November 5 Meeting & Program

### Michigan's massasauga rattlesnakes besieged

Join us on Thursday, **November 5** when **Dr. Jennifer Moore**, assistant professor of biology at Grand Valley State University, helps us to better understand this threatened Michigan species and the latest research on disease that threatens them.



Eastern massasauga rattlesnakes are listed as threatened or endangered in every state or province they occupy, except in Michigan. Although the massasauga population is higher in Michigan

than other states in the snake's range, the long-term viability of this population is unknown. Massasaugas have declined over much of their range due to combined effects of habitat loss, road mortality, and direct persecution. Snake fungal disease is now emerging as an additional threat. Dr. Moore will describe her research on these rattlers and the affects of snake fungal disease on them.

In addition to massasaugas, Dr. Moore has studied a wide range of wildlife species, both here and abroad, including boreal toads, tuatara, Canada geese, and black bears. Her research focus is on conservation genetics, spatial ecology, and population demography.

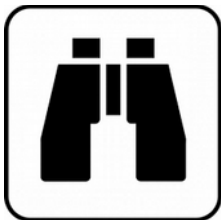
Please join us for snacks and socializing at 7:00 p.m. at Fenner. Dr. Moore's program will follow a brief business meeting starting at 7:30. Bring a friend!

## Allegan county field trip Sunday, November 8

**Rick Brigham** will once again be leading the CAAS field trip in Allegan county. **Meet at Douglas Beach at 8:00 a.m.** to spend some time along the Lake Michigan shore watching for late shorebirds, ducks, scoters, loons, grebes, gulls, and more.

Birders will next visit Allegan State Game Area and other nearby locations to seek out more shorebirds, ducks, geese, hawks, eagles, and other inland birds.

Bring binoculars of course and a scope, if you have one. Remember that it can be much colder along the lake than inland, so bundle up.



Sightings can be varied and unpredictable. Two years ago, the trip highlight was a very unexpected Sabine's gull. With climate change and an uptick in unusual sightings everywhere, rare birds here are not an impossibility. Rick lives in Allegan county so he will have

the latest information on any hotspots and potentially productive areas.

As always there will be a stop for lunch at the ever popular Crane's Orchard Pie Pantry in Fennville, in itself worth the trip.

**Directions to Douglas Beach:** take I-196 to Saugatuck/Douglas exit 41. Go right on the Blue Star Highway for about 3 miles to the stoplight at Center Street in Douglas. Turn right on Center Street and go about one mile until the road ends. Turn right for about 100 yards to the small parking lot on the left for Douglas Beach.

Under normal conditions, the drive from Lansing to Douglas Beach takes a little over an hour and a half.

Looking ahead ...

## December program discusses honeybees

You won't want to miss our **December 3** program which features **Meghan Milbrath**, Director of the Michigan Pollinator Initiative at Michigan State University. Meghan will better acquainted us with honeybees and beekeeping, and discuss stressors facing today's populations.

**When & Where:** Thursday, December 3, 7:30 p.m. at Fenner.

## Fenner offers evening programs for all

### Día de los Muertos Cemetery Stroll – Oct. 30

Fenner Nature Center and the Friends of Lansing's Historic Cemeteries are teaming up for a guided tour through Mount Hope Cemetery to investigate the signs and symbols of nature that surround life and death. We delve into the folklore of ravens, owls, and other animals that can be found on the tombstones on our walk before heading back to Fenner for a campfire and marshmallow roast. **Friday, October 30, 6-8 p.m.**

### Twilight Trek at Fenner – Nov. 13

Interested in exploring Fenner at night? Join a naturalist on a guided hike as the sun is setting. Learn how certain animals are adapted to function during twilight and nighttime, and which animals are hunting, walking, or flying around while we are typically getting ready for bed! This family-friendly program concludes with a bonfire and marshmallow roast. **Friday, November 13, 7-8:30 p.m.**

## September bird walks wrap-up

The last Saturday morning bird walk on September 26 held some great sightings. As reported by leader **Bob Kingsbury**:



*Brown creeper, Humber Bay Park, Toronto, Canada (Photo Wikimedia.org)*

A beautiful day to be outside. Our group birding Fenner Nature Center's trails enjoyed good looks at a red-breasted nuthatch. We also saw a nice female scarlet tanager and a brown creeper. There were about a half dozen warbler species seen among us, and on our way out 3 of us found a FOS ruby-crowned kinglet.

Thanks everyone for another great season of walks.

And thank you, Bob!

## Estimating flock size takes practice

We've all struggled with counting birds, especially large flocks. This link provides many photos of large flocks. The idea is to estimate the first image and then click on the image to get the actual count. You'll be amazed.

[www.martinreid.com/Main%20website/estimatingind.html](http://www.martinreid.com/Main%20website/estimatingind.html)

Source: Martin Reid via [maine-birds@googlegroups.com](mailto:maine-birds@googlegroups.com)

**Did you know:** Even birds that don't fly migrate. Emus, the large Australian birds, often travel for miles on foot to find food, and many populations of penguins migrate by swimming. – Audubon

## Finch report for 2015-16

(edited for space)

**Ron Pittaway**, field ornithologist headquartered in Toronto, Ontario, has once again issued his winter finch forecast, which includes a general forecast for the coming winter months as well as in-depth forecasts for many individual species. As is often the case, Pittaway's forecast holds mixed news for us here in mid-Michigan, with no sizable irruptions predicted. Here is his forecast, edited for space and interest.

**General Forecast:** This winter, spruce seed specialists such as white-winged crossbills and pine siskins should be concentrated in eastern and western North America where cone crops are heaviest. Northwestern Quebec and Ontario have the least spruce cone abundance with only poor to good crops. Conifer crops including on ornamentals are heavier in southern Ontario and could attract finches. Common redpolls may move into southern Ontario because birch seed crops are low to average in northern Canada. A small flight of evening grosbeaks is expected in the East because of increasing numbers due to expanding spruce budworm outbreaks in Quebec. Pine grosbeaks also should move south in small numbers because the mountain-ash berry crop is below average in northern Ontario. Expect a scattering of red crossbills across the East this winter. See individual forecasts for the details.

**Individual Forecasts:** Forecasts apply mainly to Ontario and adjacent provinces and states. Three irruptive non-finch passerines whose movements are often linked to finches are also discussed. Follow finch wanderings this fall and winter on eBird.

**Pine Grosbeak:** This largest of the finches should move south in small numbers to Algonquin Park and probably farther south. If they come south, they will find plenty of European mountain-ash berries and ornamental crabapples in southern Ontario and elsewhere. They relish sunflower seeds at feeders.

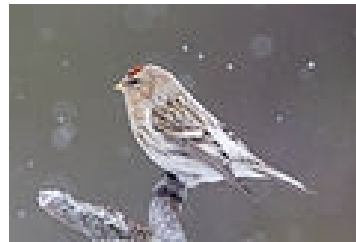
**Purple Finch:** Many should migrate south out of Ontario this fall because cone and deciduous tree seed crops are generally low in northern Ontario. Purple finch winter in numbers in the south only when the majority of tree seed crops are bumper. An easy way to tell purple finches from house finches is by checking the tip of the tail: it is distinctly notched or slightly forked in the purple finch and squared off in the house finch. Prefers sunflower seeds at feeders.

**Red Crossbill:** Expect a scattering of red crossbills in the East this winter.

**White-winged Crossbill:** This crossbill moves back and forth like a pendulum across the boreal forest looking for bumper spruce cone crops and irrupts

south only in years of widespread cone crop failures. They will be scarce in most of Ontario because cone crops are low. They should occur this winter in Atlantic Canada including Newfoundland, which has a heavy spruce cone crop. It is hoped that white-winged crossbills will move into the northern New England states and the Adirondack Mountains in New York State where spruce cone crops are very good.

**Common Redpoll:** Similar to last winter, expect a southward movement because birch seed crops are low to average across the boreal forest. Birch crops are much better in southern Ontario south of Algonquin Park so watch for redpolls in birches, in European black alders, and in weedy fields. At feeders redpolls prefer nyger seeds served in silo feeders. Redpolls are difficult to study in the field because they are so flighty, but much easier to study at feeders.



**Hoary Redpoll:** Hoaries occur mixed in with flocks of common redpolls. The "Southern" hoary redpoll (nominate subspecies *exilipes*) breeds south to northern Ontario and is the usual subspecies

seen. "Hornemann's" hoary redpoll (subspecies *hornemanni*) was formerly considered a great rarity south of the tundra .... there are 10 accepted records by the Ontario Bird Records Committee. For ID and photos of Hornemann's see links #2 and #3 [on next page].

**Pine Siskin:** Expect very few siskins in Ontario this winter because white spruce crops are generally low. Siskins likely will be concentrated in western Canada which has heavy spruce cone crops. There were high numbers of siskins in southern Yukon in early September. They also should occur in New York's Adirondack Mountains, the northern New England states, and the Atlantic provinces which have very good spruce cone crops. Their wheezy calls are the best way to identify siskins flying overhead. At feeders they prefer nyger seeds in silo feeders.

**Evening Grosbeak:** Watch for this spectacular grosbeak in Eastern Ontario, the Adirondacks, and northern New England. The feeders at the Visitor Centre in Algonquin Park usually have grosbeaks in winter. Evening grosbeaks prefer black oil sunflower seeds.

**Three Irruptive Passerines:** Movements of these three passerines are often linked to the boreal finches:

**Blue Jay:** The flight of jays is fairly strong this year along the north shorelines of lakes Ontario and Erie. The strength of annual flights appears to be linked to the size of acorn, beechnut, and hazelnut crops. Acorn crops were good in some areas and poor in other areas of the province. The beechnut crop failed in most areas and the hazelnut crop was average in 2015.

Continued on page 4 ►

## Finch forecast (cont. from page 3)

**Red-breasted Nuthatch:** This nuthatch is not moving south in numbers this year indicating that white-winged crossbills and pine siskins also won't irrupt southward. A heavy cone crop on balsam fir in many areas may explain why this nuthatch is more sedentary this year. Dennis Barry told me years ago that when fir cones disintegrate in the fall it causes millions of seeds to become lodged in the dense upper branches. These lodged seeds provide an abundant winter food for nuthatches and probably finches.

**Bohemian Waxwing:** Expect a moderate southward and eastward flight this winter because mountain-ash berry crops are average in the boreal forest. Bohemians should get east to St. John's, Newfoundland where mountain-ash (dogberry) crops are excellent. Bohemians now occur annually (historically more infrequently) in southern Ontario, southern Quebec, northern New York state, and elsewhere in the east. Their more regular winter occurrence now may be related to the abundance of introduced buckthorns (*Rhamnus*) which produce large berry crops almost every year. If they venture south, Bohemians will also find large crops (some bumper) on European mountain-ash and ornamental crabapples in many areas.

**Where to See Finches:** Algonquin Park is an exciting winter experience about a 3.5 hour drive north of Toronto. Cone crops are very poor in the park so finch numbers will be very low to absent. However, feeders at the Visitor Centre (km 43) should attract common redpolls (watch for Hoaries), evening and pine grosbeaks. The visitor centre and restaurant are open weekends in winter. On winter weekdays, the facility is open, but with limited services. Birders can still call ahead to make arrangements to view feeders by calling 613-637-2828. The bookstore has one of the best selections of natural history books anywhere. *Birds of Algonquin Park (2012)* by retired park naturalist Ron Tozer is one of the finest regional bird books ever published. The nearby Spruce Bog Trail at km 42.5 and Opeongo Road at km 44.5 are the best spots for finches and other species such as gray jay, boreal chickadee, spruce grouse, and black-backed woodpecker.

### Additional Information Links:

1. Finch Facts, Seed Crops and Irruptions, plus an informative chart of finch species and numbers on 40 Algonquin Park Christmas Bird Counts. <http://www.jeaniron.ca/2012/winterfinches.htm>
2. Subspecies of Common and Hoary Redpolls – ID Tips and Photos. <http://www.jeaniron.ca/2015/redpollsRP.htm>
3. Photo Essay: Redpolls from Nunavut and Greenland visit Ontario. <http://www.aba.org/nab/v65n2redpolls.pdf>

*Editor's Note: Arctic redpoll (Acanthis hornemanni) photo on page 3 courtesy of Ron Knight, United Kingdom (2014) ■*

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**Did you know:** 70 out of 100 major crops are pollinated by bees — from apples to zucchinis.

## Hoarding a survival tactic for chickadees

Hoarding as TV entertainment is a fairly recent innovation, but for chickadees it is a life-or-death issue every winter.

Black-capped chickadees need 20 times more food in the winter than they do in summer because they can lose 10% of their body weight during just one cold winter night. So they've got to eat often.



As autumn approaches they begin hiding, or caching, seeds for the winter by the hundreds. In a behavior called "scatter-hoarding," each seed is individually hidden under tree bark or dead leaves.

The amazing thing is that they can accurately remember the location of each seed they hoard. Not only that, they also remember the quality of items they initially stored, making more of an effort to retrieve the higher quality food first.

Scientists have found that the hippocampus region of the brain, the area associated with this type of spatial memory, is proportionately larger in chickadees than in other birds that do not cache food. Not only is it generally larger, it actually increases in size in the autumn and shrinks back to its original size each spring.

Watch for the chickadee's scatter-hoarding behavior at your feeders this fall to add another dimension to your backyard bird watching.

*Adapted from Wild Birds Unlimited's blogspot, with permission.*

## Duck Stamp design for 2016-17 chosen

**Joe Hautman** of Plymouth, Minn., won the 2015 Federal Duck Stamp Art Contest last month. In a remarkable coincidence, his brothers, Robert and Jim, took second and third place in the competition.

Joe's acrylic painting of a pair of trumpeter swans will grace the 2016-17 Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp, commonly known as the Duck Stamp, which will go on sale in late June 2016.



Purchase of the \$25 Duck Stamp benefits the National Wildlife Refuge System and may be purchased by anyone who wants to support conservation of birds and critical bird habitat. The stamp also permits free admission to any National Wildlife Refuge that charges an admission.

*Source: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service website.*

## Native Plants for Wildlife

### Asters by any other name are still a gorgeous fall flower

by Ann Hancock

Galaxies of asters, the quintessential fall flower, are in bloom all over Michigan and the Midwest in September and October. Along our roadsides, in old fields, swampy areas, woods and hedgerows – species of aster are found in every habitat. They are critically important sources of nectar and pollen, and many are host plants for the pearl crescent butterfly.

As I began to research this article, I was dismayed to find that the genus *Aster* has been carved up and its species reclassified into several new genera. What we called *Asters* have now been put in the genera *Doellingeria*, *Eurybia*, and *Symphotrichum*. Fortunately, the species name (the second word in the Latin binomial) has remained similar, so those of us who know these plants by their old names are not completely lost when trying to look them up in modern references. MichFlora, the wonderful database of native plants from the University of Michigan Herbarium, lists 22 species of *Symphotrichum*, including the well-known species formerly known as New England aster, smooth aster, and calico aster, all of which are briefly detailed in this article.

Asters belong to the family formerly known as the Compositae, now renamed Asteraceae. Composite flowers consist of two different types of flowers: the central flowers which are tubular and called disc flowers, and the ray flowers which are the outer petals. Think sunflower or daisy; these are classic composite flowers. Most of Michigan's asters are now found in the genus *Symphotrichum*, which is a taxonomically challenging genus. As MichFlora states: "This is the great bulk of the former inclusive genus *Aster* in Michigan, and remains a large and difficult genus." (Refer to [www.michiganflora.net/genus.aspx?id=Symphotrichum](http://www.michiganflora.net/genus.aspx?id=Symphotrichum))

If you spend some time next to any clump of asters, you will see a steady procession of insect visitors. Besides butterflies, you will see bees of numerous species, wasps, soldier beetles, and small flies all feasting on the banquet of nectar and pollen. These are important nectar plants for monarch butterflies as they make their way south to their wintering grounds in Mexico. Besides serving as convenient feasts for pollinators, many asters are host plants for pearl crescent butterflies, as well as saddleback caterpillar moths.

Perhaps our showiest and best known Michigan aster is the New England aster, now *Symphotrichum novae-angliae*. The intense purple flowers along the roadside stand out even when traveling at 75 mph.



*Symphotrichum novae-angliae* photo by Jennifer Anderson, USDA-NRCS PLANTS database, commonly called New England aster

Their bloom often overlaps with that of goldenrod, creating a dazzling color combination. New England aster is also sometimes found in a pink or rose form. Its preferred habitat is old fields and meadows, so the managed roadside along highways suits its growing requirements perfectly. In the garden it is best grown in sunny conditions with other perennials that will mask the lower part of its stems, since it tends to drop its lower leaves as summer progresses. Cutting it back once by one third to one half in early to mid-June will result in shorter, bushier plants with more flowers. Cutting back any later, however, may delay or even diminish its bloom.

*S. laeve* photo by Heike Löchel, Wikimedia



Smooth blue aster, *Symphotrichum laeve*, is another one of my favorites. The central disc florets are yellow and the ray flowers are bright lavender. This plant bears dozens of flowers

that create an impressive floral display. As implied in the name, the leaves are smooth, even a bit thick. This is a plant that has been bred by plant breeders to produce even more flowers; the best known cultivar is 'Bluebird'.

Deer are fond of browsing smooth aster, which appears to be a preferred food source, though the plant readily recovers if only the top portion is removed.

Smooth aster is widely adaptable as far as soil type, since it can be found anywhere from moist woods to drier open fields. In Michigan it seems to prefer dry rather than moist sites. It is also one of the latest asters to bloom, extending the aster floral show well into October.

Continued on page 6 ►

**Asters (cont. from page 5)**

In most composite flowers the central disc florets are yellow. Many species start yellow and then fade to purple or blue. But in *Symphyotrichum lateriflorum*, the calico aster, the disc flowers are always lavender in color (even when first open), while the ray flowers are white to bluish white. This color combination, plus the size of the flowers (like the tiny prints in calico cloth), gave rise to the name calico aster. The plant bears these small flowers abundantly in rows along the sides of the stems, hence the species name lateriflorum. This is another species that has been bred by plant breeders to produce impressive floral displays, with the best known cultivar 'Lady in Black' having darker stems than the straight species. Calico aster is found most often in damp shade, and grows from a perennial basal crown rather than a creeping rhizome.



*Symphyotrichum lateriflorum* 'Lady in Black' photo posted to Flickr by Andrey Zharkikh, Wikimedia Commons

Take a look at the many species of *Aster*/*Symphyotrichum* around you the next time you are out on a fall bird walk. Once you begin to look closely at them, you will be amazed at their abundance and variety. If you don't already grow them, imagine what a wonderful addition they will make to your landscape.

If you have been weeding them from your perennial bed, consider letting some grow and enjoying the late fall bloom they provide, as well as the pollinators that visit them. ■

**Alaska gets rare visitors**

When two National Park Service interpreters stopped to watch a bird outside their offices in Glacier Bay on September 22, they didn't realize it was the first time a **yellow-throated warbler** had been reported in Alaska.

This species usually spends summers in the Midwest and winters as far south as Cuba and the Dominican Republic.

The sighting occurred just three days after a mother and son spotted a **hooded oriole** in Juneau.

Although unusual birds do show up during migration periods, these vagrants are often young birds. The birds sighted in September appeared to be adults.

**... and so does Michigan**

On October 20, a **hepatic tanager** was reported by **Chris Neri** and **Tom Wheeler** near the Whitefish Point Bird Observatory gift shop building.

The hepatic tanager is a bird of the pine-oak forests of the American Southwest, according to the Cornell Lab. They are year-round residents of Central and South America.

**Call Note**

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*You might be a birder if you know the name of the last passenger pigeon and the year it died.*

*You might be a very old birder if you actually saw the last passenger pigeon in the year it died.*

– *Birding Humor*  
([www-personal.umich.edu/~bbowman/birds/humor/](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~bbowman/birds/humor/))