

WATERFOWL OF THE CAPITAL AREA OF MICHIGAN - 2011

This is a second draft summary of what is currently known about the occurrence of waterfowl in the vicinity of Lansing, Michigan. Past summaries for the area have been for a county-sized region roughly centered on Lansing; however, practical “common usage” and recent compilations have included the whole of Clinton, Eaton, and Ingham counties plus Maple River SGA, which has units in Gratiot, Clinton, and Ionia counties.

WATERFOWL VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE LANSING AREA

SPRING

During spring migration, the best local sites are Park Lake and Lake Lansing. Maple River SGA generally has the greatest variety and often the best views. Lake Ovid at Sleepy Hollow SP can also be good. Almost all our water will entertain some waterfowl during this time period, even flooded sod farms. It is best, but not entirely necessary, to have a spotting scope. Small bodies of water (ponds) may afford close views.

Park Lake has an excellent viewing spot from the parking lot at the east end of the lake. Morning is the best time, unless it is overcast. There is also a pull off along the north edge. A third spot is a telephone utility pad at the northwest corner where, if you are polite, you can stand and scan the west end of the lake.

Lake Lansing can be viewed from the park on the southwest corner (best in the afternoon) and the boat ramp / park at the northeast corner. It is possible to catch some views from the public roads around the lake; however, there is not much room to pull off the road. Do not impede traffic.

I27 north of St.Johns cuts right through the waterfowl management units of **Maple River SGA**. Unit A is on the west side of the road and the three diked units to the east are Unit B, C, and D. Frequently, the best viewing in spring is from the dikes around C and D Unit. Maps of this area can be downloaded from the DNR web site. The Capital Area Audubon usually has at least one field trip there each spring.

The parking lots for the C and D Units can be reached by going a short distance north of the marshes on I27 to Ranger Road and turning east. At the mile mark, turn south on Baldwin, going 0.5 miles to the parking lot at the intersection with Taft. There is a series of parking areas further east on Taft. Be cautious about driving Baldwin / Taft / Crapo when they are muddy or partially flooded. The fields along Ranger and Roosevelt further east can have good viewing if they are flooded.

SUMMER

Birding in general drops off in our area after the spring rush. Waterfowl viewing is no exception. The best place to observe nesting behavior, fledglings, and moult is at Maple River, although mosquitoes can be bothersome. A trip combining observation of marsh birds, butterflies, and dragonflies can be relaxing and fruitful, although Rose Lake and Dansville are better for the latter two pursuits. Please keep in mind that hunting license revenues paid for these areas and we are fortunate to be able to use them the rest of the year.

FALL

The same areas for waterfowl viewing in spring can be good in the fall, though fewer birders venture out during that season. Hunting and recreational use of the marshes and lakes can curtail the use of these areas by both bird watchers and waterfowl. There can be good viewing at some of the sewage ponds during this time. Lake Lansing is generally good after cold weather chases the boaters away.

There can be large concentrations of geese on the **south MSU campus** in the vicinity of the Jolly / College road intersection, although parking can be difficult. The ponds there can hold ducks and can be viewed from outside the fenced areas, if you work at it.

WINTER

A large portion of the local Canada Goose flock roosts nightly on the **Potter Park** “bayous” and are accompanied by a large group of ducks. “Unusual” ducks may turn up at any of the local Mallard flocks, including the Potter Park gang. During harsh winters, diving ducks may be driven from the near shore areas of the Great Lakes by ice conditions, and they end up as stragglers on inland rivers. Wounded or ill birds will end up there as well. Most of the divers, including Long-tailed Duck, have been seen infrequently, in small numbers, in downtown Lansing on open water between Michigan and Oakland.

A productive winter run, or at least a break from routine, starts at Potter Park on the Red Cedar, proceeds to the bridges in downtown Lansing (the portion most likely to be skipped), on to Grand Woods Park in Lansing, and finishes at the boat launch and riverside park in Grand Ledge.

[Maple River SGA, Sleepy Hollow SP, Rose Lake, Park Lake, Lake Lansing, State Secondary Complex / Lake Delta, Potter Park, South campus MSU, Plains Road ponds, Narrow Lake, flooded sod farms (Halmich, Royston/Nixon, Aurelius/Curtice), sewage lagoons, (Westphalia, Potterville, Dansville)]

SPECIES ACCOUNTS

GREATER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE

This species was not noted for the area in Cook or Barrows and McWhirter and Beaver contained no records. However, the latter work did not include Maple River SGA, where the species probably occurs most every year during waterfowl migration. It is rare in the rest of the Capital Area. The birds have always been associated with concentrations of Canada Goose (e.g. south campus of MSU), usually as single birds, but small groups of 3-4 have occurred at Maple River.

The first known record for Ingham Co. was from 23 November to 10 December 1985. Additional records include 13 March 1997, 01-03 January 2008. There are no reports from Clinton or Eaton.

SNOW GOOSE

Cook stated that Snow Goose was not infrequent near Lansing and “Blue” Geese was rare in the state. The species is now considered an irregular spring and fall migrant seen flying over or sitting with Canada Goose where they gather. The dark morph of the goose is still somewhat rare.

Groups of over 10 have been noted with a maximum of ???. Seen in all three counties and at Maple River.

Spring migration: 26 February to 07 May.

Fall migration: 06 October to 28 December.



A single free-flying bird wintered on Rose Lake 1972-3.

ROSS'S GOOSE

Rare migrant in our area. Most likely seen at the main Canada Goose flocks in the area. Hybrids with Snow Goose are not rare, so care must be taken in identification.

Single bird on south MSU campus during March of 1999. Date range? (My record is the 26th). Four birds at the Aurelius/Curtice intersection sod farms on 09-10 March 2009, and one there on 18-19 March.

ACKLING (CANADA) GOOSE

This goose was made a full species by the AOU in 2004, separating it from Canada Goose, although Richardson's Goose (one of the subspecies that became Cackling Goose) was well known in Michigan before then. It is likely to winter in the area, more likely to be seen during migration, associating with flocks of Canada Goose.

Maximum number so far is a group of 7 at Maple River. During the 2008 CABY (Capital Area Birding Year) compilation, it was reported in all three counties and Maple River.

Spring records: 08-28 March.

Fall records: 07 October to 05 December.

One record on 01 January at Potter Park. It has been noted in the area every year since 2005.

CANADA GOOSE

During the 1960's, "Giant" Canada Goose in Michigan numbered only in the thousands and were seen mostly in migration. Re-stocking efforts by the DNR created a burgeoning population of resident birds and a count that is now routinely in the hundreds of thousands. It is one of the most abundant species on CBCs.

It is a common breeding resident in our area. Nesting starts in late March, early April. Maximum flocks of 3,000 or more have been reported at Maple River and at Potter Park / south campus MSU.

MUTE SWAN

Introduced to NW Lower Peninsula nearly 90 years, it is now found as a breeding species in nearly every county in Michigan. Only three records in our area through 1974, it now breeds throughout the area, especially at Maple River. Scarce during the winter months, it may not overwinter.

Seen on nests in the 2nd and 3rd week of April. Maximum number of 20+ at Maple River.

TUNDRA (WHISTLING) SWAN

Regular spring migrant, irregular in fall. Seen or heard flying over, on larger lakes, in shallow water at Maple River during spring. Often seen in the hundreds (500+) each spring at and near Maple River; groups of 100+ over the Lansing area are not uncommon.

Spring dates: 07 March to 15 May; average arrival 4th week March, average departure 4th week April.

Fall dates: 07 October to 17 December; avg arrival 2nd week November, avg departure 3rd week November.

A few records of stragglers near or past each departure date refer to ill or wounded birds.

TRUMPETER SWAN

While there are historical records of this swan in the state, there is debate whether it ever bred in Michigan prior to DNR re-introduction efforts starting in 1980s. By 2000, a stable breeding population was established in at least three areas in Michigan and the population has slowly grown since then.

This swan has been seen in low numbers in our area throughout the year, mostly near cattail marshes. There has been highly successful breeding in Eaton near Bellvue (part of the re-introduction effort), and pairs have been seen during the breeding season in Ingham (Plains Road ponds), Clinton (Park Lake) and at Maple River.

WOOD DUCK

Resident breeder throughout the area, numbers augmented during migration, has rarely overwintered with Mallard flocks along the rivers. Found on all manner of water; usually avoids the deepest parts of lakes. Courting chases and nest hole selection can begin in the first two weeks of March. Very common at Maple River with numbers well over 100 there in the summer months.

GADWALL

Cook reported this species was often taken during the hunting season at Lake Lansing and Park Lake. Now it is a somewhat irregular, uncommon migrant in small groups, rare in winter. Found shallow water, including sewage lagoons, throughout our whole area. Maximum on 4-5 on 2008, 2009 CABY report.

Spring dates: 12 March to 15 May.

Fall Dates: 07 October to 14 November.

Female on 11-13 January 1968 with MSU Mallard flock, pair on 13 February 2010 near Lansing.

EURASIAN WIGEON

This species is rare in Michigan and our area. There are three records of single birds from Maple River SGA in Gratiot County: 08-23 April 1995, 08 April to 04 May 1996, 24 March to 20 April, 1997.

AMERICAN WIGEON

Regular spring migrant, less common in the fall. Rare in summer and winter. Found on lakes, ponds, and marshes throughout our whole area; with Mallard flocks on rivers in winter. Could possibly breed at Maple River SGA. Several groups of 10+ seen at Park Lake and Maple River during spring 2008, 2009.

Spring: 01 March to 23 May; average arrival 4th week of March, average departure 4th week of April.

Summer: 03 August 40 at Rose Lake.

Fall: 01 October to 29 December; average arrival 1st week of October, average departure 1st week of November.

Winter: single birds at MSU on 12-19 January 1968, 07-14 February 1972.



AMERICAN BLACK DUCK

Formerly a regular resident and breeder in our area. More recently, numbers have decreased, although it can still be readily found throughout our area during migration. A few usually winter in the Mallard flocks. It might breed at Maple River, but there are no confirmed records in the last 10 years of which I'm aware. (DNR breeding surveys, if they have been conducted there, might show otherwise.)

The largest group in 2008, 2009 was 20+ at Maple River on 26 March 08, with 6 the next largest group.

MALLARD

Ubiquitous breeding resident. Hundreds (500+) gather at Maple River in the spring; several winter flocks along the Red Cedar and Grand have close to 100 birds during the coldest months.

BLUE-WINGED TEAL

Common spring migrant in small groups, less common in the fall. Breeds throughout the Capital Area, most commonly at Maple River. Mostly found on shallow water of all sorts.

Maximum of 20 at Maple River on 20 April 2008.

Records from 19 March to 13 November. (No CBC records??)

NORTHERN SHOVELOR

Common spring migrant in our area, less common in fall. Found on shallow water, including sewage lagoons. Groups of 10+ at Maple River and Pottersville sewage ponds during 2008-2009 seasons.

Spring range: 13 March, 22 March to 25 May; average arrival 1st week April, departure 4th week of April.
Fall range: 04 September to 18 November.

NORTHERN PINTAIL

Uncommon spring and fall migrant through most of the area. Found on lakes, ponds, and rivers, most common in spring at Maple River. Winter records with the Mallard flocks at Potters Park and MSU.

Maximum of 20 on 28 March 2009 at Maple River.

Date range from 19 September to 18 May with at least 9 sets of winter records from 1953 to 2009, has wintered successfully.

Spring average arrival 3rd week of March, departure 3rd week of April.

Fall average arrival 1st week of October, departure 3rd week October.



GREEN-WINGED TEAL

Uncommon spring and fall migrant in our area; most common at Maple River. There were two sets of wintering records through 1975. Scattered reports in the summer months with confirmed breeding in Eaton, Clinton, and probable breeding elsewhere.

Several flocks of 50+ at Maple River during the 2008, 2009 spring migration, max of 110 on 27 April 2008.

Spring dates from 09 March to 11 June.

Fall dates from 19 September to 24 November, 29 December; average arrival 1st week of October, average departure 4th week of October.

CANVASBACK

Regular in spring, less so in fall throughout our area, usually on the larger lakes, but may occur in the rivers and shallower water before or after the lakes close.

Maximum of 30 at Park Lake on 13 April during the 2008 and 2009 season with several groups of 10+ there on other dates.

Spring records: 12 March to 22 May; average arrival 3rd week March, average departure 3rd week April.

Fall records: 17 October to 08 December; average arrival 4th week October, departure 3rd week November.

First winter record was on 24 January 2009 at Moore's Park on the Grand.

REDHEAD

Regular in spring, less so in fall throughout our area (not recorded during fall of 2008), usually on the larger lakes, but may occur in the rivers and shallower water before lakes open or after they close.

Maximum of 20 on 14 March in the East Units at Maple River during the 2008 and 2009 season with no groups of 10+ otherwise.

Spring records: 06 March to 18 May; average arrival 3rd week March, average departure 4th week April.

Fall records: 07 October to 11 December; average arrival 3rd week October.

Winter records: January 1964 at MSU, a group of 9 on 31 January 2009 on the Grand at Dimondale, and 1 at the Nixon/St.Joe pond in Lansing on 11 February 2009.

RING-NECKED DUCK

Regular, common spring migrant, rare in summer, less regular and common in fall. Found on all types of water, infrequent on rivers. Has bred at Rose Lake.

Groups of 30+ at State Secondary ponds, MSU ponds, Park Lake, and Maple River during the 2008, 2009 seasons with a maximum of 200+ in the D Unit at Maple River on 06 April 08 and 28 March 09.

Spring / summer range 07 March - 12 July; average arrival 3rd week March, departure 3rd week April.

Fall range 03 October - 08 December; average arrival 2nd week October, departure 2nd week November.

SCAUP species

Separation of the two scaup species in the field can be tricky, although recent advances in optics and our understanding the ID issues have helped. Still, if one is honest, a good number of “scaup sp.” continue to be seen. Lesser Scaup is undoubtedly the more common inland scaup in Michigan, and most of our records are of that species. Greater Scaup is more often seen on larger bodies of water, but both species can occur, frequently together, in small numbers at sewage ponds and on rivers in winter.

GREATER SCAUP

Irregular, uncommon spring migrant; more so in the fall. Rare in winter. Outlier date of 29 August at Rose Lake in 1947. None reported some years.

During the 2008 and 2009 season, mostly seen in small groups, but 30+ reported at Park Lake on 02 April 08, and 125 (!) at Lake Lansing on the same date by the same observers.

Spring dates 18 March to 26 April. Autumn dates 7 November to 17 November. Four fall records to 1976. Most recent winter date was on 15 February 2009 on the Grand at State Road.

LESSER SCAUP

Regular, common spring migrant, less regular and common in the fall. Rare in winter; several winter records refer to ill or wounded birds.

Groups of 10+ seen in all of the counties and at Maple River during each of the 2008, 2009 seasons, with maximums of 50+ at Lake Lansing on 08 April 08 and at Park Lake on 30 March 08; not so common in 2009.

Spring records 07 March - 05 June; average arrival 3rd week March, departure 1st week May.

Fall records 28 September - 08 December; average arrival 3rd week October, departure 3rd week November.

SCOTER species

Traditionally, scoters have been “sea ducks”, rare in our area. For example, Black Scoter was not observed through 1975, when records were collected for the McWhirter and Beaver reference below. As the number of invasive Zebra Mussel has increased in the Great Lakes, there has been a correlated increase in the number of scoters seen in Michigan waters, including more inland records. Currently, scoters as a group can be considered uncommon and irregular migrants on the larger lakes in our area, mostly in fall, with a few winter reports.

SURF SCOTER

Three records through 1975; 19 April 57, 11 and 25 October 75. Subsequent records on 11 April 95, 11 April 08.

WHITE-WINGED SCOTER

Cook stated that this species was becoming more numerous in the area and was frequently shot at Park Lake and Pine Lake (Lake Lansing) during migration. There were five records from 1945 to 1975. Subsequent reports include 17 October 93, 24 November 88, 23 October 97, 17 November 84, 14 April 08.

Date range therefore is 14 April, 17 October to 24 November.

BLACK SCOTER

No records through 1975. Subsequent records on 24 October 77, 23 March 99

LONG-TAILED DUCK

This duck is also a “sea duck” and is rare in our area on the larger lakes, although it has turned up on the Grand in the winter. Cook noted a specimen from Lake Lansing. There were five records through 1975. Subsequent records include: 21 November 76, 17 November 84, 21 October 08, 20-21 March 09.

Date range of 15 March to 14 April and 21 October to 30 November with one found dead in Lansing on 07 February 59.

BUFFLEHEAD

Common, regular spring migrant, less common and regular in fall / early winter, rare on rivers during the winter months. Throughout our area, prefers shallower waters than goldeneye. Groups of 10 or more not uncommon, max of 50+ at Park Lake on 29 March 08.

Spring reports 07 March to 21 May, average arrival 3rd week March, departure 4th week April.

One very old July record.

Fall date range 14 October to 27 December.

Recent winter records on 24 January 08 and 09 at Potter Park and on 27 February at Lincoln Brick Park.

COMMON GOLDENEYE

Common, regular spring migrant, less common and regular in fall / early winter, irregular on rivers during the winter. On all waters, including rivers, throughout our area. Generally, small groups of less than 10.

Dates from 30 October to 20 May.

Spring average arrival 3rd week March, departure 3rd week April.

Fall average arrival 2nd week November, departure 3rd week December.

HOODED MERGANSER

Considered very abundant by Cook, this is one of only four species of duck which routinely breed in our area, although it is far from abundant now. Formerly, mostly bred in wooded areas along the rivers, more recently has been found nesting in Wood Duck boxes, even in situations on small ponds where it's unlikely Wood Ducks would nest. At least 3 breeding records in Eaton and Clinton in 2008. Rare in winter.

There were no summer reports in the smaller Capital Count Area through 1975; however, it has been seen near annually during the summer in the CCA since then. Prior to 1975, this merganser almost certainly nested in other parts of our expanded reporting area (*e.g.* Maple River SGA).

Groups of 10 or more throughout our area, maximum of 40 at Lake Lansing on 29 November 08.

Spring range (through 1975) 13 March to 19 May; average arrival 4th week March, departure 3rd week April. Since then, found near Holt on 06 March 2008, 09 March 2009 at I27/Price Road.

Fall range 09 (through 1975) October to 30 December; average arrival 1st week November, departure 4th week November.

One at Potter Park on 01 January 2008, one wintered at Potter Park 2008-09.

COMMON MERGANSER

Irregular, common in spring and uncommon in fall migration on lakes throughout; irregular and somewhat rare on rivers in the winter.

Most often in groups of less than 10, max of 20 at Lake Lansing on 29 November 2008, 22 at Maple River on 14 March 2009, and 24 at Lake Ovid on 19 March 2009.

Spring dates 10 March to 04 May; average arrival 3rd week March, departure 2nd week April.
Fall dates 21 October to 31 December.

RED-BREASTED MERGANSER

Irregular, uncommon in spring and rare in fall migrant on lakes throughout.

Mostly seen in groups of less than 5, but a flotilla of 20 at Lake Lansing on 22 April 08.

Spring reports 10 March to 10 May; average arrival 4th week March, departure 3rd week April.
Fall dates from 26 October to 25 November; bird on 16 December 1973 died.

RUDDY DUCK

Cook considered this species to be very common at Lake Lansing at times. Currently, it is a common to uncommon, regular spring migrant, less common and regular in fall / early winter, rare in summer and on rivers during the winter months. Numbers may be increasing slightly in our area. Found throughout, likes shallow waters for feeding, will loaf on deeper waters. Often the most common ducks at sewage lagoons.

Groups of 10 or more not uncommon, max of 50+ at Potterville sewage lagoons on 14 April 08.

Spring dates: 02 March to 01 June; average arrival 2nd week April, departure 3rd week May
May have nested on the MSU ponds in the 70's.
Fall dates: 06 October to 25 November (three fall records before 1975)
Female likely wintered near Potter Park 2007-08.

RED-THROATED LOON

Neither Cook nor Barrows mentioned this species in our area. Currently considered a rare spring and fall migrant. Mostly on large lakes, but see below.

Our records include 14 April 1967, 16 November 1972, and two found in a field on 28 January 77 (This record was probably due to near-shore icing of the Great Lakes, most likely Lake Michigan. These loons probably mistook the shiny ice covering the fields for water.). Three more recent observations were at Lake Lansing on 08 April 1987, 10 October 1997, and 29 March 2001.



COMMON LOON

Cook stated this loon was a very common migratory breeder in the LP. Barrow indicated it had become increasingly rare in the southern part of the state, but still nested in all counties, including Ingham. At the present time, only small numbers are seen during spring and fall migration, mostly on large lakes. However, adult(s) and a young bird were seen on Park Lake in 2009.

High count of 5 on Lake Lansing. Seen in all three counties and Maple River.

Spring migration: 12 Mar to 26 May; average arrival 4th week March, average departure 3rd week April. There is an unusual date of 26 February 1976 (flying over Fenner).

Fall migration: 25 October to 25 November; average arrival 1st week November, average departure 3rd week November.

PIED-BILLED GREBE

Common nesting resident through the area, rarely into early winter. Prefers shallow water with plenty of tasty invertebrates; along river edges in the winter.

Maximum of 3-4 during 2008, 2009, but probably more during the breeding season at Park Lake and Maple River.

Date range from 10 March to 22 December. Average arrival 1st week April, average departure 3rd week November. December birds often at Park Lake, one was injured. One along the Grand on 05 January 2008 and the Red Cedar on 28 February 2009 (wintered?).

HORNED GREBE

Regular uncommon spring migrant, irregular fall migrant, rare in winter and often injured or "trapped" on rivers at that time. Occurs in all portions of the Capital Area.

Maximum of 6-8 on the larger lakes not uncommon, 11 at Park Lake on 26 April.

Spring: 08 (on Grand), 15, 22 March to 24 May; average arrival 1st week April, departure 4rd week April. Fall: 16 October to 27 November; average arrival 1st week November, departure 4th week November. Three sets of records in January, February.

RED-NECKED GREBE

Rare spring and fall migrant in our area, restricted to larger lakes. More common along the coast of the Great Lakes. Seen 30 October 1897, 06 October 47, 26 March to 07 April 1966, 04 April 1985, 30 March 1995, and 08 April 2008, all records at Park lake and Lake Lansing. (Other records??)

EARED GREBE

No viable records through 1974. Verified records 09-23 April 1987 at Park Lake and 11 April 04 at MSU water quality ponds. (Other dates on the MSU bird? Other good records?)

WESTERN GREBE

Cook noted one shot near Lansing, date unspecified; one was reported at Rose Lake in the fall of 1972.

AMERICAN WHITE PELICAN

Traditionally uncommon in Michigan; seems to have become more common in the last decade or so. Nests in Wisconsin. Seen flying over or sitting on shallow lakes.

One record during the first week of September 1944 at Rose Lake. More recently, 2 over Dansville SGA on 19 May 1995, 1 at Lake Lansing on 12 April 2006, 8 at Maple River on 19 April 2006, 4 overhead near Olivet on 26 October 2008, 1 flying near Williamston on 12 April 2009, and 6 at Park Lake on 17 May 2009. Maybe other records at Park Lake and another flyby.

DOUBLE-CRESTED CORMORANT

There were only 4 observations of this species in our area through 1974; however, as might be expected, the number has increased since the population in Michigan began to increase in the 1980's. This species is now regular in all parts of our area, occurring on any open water with fish. Still not known to breed in our area, a few seen at Maple River through the summer.

Records from 11 April through 27 November. The Maple River management units seem to attract the species and groups of 60 and 70 were seen there in April and May of 2008, 2009.

PURPLE GALLINULE

Rare in Michigan and our area. One seen at Maple River SGA 02 to 04 May 1969.

COMMON MOORHEN

Uncommon summer resident, has bred in each of the three counties and at Maple River. Most recent breeding records at Plains Road ponds and Maple River. Has declined in the last decade. Prefers open areas in cattail marshes; more often heard than seen.

Date range: 18 April to 22 October; average arrival 1st week of May. Maximum of 2 birds.

AMERICAN COOT

Regular summer resident, breeding in the three counties and at Maple River, a few early winter records, one bird to 23 February 2008 near Moore's River Park. Perhaps has declined in the last decade. Found on lakes, ponds, and river; prefers cattail marshes for breeding.

Date Range from 12 March to 30 December; average arrival 3rd week April, average departure 4th week November. Groups of 100+ noted at Park Lake and Maple River in spring of 2008, 2009; max of 200+ at Park Lake on 02 April 2008.



REFERENCE MATERIAL

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Personal unpublished records of various local observers through the ages.

