



# Cayuga Bird Club NEWSLETTER

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JANUARY 2009

## *Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Moravia*

BY KEVIN MCGOWAN

Gene and Jeffrey Ward had been watching an unusual bird in their yard along the southeastern side of Owasco Lake in Moravia for over a week. They observed the bird in their weedy and scrubby backyard, often sitting on a birdhouse feeder near the house. They knew the bird was unusual, and after looking through bird books, they finally decided it was a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher. Since the bird was not supposed to be in the area, they sent a description to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology on November 17, 2008. Their description of this nearly unmistakable bird, which they apparently first observed on November 3, included a good description of the salmon pink sides and long black tail. In response to a request for more information, they sent several photographs via email that proved conclusively that they had a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher.

After word got out, a number of people flocked to watch the bird on

November 18. Although somewhat elusive, the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher eventually gave most people good, if somewhat distant, looks. The long tail and bright sides suggested that it was an adult male. It often perched for long periods of time near the ground and was frequently out of sight. It was seen eating berries, but few insects were moving on that cold day for it to catch. Unfortunately, it probably did not survive the following night, when temperatures dipped below 20°F. Further efforts to find the bird were unsuccessful.

The Scissor-tailed Flycatcher has a rather unusual breeding distribution, breeding in the middle of the continent from southeastern Colorado to southern Nebraska and central Missouri, southward to southeastern New Mexico, Texas, and western Louisiana, into northeastern Mexico.

It winters primarily in southern Mexico and Central America, although some winter in southern Florida. It regularly wanders to the Northeast, with most sightings occurring in late spring and early summer (May–July) or during the fall (September–November).



Jay McGowan

The first occurrence of this striking bird in New York was recorded in June 1939 in Suffolk County on Long Island. By 1978 it had been seen in the state 12 times, with two of those records upstate. By 1998 the state total was up to 39, with only 9 sightings outside of Long Island. Five records were accepted by the New York State Avian Records Committee between 1998 and 2004, with four of those upstate. Most New York sightings have been in June, and most were for only a single day, although one individual in Oswego County was seen for over a month in the fall of 1979. A bird looking very similar to the Moravia bird was seen in August 2008 in the Shawangunk Grasslands of Ulster County, New York.

Scissor-tailed Flycatcher has been nearly an annual visitor to the East Coast lately, if still rare in New York. Such a remarkable bird as a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher is an impressive sighting, no matter where one sees it, in the heart of its breeding range or as a rare vagrant. For the fortunate people who saw the Moravia bird, it was a very memorable and enjoyable experience. 🐦



Kevin McGowan

WATCHING BIRDS IN THE ITHACA AREA FOR NEARLY 100 YEARS

## CAYUGA BIRD CLUB

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The Cayuga Bird Club meets on the second Monday of each month, September through June, at 7:30 p.m. in the Auditorium of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Johnson Center on Sapsucker Woods Road. All programs and field trips are free and open to the public. Membership costs \$15 per year, \$10 for students, payable in September. To join, send a check (made out to "Cayuga Bird Club") to Cayuga Bird Club Treasurer, c/o Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods Road, Ithaca, NY 14850.

Bird club members receive the Cayuga Bird Club Newsletter monthly from September through June. Send newsletter submissions to Anne Marie Johnson, contact information above. Of particular interest are articles about local bird sightings, bird behavior, or birding hot spots, as well as original poetry, art, and photos.

*Chickadee illustration in masthead by Karen Confer, waxwing illustration for native plants column and duck silhouette by Lena Samsonenko.*

Visit the Cayuga Bird Club website at:  
[WWW.BIRDS.CORNELL.EDU/CAYUGABIRDCLUB](http://WWW.BIRDS.CORNELL.EDU/CAYUGABIRDCLUB)

## From the President

"Did you see it?" asked a colleague from the classroom directly above mine, as she hurried into my room and headed to the window. See what? Had there been a fight outside my window? "Did you see the Pileated Woodpecker? It was just out there going to town on the base of that tree right there. I'm pretty sure it was a pileated; it was bigger than a crow and had a big red crest. I asked Fred, and he confirmed it. Oh, it was just right there, and it flew back that way deeper into the trees." Her excitement bubbled over as we scanned the trees hoping for the bird to return into view.



A few days later, my phone rang, "What happened to my birds?" The husband of another colleague had a question about the birds at their feeders. They had enjoyed American Goldfinches at their thistle feeders during the summer, referring to them as "Blondies" due to their bright yellow feathers. Now the "Blondies" they had enjoyed so much were gone, seemingly replaced by birds that appeared somewhat similar but more of a greenish brown than a bright yellow. Were the birds they were now seeing a different species? Had their birds simply changed the color of their feathers? What was going on? A brief conversation about molting reassured them that they were still observing their "Blondies," albeit a toned-down version.

In both situations, the friends who approached me would never classify themselves as birders with a lower case b let alone Birders with a capital B. However, their excitement and curiosity regarding the birds they encountered rivaled that of any of the most ardent Birders I have met. I had as much fun, if not more, sharing these experiences with them as I do going out with some of my regular birding companions. What more does it take to be a birder? They may not be members of a bird club or participate in local birding field trips or travel with a focus on birds, but they enjoy the birds they encounter during their day-to-day activities as much as we enjoy the birds we actively seek out. And who knows, given a little prodding, they may find themselves future members of the Cayuga Bird Club.

Wishing you all a joyful new year in which you have plenty of opportunities to share your knowledge of and interest in birds with birders and non-birders alike.

*Susan*

## Events Calendar

DATE	EVENT	DETAILS
<b>JAN. 11</b> Sunday 7:30 A.M.	<b>Field Trip: Cayuga Lake</b> Leader: Bob McGuire Meet: Johnson Center*	Dress appropriately for this all day trip around the lake. Bring a snack and lunch. There will be a stop or two for food. Contact Bob at <rss@lightlink.com> or at 256-0460 with questions.
<b>JAN. 12</b> Monday 7:30 P.M.	<b>Cayuga Bird Club Meeting</b> Johnson Center Auditorium Host: Kevin McGowan	Kevin McGowan will host the club's annual "Share Your Photos Night." Send a maximum of five photos you want to share to Kevin at <kjm2@cornell.edu> by January 10. Contact him with questions by email or at 342-2430.
<b>JAN. 15</b> Thursday	<b>Point Pelee trip deadline</b>	Last day to sign up for the Point Pelee trip being planned for May 8-10. Like the fall trip to Cape May, this trip promises to be filled with lots of great bird sightings. See the article on page 8 for details.
<b>JAN. 19</b> Monday	<b>Newsletter deadline</b>	Send newsletter submissions to Anne Marie Johnson, contact information on page 2.
<b>JAN. 25</b> Sunday 7:30 A.M.	<b>Field Trip: Summerhill</b> Leader: Bill Baker Meet: Johnson Center*	Dress warmly and wear appropriate footwear for this half day trip to look for winter finches and other birds. Contact Bill at <bilbaker@lightlink.com> or at 275-0540 with questions.
<b>FEB. 8</b> Sunday 7:30 A.M.	<b>Field Trip: Cayuga Lake</b> Leader: Bob McGuire Meet: Johnson Center*	This all day trip will travel around the lake to look for birds. Dress for the weather. Bring lunch and money for food stops along the way. Contact Bob with questions at 256-0460 or at <boju@lightlink.com>.
<b>FEB. 9</b> Monday 7:30 P.M.	<b>Cayuga Bird Club Meeting</b> Johnson Center Auditorium Speakers: Tom Johnson, Jay McGowan, and Brad Walker	In their presentation, "Accessible Arctic: The Birds and Beasts of Churchill, Manitoba," Tom, Jay, and Brad will give a well-illustrated account of their summer working with Hudsonian Godwits and exploring the Canadian sub-arctic of Churchill, Manitoba.

\*Meet for field trips in the front parking lot.

## FIELD TRIP REPORT: LOON WATCH, NOVEMBER 16

BY MEENA HARIBAL

Five of us braved the weather forecast of rain or snow and went to Taughannock Park for a Loon Watch. We were lucky the weather god held back the precipitation.

As we got out of the car, we saw quite a few loons flying overhead. Many groups of loons circled around as if they were trying to gain thermals like hawks, but maybe they just were trying to make a democratic decision. Early in the morning the loons headed south. Later, after around 8:30 A.M., we watched many loons heading north low over

the water. Perhaps these loons were local loons, as most of the others we had seen were pretty high. We counted about 300 loons flying south. Then on the water there were at least 50 more.

In addition to loons, we also saw two small flocks of Cedar Waxwings, heard a lone bird that sounded like a Snow Bunting overhead, and saw some small finches. I could see wing bars or windows on the finches. They may have been siskins, but they did not call, so I was not sure. Two local Red-tailed Hawks circled over the west ridge. 🐾

# MINUTES: CAYUGA BIRD CLUB MEETING

## DECEMBER 8, 2008

BY SUZANNE HENDERSON

President Susan Danskin called the December meeting to order and welcomed visitors.

### OLD BUSINESS

- Susan provided an update on the *Native Plants for Native Birds* book fundraising campaign, which is progressing well. She invited those who had volunteered to solicit donations from businesses to come up after the meeting to get handouts from her. Some additional volunteers would be helpful for canvassing more businesses. Anyone interested in helping with this mission should contact Susan.
- Susan thanked Betty Rowley and Lee Ann van Leer for providing a wonderful array of refreshments for after the meeting. Ann Mitchell and Colleen Richards volunteered to bring refreshments for the January 12 meeting.
- There has been no further news from Frank Moses, of the Montezuma Audubon Center, regarding the adoption of Cayuga Lake as an Important Bird Area. Jane Graves volunteered to speak with Frank about informing the club of details regarding the projects that will be undertaken with the grant money. Frank Moses will come and speak to the club after the grant has been awarded.
- Linda Orkin recruited volunteers to read the Basin List at the beginning of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Monday Night Seminars as well as members to serve on the Basin List Committee. She passed around a sign up sheet with the dates of the spring seminars and a sign up sheet to join the committee.
- Gladys Birdsall substituted for Bard Prentiss to report on plans for the January 1 Christmas Bird Count. Linda Clougherty and her daughter, Julie, have volunteered to answer the phone from 4–6 P.M., recording Feeder Watcher reports. Volunteers are still needed to help with dinner setup at 5:30 P.M. and cleanup at the close of the evening. The dish-to-pass dinner will start promptly at 6:30 P.M. Following dinner, Kevin and Jay McGowan will compile the day's counts. Area leaders will contact club members who have volunteered in the past to help cover their areas.

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

The next bird club meeting is scheduled for January 12. It will be an enjoyable share-your-photos night.

Interested participants should send Kevin McGowan a maximum of five digital photos on or before January 10. Photographers will be given a few minutes to talk about their submitted pictures. This photo sharing night has been great fun in years past, so members should not be shy about sharing photos.

### BASIN LIST AND RECENT SIGHTINGS

Bob McGuire read the Cayuga Lake Basin bird list and recorded birds identified in the basin during the previous week, including White-winged Crossbills, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, a Northern Harrier, and a Peregrine Falcon.

### EVENING PROGRAM

Susan Danskin introduced Ken Rosenberg, Director of Conservation Science at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Ken's presentation, "The State of Our Birds: A Continental Perspective," provided extensive observations and evaluations of bird populations in New York.

Evidence from *The Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State (2000–2005)*, when compared to information from the first atlas (20 years prior), highlighted declines in some bird species, as well as explosions in other species. Ken focused on some 84 species of greatest concern in New York.

The reasons for severe decline in some populations, as well as the apparent increased success of others, are extremely complex. Changes in habitats were examined, but often investigations need to extend to continental conservation issues, especially where wintering habitats and migration flyways have suffered from acreage losses, contamination, and alterations. Ken pointed out that international shared responsibility for the conservation of birds is needed and that the state of birds directly corresponds with environmental health.

In hopes of reducing mortality during migration, there is a need to predict migration more accurately (understanding hazards and prevailing winds), as well as to understand and measure the level and distribution of vulnerabilities. Ken was very convincing regarding the need for full life-cycle stewardship and for non-adversarial, proactive conservation (conservation of birds before they become endangered). 🐦

# FIELD TRIP REPORT: NIAGARA FALLS, DECEMBER 6

BY KEVIN J. MCGOWAN

On December 6, 2008, four hearty souls headed to the Niagara Frontier to spend the day sorting through thousands of gulls to find a few different ones of interest. Joining me were Jay McGowan, Ann Mitchell, and Gary Kohlenberg. We were able to find 10 gull species to satisfy our gull cravings, a pretty good day. In addition to the four common species (Bonaparte's, Ring-billed, Herring, Great Black-backed), we saw an adult Little Gull, an adult Glaucous Gull, a picture-perfect adult Thayer's Gull (along with a number of other Thayer's candidates), 16 Iceland Gulls of all ages (but a surprising number of second cycle birds), a second cycle California Gull, and numerous Lesser Black-backed Gulls.

Unfortunately we were about an hour too late for the most noteworthy gull on the river that day: a Mew Gull, thought perhaps to be the "Kamchatka" version from northeastern Russia. We also had a Herring Gull with a slightly, but noticeably, darker back than the other thousands and thousands present. I would like to have made this into a "Vega" Gull,

a form of Herring Gull or a closely-related species from Siberia (the same place where Kamchatka and Slaty-backed gulls come from). It had the appropriate darker pink legs, moderately limited streaking on the head and neck, and what appeared to be dark eyes. But that is a pretty difficult identification, and we did not have good enough looks to say for sure. (Actually, I am not sure we could have told even if we had great looks!) We figured it was more likely a Herring X Lesser Black-backed gull hybrid.

This was perhaps the most gull-centric of the trips I have led to Niagara Falls. We spent very little time looking at waterfowl or anything except gulls. We did enjoy the falls awhile, and we took a break to warm up and look at the exotic birds in the conservatory. Otherwise we were standing at our scopes, braving the strong (really strong!), cold (really cold!) winds, looking through the gulls all day. But that's what we were there to do, and the gulls, combined with the scenery and the pleasant company, made it a very enjoyable day. 🐦

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# FIELD TRIP REPORT: SHORT-EARED OWLS, DECEMBER 13

PHOTO AND ARTICLE BY ANN MITCHELL

Five people joined me at around 2:00 P.M. to look for Short-eared Owls. We met Michele Mannella at the Cayuga Lake Creamery, and she led us to the areas around Ovid where she had been seeing owls. We were hoping to see at least one owl but knew not to get our hopes up. As we were driving, we saw a flock of Horned Larks and Snow Buntings by the road, and a little further along, six to eight Eastern Bluebirds. We also saw a number of Red-tailed Hawks and a beautiful Rough-legged Hawk.

We first stopped at the Beardsley Farm on Rock River Road. Michelle knows the owners. We found two Short-eared Owls sitting together by a pond. One owl was on a post, the other was on the ground. It was a life bird for two people. That made the trip extra special. After awhile we walked a little closer to

the owls to get better looks. All of a sudden, an owl flew from the pond area, then three others. There were a total of six Short-eared Owls there. We watched them fly about in the fields for quite awhile.

Next we headed to Center Road and Route 129 where we found eight or more Short-eared Owls. There were owls in trees, on the hay bales, on the ground, and flying over the fields. There were also five or six Northern Harriers combing the fields. One of the owls started chasing a group of three juvenile harriers. The owl attacked one of them, which apparently had a mouse in its talons because the mouse tumbled to the ground. The harriers moved on, and the owl landed on the ground to retrieve



*Short-eared Owl seen by trip participants on Rock River Road in Ovid.*

its reward. When it started to get dark, we headed back to the Cayuga Lake Creamery. We arrived just in time to see twenty-two turkeys in the field across the street. Needless to say, it was a very successful trip. I hope everyone had as great a time as I did. 🐦



## Native Plants for Native Birds: Hobblebush (*Viburnum alnifolium* and *Viburnum lantanoides*)

BY JOEL BAINES, PHOTOS BY DAVID RUPPERT

A striking feature of the genus *Viburnum* is the large number of similar species in the group and

how each member has exquisitely adapted to particular environmental niches. These small to large shrubs with often dense foliage would cover the planet if they had their way, from the barren hilltop to the swamp below. Gardeners have diligently hybridized many of these species to alter their characteristics to a variable ideal, depending on who is dictating the plant breeding.

A native, nonhybridized species, Hobblebush (*Viburnum alnifolium* and its synonymous *V. lantanoides*) is a denizen of the rich forest floor with a range extending from the Maritimes of Canada to the hills of Georgia. Unlike many of the plants covered in this column, this plant is a lover of full or spotty shade, which should be of special interest to the woodland gardener. The plant is uncommon and, as of 2008, endangered in New Jersey and Kentucky and of special concern in Rhode Island, perhaps because of its relatively slow growth and demure stature (less than 6–9 feet in height), making it highly vulnerable to deer browsing and understory clearing by humans. Also Hobblebush requires rich moist soil and does not compete well against faster growing plants that like the same conditions, especially more aggressive and invasive species like Tatarian Honeysuckle. Despite these caveats, it is easily grown in a moist acidic soil and, once established, will grow relatively fast, up to one foot per year.

Hobblebush gets its name from the fact that the branches hang down to touch the ground and root at their tips, making a series of rooted loops that tend to trip unwary passersby. This hobbling effect can be avoided easily in the garden by pruning.

The leaves are oppositely arranged, strikingly ovate, deeply veined, and often flatly displayed along the stem to gather as much light as possible. The flowering strategy is a rather

clever ruse (also employed by other viburnums) in

which the circle of white showy (but sterile) peripheral flowers draw pollinators to



the more demure fertile flowers in the center of the cluster. These flowers eventually produce fruit, which progress from green to red and finally to black. The white flowers and red fruit are very attractive and shine like beacons in the all green environment of the forest understory.

Fruiting is usually modest (often a few clusters of dozens of fruit per plant), which might be expected given the limited energy that the shady environment provides. The plant also will be sterile unless a genetically distinct member is nearby,

which is rarely an issue in the wild. When purchasing specimens for planting, however, choose seed-grown specimens, since they are genetically distinct enough to eventually become proud parents.

Hobblebush is virtually pest free and is even resistant to the *Viburnum* Leaf Beetle, thus arguing for more intense propagation in the future. The forest understory rapidly has become one of the most important battlegrounds in the ongoing competition between native and invasive plants, and in some areas this environment is virtually devoid of natives. There are a number of woodland birds that depend on the understory for cover (such as the woodland thrushes and ovenbird), and this particular plant has specifically evolved to fill the niche. For this reason alone, Hobblebush is a wonderful addition to any woodland landscape or garden. 🐦

# White-winged Crossbills in Tompkins County

BY ANNE MARIE JOHNSON

White-winged Crossbills have been showing up throughout the Ithaca area this fall and winter. Small groups of the birds were observed in Brooktondale by Steve Fast and in Ithaca by Tom Johnson on November 6. The next day, Mark Chao discovered a group in conifers across from the Park Preserve on Irish Settlement Road, a location that



Anne Marie Johnson

White-winged Crossbills on Irish Settlement Road, November 29 (right) and December 1 (left), 2008.

proved to be fairly reliable for several weeks, with White-winged Crossbills being seen at several locations along Irish Settlement Road. A few birders found groups of 50 to 200 birds near the intersection of Irish Settlement and Beam Hill roads toward the end of November. In mid-November several observers began seeing White-winged Crossbills in Sapsucker Woods and various locations in the Cayuga Heights area, where sightings continued through December.

Not since the 2001–2002 winter have there been so many sightings of White-winged Crossbills in and around Ithaca! Look for crossbills wherever you see cone laden conifers. 🐦



Kevin McGowan

## Stocking up

By Inta Ezergailis

An inhabited morning –  
wood ducks on the lake, a pair,  
his colors glinting in the sun –  
God in his Klee mood –  
the male, full of himself,  
glides by, the plainer female –  
practical – pecks at food below.

On the way, a wild turkey  
stalked across the road –  
slow, elegant, oblivious to all,  
and a grouse drummed  
some festive arrival  
or departure.

Across the creek, rough cries  
of two young ravens,  
blackier than night, the darkness  
gathered in a soft velvet ruff  
around their necks.

Then the day empties out  
hour by hour, and at last  
by evening the cupboard is bare,  
unless you know how to hold  
the green glint, the proud solitude,  
the drumming in of softest night.

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## Point Pelee Trip

BY MEENA HARIBAL


Ann Mitchell and I are planning to lead a three day trip to Point Pelee in Leamington, Ontario. The trip is being planned for May 8–10, during peak spring migration, to look for migrant birds such as Connecticut Warbler and Kirtland's Warbler. The trip will be weather dependent, but we need to make hotel reservations well in advance because the places get booked almost a year ahead. The cost for lodging and travel will be \$200. If you would like to come, please let us know by January 15 so that we can reserve enough rooms. Contact me at <mmh3@hotmail.com> or at 592-2506, or contact Ann Mitchell at <alm9413@aol.com> or at 277-2926 with questions or to reserve a spot. 🐦

House Finch eating berries in Sapsucker Woods, December 19, 2008.



Raghuram Ramanujan

**CAYUGA BIRD CLUB**  
 c/o Cornell Lab of Ornithology  
 159 Sapsucker Woods Rd.  
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Eastern Bluebird by Kevin McGowan

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SHARE YOUR PHOTOS NIGHT

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