

WBCI conference unites birders, researchers, and managers for better bird conservation

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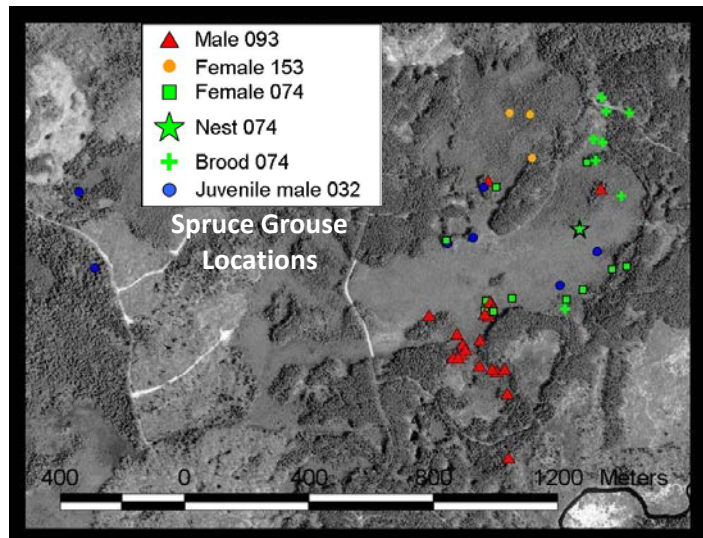
What are the keys to building a good bird monitoring program? Which birds utilize deep waters miles off the Lake Michigan shore? How do we evaluate the success of our bird conservation actions? Where do Wisconsin's Common Loons spend the winter? How can I be a better eBirder? What does the future hold for the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology?

These and many other questions attracted a broad spectrum of nearly 100 participants to Green Bay, Wisconsin, from September 29 to October 1 for the 2011 Annual Meeting of the Wisconsin Bird Conservation Initiative (WBCI), a voluntary partnership of 170+ state, federal, and non-government organizations. Co-sponsored by the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, Western Great Lakes Bird and Bat Observatory, UW-Green Bay's Cofrin Center for Biodiversity, and Bird City Wisconsin, the three-day event featured a unique blend of birding, science, and conservation-related topics, with focus on current research and monitoring efforts in the state.



Perhaps highlighting the conference was a diverse set of outstanding presentations on Friday that showcased the breadth and utility of cutting-edge bird research underway in Wisconsin and neighboring states. Here's a snapshot of some research results that meeting attendees walked away with:

- ❖ Golden-winged Warblers, traditionally thought to be an early-successional forest specialist, are utilizing more mature forest stands both for nesting and especially for brood rearing after fledging.
- ❖ Oaks, ashes, and elms are all highly-preferred trees for migratory warblers during spring migration, but all of these trees are expected to drastically decrease in abundance in Wisconsin over the next century.
- ❖ WBCI's statewide marshbird survey needs more volunteers; results so far indicate that Wisconsin is home to more than 15,000 American Bitterns.
- ❖ Volunteers have conducted over 3,000 point counts in 20+ years in the Nicolet National Forest Bird Survey!
- ❖ Thousands of waterfowl can be found in areas more than two miles east of the Lake Michigan shore, including over 20,000 Long-tailed Ducks off the Door Peninsula in November 2010.
- ❖ Managers can improve forest bird habitat by creating more canopy gaps, leaving trees to grow and become snags, and increasing downed woody debris.
- ❖ Spruce Grouse typically favor lowland black spruce and tamarack bogs for nesting but may shift to upland red and jack pine to raise their broods and survive the winter (see accompanying figure).
- ❖ Data from citizen science bird studies, including backyard programs like Cornell's Project Feederwatch, are proving invaluable in determining the impacts of climate change on birds.
- ❖ Wisconsin's Common Loon population winters along the southeast Atlantic Coast and in the Gulf of Mexico but mostly outside of the BP oil spill impact area. Whew!



Thursday's morning session generated excellent conversation on moving WBCI's monitoring efforts beyond current surveillance programs. The discussion largely revolved around approaches to integrating and implementing monitoring as an evaluation tool for our conservation actions. Two models were presented, including a large scale, ecosystem-based, top-down effort from the grassland bird world, and the other a smaller scale, site-based, bottom-up effort from an Important Bird Area on the Lower Wisconsin River. Although all agreed that both approaches were important to success, how to incorporate each within a strategic conservation framework went unresolved and needs further discussion, in particular under what context and on what scale would the IBA-type model be applied. Later in the day, participants learned how to build their own quality monitoring program via a ten-step "cookbook", how to account for birds not detected during a survey, and what it takes to successfully implement a long-term volunteer-based survey.



Other conference activities were tailored to the birding community. The Wisconsin Society for Ornithology is in the midst of a strategic planning effort to determine what the organization wants to be and how it will get there. Moderated by President Tom Schultz, WSO held a two-hour panel discussion that garnered important audience feedback and set the stage for how WSO can move forward in defining its mission, recruiting new members, and improving their work for the birds. Stay tuned for more from WSO in the upcoming months. Another conference co-sponsor, the newly-formed Western Great Lakes Bird and Bat Observatory, provided Friday night's entertainment in the form of fun quizzes testing teams' knowledge of Wisconsin birds. Finally, Saturday featured unique hands-on training workshops about

eBird and the Birder Certification online program, along with incredible talks on how to identify hawks in flight and waterbirds on the Great Lakes. Participants then took their new skills to the field with an afternoon trip on Lake Michigan where they soaked up the sunshine and spotted a rare Nelson's Sparrow, state endangered Common Terns, Bonaparte's Gulls, and an assortment of puddle ducks.

Above. The future of Wisconsin birds? Meet 13-year-old Jack Coulter, the youngest participant at this year's conference.

Right. Ryan's team (left), the P-Hats, was victorious during Friday night's fun quiz. Andy (right) seems to be taking defeat quite well.



WBCI would like to thank its partners and co-sponsors for an outstanding meeting. The presentations were fantastic, discussions fruitful, and opportunities for learning and networking endless. We received a great deal of positive feedback and hope to see you all again at next year's conference. Thank you!

