



The Burrowing Owl

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A Publication of the Nebraska Ornithologists' Union

Dedicated to the study, appreciation, and protection of birds

Important announcements regarding the fall meeting and the NOU's response to COVID-19

It is not news to anyone that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect our lives in all sort of ways. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the pandemic will once again affect our plans to hold a meeting. The NOU Board has decided the fall meeting scheduled to be held at Schramm Park State Recreation Area (SRA) 23-25 October 2020 is cancelled. Tentatively, the plan is to have the fall meeting at Schramm Park SRA in fall 2021 (keep your fingers crossed).

In lieu of having the meeting, the NOU will once again have a Big Weekend 24-25 October. The Big Weekend will be a statewide event in which individuals go out birding to their favorite haunts and, of course, record what they find. Observers are encouraged to post their results on NEbirds with a summary of highlights, but lists submitted to eBird will also be included. As he did in spring, T.J. Walker has again volunteered to tally all species recorded by county and in the state. The goal is to come up with as big of a total number of species as possible. In this era of COVID-19, it is imperative that everyone follows appropriate guidance intended to stop the spread of the virus. Everyone should know the drill now. Thus, only go out and do what you can if you can do it safely and wisely. The good news is birding is one of the few activities that is easy to do while physically distancing.

NOU's Next Meetings

The NOU's Big Weekend, 24-25 Oct 2020

Spring Meeting: Gering, 21-23 May 2021

Fall Meeting: Schramm Park State
Recreation Area, fall 2021

New Members

Steve Maronde, York; John Hakonson, Elmwood;
Patricia Spitzer, Lincoln; Theresa and Myles Gart,
Omaha; Jean Jensen, Lewellen; Pavan Nagaraj,
Omaha

Welcome!

Moving?

If you are changing addresses, please update it by logging into the NOU website or by sending a note to Jan Johnson at janbirder@gmail.com. Copies of the *Nebraska Bird Review* sent to defunct addresses are costing the NOU unnecessary postage. Being proactive will help us save dollars.



A Summary of the NOU's Spring Big Weekend

By T.J. Walker

Editor's note: This summary was originally posted on NEBirds by T.J. Walker on 21 May 2020.

We hit 250 species over the weekend [16-17 May] – barring any late additions – not bad for the first social-distancing NOU Big Weekend (and hopefully the last). There was a least one report for 60 of the 93 counties, not surprisingly with better coverage east and central than far west or southwest.

Top County List was Lancaster with 149 species reported, five other counties broke the hundred species mark including Sarpy (118), Scotts Bluff (110), Seward (107), Douglas (106) and Madison (101).

The most reported species (number of counties reported in) included Red-winged Blackbird and Common Grackle (46 counties each), Mourning Dove (45), House Wren/European Starling/Yellow Warbler (43), American Goldfinch (40), Brown-headed Cowbird (39), and Barn Swallow/Blue Jay/Common Yellowthroat (37). 33 species were reported from just one county (some by multiple observers, others by a sole reporter).

Group-wise – Waterfowl (21 species), shorebirds (30 species), sparrows (17 – 18 with House Sparrow) and Warblers (30 species).

Surprises (in my opinion)

- Black-bellied Whistling-duck – pair “just north of Burwell”
- Dunlin – reported in 6 counties
- Seven vireo species is pretty nice
- A single winter wren was reported with pretty a good description
- Veery (5 counties) and Gray-cheeked Thrush (6 counties) also is nice
- WARBLERS – Louisiana Waterthrush (3 counties), Golden-winged (5 counties), Prothonotary (2), MacGillivray's (1), Mourning (10), Kentucky (4), Hooded (2), Cape May (2), Magnolia (10), Bay-breasted (4), Blackburnian (7), Chestnut-sided (8), Blackpoll (25), Palm (3), Yellow-throated (2) and Canada (3) – all pretty neat numbers.
- TANAGERS – Summer (6 counties in one weekend), Scarlet (9) and Western (3)

Surprising Misses (not considering distribution of birders) – again in my opinion

- Bufflehead
- Sharp-tailed Grouse
- Mountain Plover
- Golden Eagle
- Ferruginous Hawk
- Yellow-bellied Flycatcher – all those people chasing warblers on the “east coast”, thought for sure someone would come up with a Yellow-bellied.
- Scissor-tailed Flycatcher – coverage in “South-central” was a little slim
- Cassin's Sparrow – basically NO bird reports from SW Nebraska
- Henslow's Sparrow
- [Thick-billed] Longspur
- Chestnut-collared Longspur

Great job everyone – while it wasn't as good as an NOU meeting, it was great to “interact” with all of you in some way, great to get “warbler neck” like I would at an NOU meeting (still hurts by the way) and, of course, just to “get out with a purpose” birding wise.



McCown's Longspur renamed with limited success

Most people reading this newsletter have already received the news that the American Ornithological Society's North American Classification Committee (NACC) changed the common name of *Rhynchophanes mccownii*. The longspur formerly known as McCown's is now referred to as Thick-billed Longspur. The reason for removing the McCown from the longspur is that the namesake, John P. McCown, was an officer in the Confederacy who defended slavery and battled multiple Native American tribes. Some people have strong feelings that a name change is long overdue and it was offensive to honor such a dishonorable individual. Other people have strong feelings that so-called "cancel culture" has run amok with its mission to purify and rewrite history. I am not going to change anyone's mind here and frankly, this is not an outlet to have that particular debate.



I would rather use this forum to express my own outrage at the choice of the new name. Thick-billed Longspur? This is the best replacement name the NACC could come up with? I realize a number of people prefer descriptive names, but this name choice is nearly non-descriptive. Yes, the Thick-billed Longspur has a large bill, but is that the first feature one notices? Is that the key feature a person must spy to identify this bird to species? I wonder what other names must have been finalists. Moderately-rotund Longspur? Off-white-naped Longspur? Rick Wright, who is an expert on avian nomenclature, chimed in on NEbirds and noted "I wish they had opted for an established alternative English name. "Bay-winged longspur" has been in use since at least 1884, and it seems to me that if, as the NACC insists, stability is truly a good in naming, the coining of neologisms is a remarkably bad idea." I agree with Rick's rationale and his recommendation. Bay-winged Longspur is a better selection than Thick-billed Longspur.

I would have also opted for a name that describes the beautiful landscapes and habitats this species occupies. How about Shortgrass Longspur or Prairie Longspur? If the NACC is going to go down this road of renaming birds named after figures with sketchy histories, perhaps it would better to receive input from the masses rather than making decisions via a closed process. I can envision the smoke-filled backroom where the wheeling-and-dealing took place. Why not give "the people" the option of voting on a few finalists, especially if neologisms are going to be used rather than established alternatives, as Rick Wright points out. Fantastic birds like *Rhynchophanes mccownii* deserve names that do the species justice. Thick-billed Longspur, in my opinion, just does not cut it.

Editor's note: The opinions expressed in this article may not reflect the views of the NOU and should not be taken all that seriously ☺.



Reddish Egret discovered in Dixon County

A little bit under the radar was a recent Reddish Egret sighting on a Missouri River Sandbar in Dixon County on 17 August 2020. The bird was originally reported as a Little Blue Heron, which is interesting because Nebraska last record from Hall County in June 2018 was also originally reported as a Little Blue Heron. If accepted by the NOU's Records Committee, this will be Nebraska's fourth record. However, this recent report is the farthest north in the state and painfully close to South Dakota, which has no records. This Reddish Egret was not relocated after the original sighting. More information can be found on the [original eBird checklist](#). Photo by Shannon Langland.



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