



Common Tern by Luke Haberkorn

# The Hoot



Volume 2, Issue 2  
Fall 2011

A PUBLICATION OF THE ILLINOIS YOUNG BIRDERS, A SPECIAL PROJECT OF THE IOS

IN THIS ISSUE

## Rarified Air

by Matthew Cvetas, ILYB Parent and Editor of *The Hoot*

Do you remember when you first started birding? Everything was new and exciting. Looking out your window, you could hardly believe you never noticed a Northern Cardinal or Ruby-throated Hummingbird before. Wow, what stunners, huh?

I can clearly recall the bird that actually rekindled my own personal interest in birding – the Eastern Bluebird. I was jogging through my local park one morning and a male and a female pair flew right in front of me. I was mesmerized. I couldn't believe something this beautiful existed let alone flew! From that point forward, I was not only hooked on birding, but I savored every new bird I saw.

After you bird for a while like me, you'll probably keep a list of birds you've seen in your life or your state or even your yard. Once you start a list, it's simply human nature that soon you'll long to see more new birds.

So, how do you see new birds? Join the Illinois Young Birders for field trips of course! This might inspire you to take trips further afield, visiting habitats different from those found in Illinois - the mountains, a desert, an ocean, or even a tropical rain forest. The possibilities for birding are truly endless.

As it turned out, you wouldn't have had to travel far to see a few new birds this fall. Unprecedented numbers of western species were suddenly showing up right here in Illinois. Birders discovered a Sage Thrasher, Mountain Bluebird, Brant, Townsend's Solitaire, and Brewer's Sparrow – all within a few weeks! Our own Illinois Young Birders, Ethan and Aaron Gyllenhaal, even found a Rufous Hummingbird right in their own Oak Park backyard!

While not a western rarity, Nathan Goldberg and his Mom struck gold and found a rarely seen Yellow Rail at Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary in Chicago.

Stories of these rarities and more can be found right here in this Fall Edition of *The Hoot*. I hope you enjoy them.

By the way, it wasn't until this fall that I found another Eastern Bluebird in my local park, nearly 5 ½ years later. Immediately, the memories of that first sighting came flooding back and I took a moment to appreciate its beauty, even if it wasn't new to me.



Yellow Rail by Nathan Goldberg

### Montrose - City Park of Surprises

ILYB Member, Nathan Goldberg, discovers a secretive Yellow Rail in the dunes at Montrose in Chicago.

Page 4



Rufous Hummingbird by Nathan Goldberg

### The Story of Opal

ILYB Member, Ethan Gyllenhaal, recounts the story of Opal, the Rufous Hummingbird who simultaneously thrilled and baffled the North American birding community.

Pages 5-6

# Member Spotlight: Jake Cvetas

by Matthew Cvetas

Q: How old are you and how long have you been birding?

A: I'm 11 years old and I've been birding for three or four years.

Q: How did you first get interested in birding?

A: My dad is very interested in birding and I just started going on trips with him. It was then that I really started to like birding.

Q: Was there any one bird that got you interested in birding?

A: I guess it was the Peregrine Falcon. Peregrine Falcons nest on the library each year in my home town. Watching them grow to become large birds of prey is an amazing experience.

Sometimes, my family would go down specifically to see them or we would just happen to see them when we were at the library. You can see them up close from the third floor of the library, when the chicks are about to fledge. One time, as we were looking out the third floor window at a chick just on the other side of the glass, the female Peregrine came swooping down and started screaming at me and my brother. We were so scared!



*Piping Plover Drawing by Jake Cvetas*

Q: What's your favorite bird and why?

A: My favorite bird is the Scarlet Macaw because it's red all over and that has so



*Photo by Matthew Cvetas*

many different colors on its wings and tail.

Q: Have you ever seen one in the wild?

A: No, I haven't, but one day I hope to. I've seen them only in captivity – once in my home town, once at the Brookfield Zoo and once in Mexico when on vacation. A man was walking around with one on his shoulder and you could take a picture with the Macaw. The size of the bird was surprising.

Q: If you could go birding anywhere in the world, where would you go?

A: I'd like to go to Brazil, because there are lots of different habitats, lots of trips to go on, and lots of bird to see, especially the Scarlet Macaw and Harpy Eagle.

Q: How many life birds do you have on your list?

A: I have seen 310 species in the world and 274 in Illinois. My favorite addition to my life list this past year was the Greater Prairie Chicken. On a trip with the Illinois Young Birders, it was really cool to see them displaying on a lek.

Q: If you could add one bird to your life list this year, what would it be?

A: I would like to see a Northern Goshawk, because it is one of the last regularly occurring birds of prey that I haven't seen in Illinois. It's so big and fierce looking.

Q: I understand you like to draw birds as well. What do you like about drawing birds?

A: You get to capture the bird's position kind of like a picture and I like the way it

## IN THIS INTERVIEW

11 year old Illinois Young Birder, Jake Cvetas, talks with his Dad about how he got into birding, his favorite birds and birding locations.

FAVORITE BIRD: SCARLET MACAW  
FAVORITE BIRDING SPOT: MONTROSE, CHICAGO

looks. I've drawn pictures of Gyrfalcon and Long-tailed Duck. I also drew a whole series of warblers.

Q: What's one of your favorite places to go birding?

A: Probably Montrose Point Bird Sanctuary in Chicago, because it has so many different types of birds and habitats in a small space.

I've seen lots of great birds there including shorebirds like Buff-breasted and Western Sandpiper, Red Knot, Piping Plover, and Short-billed Dowitcher. Some others I loved seeing included Red-headed Woodpecker, Connecticut Warbler, and of course Snowy Owl. I've also seen some Illinois rarities there like Lark Bunting (twice) and Sage Thrasher.

Q: If you were to speak with other kids your age about birding, what would you tell them?

A: The best part about birding is seeing all the different species of birds that you can and especially all the ones that have interesting calls and plumage patterns. I would tell them to join the Illinois Young Birders to go on all the great monthly field trips.

FIELD TRIPS



Become a Member

Do you have an interest in birds and are between the ages of 9 and 18? Join the Illinois Young Birders and meet other young birders throughout Illinois, attend field trips with other young birders and expert guides, and make lasting friendships with others that share your passion for birding.

Visit our Web site, <http://www.illinoisyoungbirders.org>, and become a member today.



Join Us on Field Trips

The Illinois Young Birders take field trips throughout the year to birding hotspots around the state of Illinois. All members are welcome to attend.

All young birders must complete a permission form at the beginning of each year before they can participate on trips.

Visit our Web site, <http://www.illinoisyoungbirders.org>, for more information.

UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

January 22<sup>nd</sup> – Starved Rock Eagles  
Led by Bob Carper

February 18<sup>th</sup> – 2012 IOS Gull Frolic  
Led by Matthew Cvetas and Josh Engel

March 17<sup>th</sup> – Fox River Area  
Led by Eric Secker



# Greene Valley Hawk Watch

October 8, 2011

by Brian Herriott, ILYB Adult Coordinator

At 10am, a small group of ILYB members met in the parking lot at the base of the hill. Since the hawk watch didn't start until 11am, we had a bit of time to walk around the grassy area and on a short trail through the woods nearby. Unfortunately, the winds were steady out of the southwest, which is not ideal for hawk movement.

There were, however, several migrants to be

been to Greene Valley before, I highly recommend going, even if you're not a birder. The view is quite nice and you can see the skyline of Chicago on a clear day.

As we arrived at the hawk watch, we were informed we had just missed an Osprey flyover (which would turn out to be the best bird of the day). Birding is often about being in the right place at the right time.

We spent the next couple of hours scanning the sky for hawks, sharing the hill with remote-control airplane enthusiasts. At times, the local Red-tail would fly close to the planes to investigate. We had a few Sharp-shinned Hawks fly over and a probably Northern Harrier, but not much else because of the winds. It was, as always, good to be outside with good company.



found. From the parking lot we were able to find a group of 10+ White-crowned Sparrows, a female Indigo Bunting, a local Red-tailed Hawk, Chipping Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. Most of the fall migrants seemed to have moved south. While walking through the woods, we did have a nice little surprise: a Scarlet Tanager! There were also the usual forest birds, including White-breasted Nuthatch, Black-capped Chickadee, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, and many Yellow-rumped Warblers.

At 11am, we made our way to the hill and drove all the way to the top. If you haven't



Photos by Denise Haberkorn

Field Trips continued on Page 7

# Montrose - City Park of Surprises

by Nathan Goldberg, ILYB Member – Age 15

When somebody utters the words 'Yellow Rail', most people snicker or groan for it is such a sneaky and impossible bird to find. I know many birders in the state of Illinois that have seen this bird once or twice in their life time in Illinois or the world. But when they tell me about their encounters, they usually only see the white secondary feathers of a bird flying away for about 2-3 seconds, and then the bird immediately ducks back into cover, never to be found again. Other times, people try to hear them by playing a tape of a calling bird to get a response from the males thinking there might be a rival in the area and replying to the tape to show that he has staked out the given territory. I know somebody who once stared into a patch of empty grass in the middle of the night for 5-10 minutes, and never saw the Yellow Rail that was only two feet from his feet. He finally dove forward; hands outstretched, and came up from the grass holding a Yellow Rail. The bird was right under him, and he was not able to see it.



But my experience with a Yellow Rail took a very different twist from these stories. I had been in an Illinois State Year Listing competition for 2011 (which was to look for as many bird species in the state of Illinois in that year) with my mentor, Geoff Williamson. One bird I tried very hard for that year was a Nelson's Sparrow and I had been to Montrose Point in Chicago about six times to look for one. Nelson's Sparrows are notoriously hard to see but not usually that hard. I had yet to see one for the year. It was October 18, and my mom and I were planning to go look for the Eurasian Wigeon (a bird closely related to the American Wigeon and rare but seen yearly on both coasts, but really rare in the Midwest) at Rollins Savanna. That afternoon, before leaving school, I had read on IBET that some photographers had gotten too close to the pond it was in and had flushed it, never to be seen again. After reading that post, I was put

into a very bad mood, and wanted to just go home. But my mom did not want me to go home, she convinced me that we should go to Montrose since I was still looking for a Nelson's Sparrow and she felt as though something unusual would show up. Being the bad guy, I did not believe her but gave in and we were off to Montrose.

I had been to Montrose for the non-existent Nelson's Sparrows so many times, I was beginning to become pretty good at looking for them, but never having any success. At Montrose, there is a special way to look for Nelson's Sparrows. You begin by walking through the dune sanctuary waiting for a bird to flush up from under your feet. Then, once it flies a bit, it will land and you have to run over to that spot and hope it pops up for you to see it. The Nelson's Sparrow is in the genus *Ammodramus*, which are small, long-tailed sparrows. When they fly they are diagnostic to genus but not usually any more specific from there. When we got to Montrose, I began the process of looking for a Nelson's Sparrow, I hear my mom all of a sudden shout, "NATHAN!!! What is this bird?!"

It's really cool looking and cute!" I ran as fast as I could over to her, and saw a small stocky bird with white secondaries flying away from us towards the beach. I scream, "HOLY COW, THAT'S A YELLOW RAIL!!!!!! OH MY GOSH!!!! WATCH FOR IT TO LAND!!!" Yellow Rails almost never fly or stay in the open, except when they land somewhere to rest, as they are exhausted. But nevertheless the Rail landed on the beach, and sat there for about a minute while I took lots of pictures. But my mom and I noticed something strange when it landed. The first time it landed we saw it, but it would fly up again and land about 15 feet from where it was previously. Every time it would try and land, it tumbled over itself and then finally would reorient itself sitting on the ground. We thought it might be injured with a broken wing, so we called Chris Williamson, to see if we should call Flint Creek Bird Rehabilitators. But when we saw it fly again, we concluded it was just exhausted and to leave it alone. We



were able to watch this bird for over two minutes before it finally flew into the sanctuary and we lost it. I then just stood there, not believing that I had just seen and photographed a Yellow Rail in Cook County, Illinois. Things just did not add up, but crazily, I was not in a dream.

Montrose is really just an amazing place where you do not know what might be around the next corner. I surely did not see this coming. Overall, I learned three things from this experience. One is Nelson's Sparrows do not exist as I never saw one after my seven tries at Montrose in the year of 2011, and will be sure to get revenge in 2012. Two, Yellow Rails are really beautiful birds that are just amazing looking. Lastly, trust your mom when she says that she feels something unusual will show up, as she



might just be right. I hope that this was not my last experience viewing a Yellow Rail, and hope to see a few more in my lifetime. Thanks for reading, and I

hope you go out and find your own Yellow Rail soon.

Photos by Nathan Goldberg

# The Story of Opal

by Ethan Gyllenhaal, ILYB Member – Age 16

It was the Monday of the hated two day week before Thanksgiving Break. I had to finish up an English paper that was due that day and I was just finishing when my dad called, "There's a hummingbird in the yard!" I typed the last couple sentences of the conclusion, and then rushed to the window overlooking our backyard. It was gone and I had history homework to do. I waited intently, barely skimming the passage I had to read, too busy thinking about what this bird could be. It finally came to the feeders, and it was obviously a *Selasphorus* hummingbird. It had a fair amount of rufous on the tail, but not as much as I am used to seeing on Rufous Hummingbirds. It also had a lot of green on the flanks, and was overall a very dull bird. I've seen plenty of both Rufous and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, and the plumage on this bird struck me as Broad-tailed. I took a couple photos and posted them on the Illinois Birder's Forum. I checked out the thread from school and saw that most everybody was thinking Broad-tailed as well, because the overall appearance of the plumage was good for it and the gorget feathers appeared to be rosy rather than orange-red.

Of course, because this was a *Selasphorus* hummingbird in Cook County, and was very accessible to birders, we had TONS of visitors in our yard. We let the first couple people into our house, but soon realized we needed a better setup. The setup we have is a row of chairs overlooking the feeder, and a sign-in sheet with photos of the bird out front. At the start was just had one little hummingbird feeder hanging outside. Our yard is a little postage stamp, so it didn't look like much, but the bird there was insane.

Considering this was a *Selasphorus* hummingbird, there was surprisingly little debate among the Illinois birding crowd. We were used to IDing these guys based on plumage, and the plumage looked right for Broad-tailed to our relatively untrained eyes. However, the banders had a different opinion. A hummingbird bander from Kentucky was the first to contact me about this bird not looking right to him for Broad-tailed. Then I got the opinions of more hummingbird banders, who all thought that this bird looked more like a Rufous than a Broad-tailed. It wasn't long before the "H"

word started being thrown around, with hybrids between Rufous and either Broad-tailed or Calliope being suggested. We thought banding the bird would only be for the possibility of it being recaptured, but now it looked like we needed to band it in order to ID it at all. Our first attempt to band it failed pretty badly, it never even entered the cage, and left for the entire day after that. It was a good day, so it was probably hunting some bugs. It did come back the next day, though, and continued its normal routine.

A couple weeks later, after I was convinced that this was not a pure Broad-tailed Hummingbird due to the shape, extent of rufous on the tail, and call note, we decided to give banding it another try. I was thinking this bird would end up being a *Broad-tailed x Rufous* hybrid, which has never been recorded before. I missed the first couple periods of school that day in order to witness the banding. We were not just banding it, but also taking measurements for identification and, more interestingly, DNA. There have been very few instances of live birds having their DNA taken for analysis in order to ID them, especially ones still being seen so regularly. This, for me, was quite possibly the most interesting part of the whole experience, the fact that the hummingbird in our backyard was a success story in using DNA evidence for identification, showing just how far the science of bird identification has advanced. When we caught the bird (which took a matter of minutes rather than the hours of failure before), we brought it inside to get some feathers and measurements. The measurements were surprising to us at the time. We had assumed this bird was a male, and the measurements seemed to be perfectly in between what one would expect from male Rufous and Broad-tailed Hummingbirds, which made me hopeful. The measurements were way out of range of a male Rufous Hummingbird, so we were hopeful.

## HUMMINGBIRD BANDING



### Baiting the Trap

Licensed hummingbird bander, Vern Kleen, encloses the hummingbird feeder in the trap.



### Banding the Hummingbird

Once the hummingbird is caught, a band, a very small one, is placed on its leg (L80832).



### Taking Measurements

Bird banders can determine the age, sex, and identification of a bird from plumage patterns and precise measurements. For *Selasphorus* hummingbirds, the tail provides a significant clue to a bird's ID. The plumage pattern of the tail and the width of each tail feather are recorded.

Photos by Greg Neise

# The Story of Opal (continued)

Despite our hopefulness, the hummingbird banding community saw this as support that it was a Rufous. We didn't know enough about sexing hummingbirds to see that this was, in fact, a female, and therefore the measurements were way off for a Broad-tailed, and supported a female Rufous. The DNA testing took a while, as it is a complicated process, but the first results we got back were that this was indeed a female. More testing first revealed that it wasn't a hybrid, and finally that one of its parents was a Rufous Hummingbird. The result wasn't what I had hoped for, but it was an amazing experience. Also, Rufous Hummingbirds are still quite rare. This was something like the 5th county record.

Cold weather and hummingbirds never mix, even for durable *Selasphorus* hummingbirds. We were able to get some special nutrient-infused hummingbird mix to go along with the normal sugar water mixture. My dad was in charge of what to feed the hummingbird and how to handle the bird's future. Some people suggested rescuing it, some wanted to let it be (that is what we decided to do in the end). It takes a lot of effort to maintain a winter hummingbird. Our current feeder setup is two feeders with squirrel baffles (we have both Grey and Fox Squirrels in our yard, and plenty of each species), one feeder filled with a more standard sugar water mixture, and one with the insect-infused mixture I mentioned earlier. Each feeder also has a light shining on it at all times to keep it warm enough to prevent the nectar from freezing. Frozen nectar is the last thing you want a hummingbird to find. We also have a few retired Christmas trees in our yard for the hummingbird to roost in, and to provide some better shelter from the weather. This setup has supported it through a good amount of cold weather, but the fact that it has been a very warm winter had helped it along.

The New Year has brought colder temperatures and a new wave of birders. The setup we have seems to be working, as the nectar doesn't freeze. The hummingbird is still around, and has survived temperatures below 12°F, with frigid winds. It has been shivering a bit at times, especially early in the morning when it is still waking up, and has been taking much longer, sitting visits to the feeders now. We can only hope for the best for our little girl, who we named Opal because we live in Oak Park (OP).

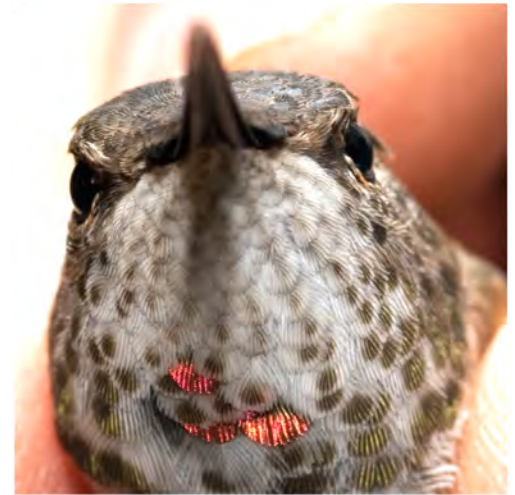
This has been quite the experience for us, with everybody (including my non-birder mom) to get into the hummingbird who knows our backyard as home. We've had about 300 visitors in our yard, including many members of the press. The story has reached across the US, and the story even managed to reach some international locations thanks to the power of the internet. The press is still paying attention to this bird, with a few more people coming to make news stories about it. There has been a good amount of response from everyday people who are interested in not only our bird, but how any backyard with a late-fall hummingbird feeder can attract rarities. Our bird's story has certainly made more members of the Illinois birding community keep their hummingbird feeders up, and has made non-birders keep up their feeders, too. I've gotten recognition for the bird in school, too, with people asking me if we finally IDed it and whatnot. Overall, even though it isn't as rare as we once thought, this hummingbird has been one of the best birding experiences in my life.

## HUMMINGBIRD BANDING



### Measuring the Bill

Measurements of the bill and the extent of the corrugation of the bill are recorded. In younger birds, bills are softer and deeply corrugated.



### Examining the Gorget

Hummingbirds of both sexes can exhibit iridescent gorget feathers on the throat with adult males typically showing the most.



### Setting the Hummingbird Free

Aaron Gyllenhaal releases Opal in his back yard.

*Field Trips continued from Page 3*

## Gillson Park Lake Watch

November 5, 2011

by Josh Engel, ILYB Field Trip Coordinator

About 12 young birders and their parents met on November 5th for a lake watch at Wilmette's Gillson Park, Illinois' premier lake watching site. Enthusiasm was high as scopes were lined up in front of the beach house. We watched a slow but steady trickle of ducks flying past, most of them quite far offshore, including Common Goldeneye, Red-breasted Merganser, and scaup. A single scoter also flew past, identified by Ethan Gyllenhaal as a Surf Scoter. Loons were also moving, including a few that flew inland over Gillson Park proper.

Two Bonaparte's Gulls spent much of the morning with the small gull flock on the beach in front of the beach house. We also saw a few Snow Buntings, including one that landed on the beach, and everyone momentarily silenced themselves in time to hear a Pine Siskin migrating overhead.

A few of us continued after the lake watch to the opposite end of the park where we found

several groups of Redheads sitting on the water, bobbing in the waves. It was a great learning experience for everyone as we discussed how, when, and where to lake watch, water bird identification, and of course a variety of other bird-themed topics.

*Photo by Josh Engel*



## ILYB Says Goodbye to...

Colleen Cahill

Ari Rice

Edward Warden

Congratulations on exceeding the age limit for membership in the Illinois Young Birders!

At your age many young birders find that their interest in birds must take a back seat to the many other interests and activities that fill their lives and spare time. We hope that the demands of schooling, jobs, family and friends will still allow you time to go birding and give you a chance to explore new birding places and meet new birding friends.

We also hope that Illinois birding and the friends you made in ILYB will remain an important part of your life. We invite you to become a member of the Illinois Ornithological Society, the parent organization of the ILYB. No other organization in Illinois supports the creation of a permanent archive of bird records and observations in our state.

Thank you for contributing to the success of the Illinois Young Birders. We wouldn't be where we are today without you.

Thanks to all who have supported ILYB and, particularly, to our contributors to this edition of *The Hoot!*

Special thanks to our parent organization, the Illinois Ornithological Society!

*The Hoot* is published four times per year by IOS. This copyrighted publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part without the specific written permission of the Illinois Ornithological Society.

