



Red-breasted Merganser



Dark-eyed Junco



Snowy Owl

Photos and Text by Heidi Meier
meierdvm@hotmail.com
 October 27, 2021

Winter Bird Notes

Plectophenax nivalis (Snow Bunting)

ORDER: Passeriformes (137 Families)

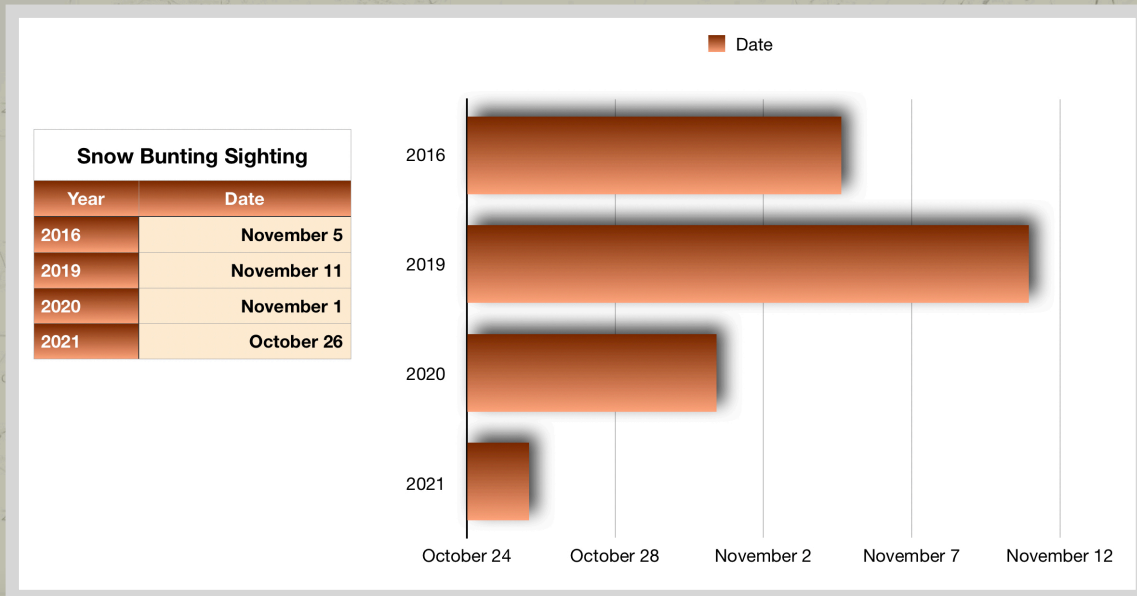
FAMILY: Calcariidae

The shores and waters of Lake Michigan offer a terrific habitat for migrating and overwintering birds. I know winter is rapidly approaching, so during this upcoming season, I thought I would help to soften the anticipated winter blues and return of brisk cold weather with some highlighted bird stories and related general information.

Lakeshore State Park is one of my favorite places to find nature and put the chaotic urban life on hold. This island park offers small areas of marsh, prairie, beach, and close approximation to Lake Michigan. This week I experienced one of those “this made my day” moments!

It was a sunny day with temperatures near 50°F in contrast to the gale-force wind storm the day before. I heard a cacophony of crickets nestled in the prairie as I walked in a southerly direction. A few small flocks of quiet Canadian geese flew overhead in “V” formation. This was interesting since they are usually very vocal during flight. As I turned toward the pebble beach, I was pleasantly surprised to see a solitary long tailed-duck (*Clangula hyemalis*) and a female greater scaup (*Aythya marila*) commingling with mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) and American coots (*Fulica americana*). The male mallards were performing their mating whistling behavior to attract a nearby female. And the American coots were diving for algae just below the water surface. A great blue heron (*Ardea herodias*) was seen at the southern edge of the beach by larger boulders near a grassy patch. It was fishing with great intent and didn’t notice my close presence. The colder temperatures must have caused some of these migratory birds to arrive early. I stayed watching the behavior of these birds for a while, then continued on the path to the Lake Michigan side of the park where the island is protected by large gray-white boulders. I was taken aback when I heard distinct soft buzzy notes from an arctic flock, also known as a drift, of snow buntings (*Plectophenax nivalis*). They flew, swirling, very close on my right and demonstrated their “snowflake” flight by

showing their bright white ventral wings in unison. They stopped and perched on the boulders long enough for me to see their rusty neckline and cheek, and contrasting white and black wing markings. It was as if they stopped by just to say “hi” to me before they ventured on their journey to their winter habitat - this was so thrilling!!! They certainly never linger long! I normally see them for a brief moment once a year near the beginning of November. This is the earliest I’ve seen these arctic feathered friends. Here is a data plot of sighting dates for the past few years. I did not see them in 2017 or 2018.



Snow buntings, also called snowflakes, are one of the few small birds that can breed in the severe arctic environment. The male will arrive at their arctic breeding ground in April when the temperature is around -20°F in order to claim a favorable nesting territory. The male will accentuate his white plumage by rubbing off feather coloration against snow during breeding season. Unfortunately, this pigment loss causes the feathers to become weaker. The nest is chosen in or under rocks, in an artificial cavity, or in a ground depression. The female will arrive several weeks later. The female will lay an annual brood of 3-6 specked white to bluish eggs. The male will feed the female while she incubates the eggs for 10-13 days. This is very important because the eggs need a constant heat source in such a cold environment. The monogamous parents will feed the nestlings until they fledge around two weeks of age. Their diet consists of seeds and insects. Interestingly, they will forage *while* walking or running on the ground. They fly together in large flocks to southern Canada and the northern USA at night and stay in open habitats far from protected cover during the winter.

Here come the snowflakes
Whirling and buzzing nearby
Keep warm snow buntings

Haiku

References:

1. The Sibley Guide to Bird Life and Behavior. David Allen Sibley. 2001. Andrew Stewart Publishing, Inc., NY and Toronto.
2. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology Handbook of Bird Biology, 3rd Ed. If by J. Lovette and JW Fitzpatrick. 2016. John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., Chichester, West Sussex.
3. Peterson. Field Guide to Bird Sounds of Eastern North America. Nathan Pieplow. 2017. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, NY.
4. The Handbook of Bird Families. Jonathan Elphick. 2018. Firefly Books Ltd., Buffalo, NY.
5. The Birder's Handbook. A Field Guide to the Natural History of North American Birds. Paul R. Ehrlich, DS Dobkin, D Wheye. 1988. Simon and Schuster Inc., New York, NY.
6. Flights of Passage. Mike Unwin and D Tipling 2020. White Lion Publishing. London.