

Conservation Corner

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Winter is the perfect time to enjoy our nation's fastest growing outdoor family activity and most popular spectator sport. With 75 million fans, more than NASCAR and all professional sports combined, it might surprise you that more Americans feed and watch birds than participate in any other sport.

Winter is also the time for the National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Counts, annual surveys that help researchers study the long term health and status of bird populations across North America. This winter marked the 116th Count, making it the longest running bird survey, five years older than the Audubon Society itself.

The first Bird Count was held on Christmas Day, 1900. A favorite holiday tradition at the time was the Christmas "Side Hunt" in which sides were chosen to see who could hunt and kill the most birds and animals. The modern American Conservation movement was just beginning, and concern about declining bird populations led Ornithologist Frank Chapman to create a new holiday tradition – one that would count birds, not hunt them.

Recently Webster County Birding published the findings of their January 3 count. While some species numbers were down from previous years, pheasant and eagle numbers were up, and all told 48 species were present and counted. Four species were seen for the first time ever – a golden eagle, winter wren, and tufted titmouse in the field and a yellow bellied sapsucker at a feeder. Today I'll share a brief overview of these infrequent visitors to northwest Iowa.

Golden eagles, the most widespread eagle in the world, may overwinter in the Upper Midwest, especially along the Mississippi River. All of the 14 species of hawks, kites, and eagles that call Iowa home feature large powerful talons and hooked beaks, strong legs, and keen eyesight.

Winter wrens, on the other hand, are small and inconspicuous, except for their singing! One of seven wrens to live in Iowa, they forage in bark and fallen logs and eat pupae and seeds to survive the winter months.

Tufted titmice are a small, sturdy, woodland species closely related to the two chickadees that also call Iowa home. Their range is expanding to the north, thanks to bird feeders. Titmice are fun to watch as they are very curious about their human neighbors. Did you know titmice are cavity nesters and often line their nests with shed snake skin?

Yellow-bellied sapsuckers are medium-sized woodpeckers, one of 11 species of woodpeckers, sapsuckers, and flickers in Iowa. One of my favorite woodland sounds is the echo of a drumming woodpecker.

In closing, I'd like to invite everyone to join Pocahontas & Humboldt County ISU Extension and Conservation for a winter outing along Three Rivers Trail this coming Sunday, Feb. 14, from 2 – 4 p.m. We'll meet at Melson Park, located just west of Bradgate on County Road P-19. Snow shoes and cross country skis will be provided. Call 712-335-3103 and reserve your spot today. I'm also counting on some of our feathered friends to join us along the trail!

