



Illinois Ornithological Society

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Letter from the editor

For better birding, learn your trees

As my sister, Laurel Ann Kaiser, and I studied the differences between pines, firs, and spruces at Lyons Woods in Lake County last fall, I heard the lovely melody of the bird I had come to find. I looked up and a *Myadestes townsendi* was perched like a star on a Christmas tree atop an *Abies concolor*. In layman's terms, that's a Townsend's Solitaire sitting on a white fir.

Knowing the identity of the tree upon which my lifer sat greatly enhanced the experience, and further explained why this western bird who lives in coniferous forests and mountainous regions was there. Lyons Woods, a former nursery replete with conifers, is now a Lake County Forest Preserve. And that means if a Townsend's Solitaire found the area a safe haven, birders might also discover other interesting birds there such as Pine Grosbeaks and White-winged Crossbills in winter.

The reason I knew the tree and its Latin name was because I took a tree identification course last fall (and also got some help from my sister, who's getting a horticulture degree, and David Johnson, who knows his trees almost as well as he knows his birds and alerted me to the solitaire's presence).

I learned 122 trees in my class and I'm excited about how my birding skills can improve because of that knowledge. For instance, late last summer, I walked through Wright Woods in Lake County and stumbled upon a tree swarming with birds - robins, Swainson's Thrushes, Cedar Waxwings, a Brown Thrasher. The birds were eating the fruit from a *Prunus serotina*, a black cherry tree. This Illinois native species produces fruit in late summer - perfect timing for the migrants. I knew it was a black cherry by the potato-chip like bark; shiny green, oblong serrated leaves; and reddish buds. I remember exactly where the black cherry is and know where the birds will be next fall. Also, learning to identify trees by examining them up close for bud color and shape and whether the leaves and buds are tomentose or glabrous, can translate to better birding observation skills.

Another advantage to knowing your trees is that when bird life is scarce, you can enjoy the plant life as I did when I compared *Carpinus caroliniana* (hornbeam) with *Ostrya virginiana* (American hophornbeam) at Ryerson Woods last fall. As I enjoyed the contrasting smooth, gray flute-like ridges of the hornbeam's bark with the thin, long strips of the hophornbeam's bark, lo and behold, a Black-throated Blue Warbler appeared.

Learning your trees, as well as other plants, will make your birding trip more meaningful and hopefully remind you that birds are one part of the bigger picture, a natural world that must be preserved.

Sheryl De Vore