

Favorite Birds of Illinois

by Sheryl De Vore

Todd Dilley has moved from Illinois to Colorado, he no longer can experience the almost-daily thrill of seeing his favorite Illinois bird. It's not a rare bird, either. In fact, it's Illinois' state bird, one of the most common and indeed, beautiful birds here, the Northern Cardinal.

"I miss them," said Todd. "I am in cardinal withdrawal." He said, "though cardinals are being seen more often in Colorado."

Todd's response to, "What's your favorite Illinois bird?" a question I posed on IBET, the Illinois birding listserv, shows that it's not necessarily the rare bird or the first state record that makes it to the top of a birder's list of best-loved avian species.

A person's favorite bird has more to do with how the species flies or nests, how the species can bring cheer to a dismal day, or how seeing a particular bird can remind you of a special person. For those who think birding is pure science, this article will not support that view. Instead, it shows that birding can be spiritual and can even renew one's hope.

"My favorite is the Brown Creeper," said Day Waterman. "There's something about its feeding behavior, size, relative scarcity, and nesting strategy that makes it unique and lovable."

In fact, Day admits to having killed several trees in her backyard trying to attract creepers, who feast on insects within the bark. "I may try artificial bark next to attract them," said Day. Obviously Day is obsessed with Brown Creepers.

Laraine Wright of Carbondale said her favorite all-time North Ameri-

can bird is the Black Skimmer (a bird that made its first Illinois appearance this fall.) Her favorite Illinois bird is the American White Pelican.

She likes these two species because "both stay in flocks, are magnificent flying together and settling in together, are dramatic, easy to see (when present!), and non-frenetic."

"That little flash of blue and orange will forever bring me a special feeling of warmth and hope."

...about an Eastern Bluebird

A few people hemmed and hawed and mentioned several birds, before settling on an answer, for example, Donald Dann finally gave up and made it a tie between the male Wood Duck and the Red-headed Woodpecker as breeders and Blackburnian Warbler for migrants. Donald probably needed 10 different categories so he could get all his favorite birds mentioned.

Robert Chapel of Champaign also had a difficult time deciding. He has a favorite Illinois bird — the Northern Saw-whet Owl. Anyone who knows Bob knows his skill in finding the saw-whets at Allerton Park during winters. I would have thought he'd say Yellow Rail.

But Bob was next musing about how he had a favorite individual Illinois bird, the Rock Wren he saw one fall at Montrose Harbor in Chicago. "It had been found the day be-

fore on rocks just east of the Magic Hedge, and that was where it was when I first saw it. However, other people were coming later from downstate only if it was still around. As it happened, I got blocked in by a 10K race, so couldn't leave Montrose. So I decided to keep tabs on the Rock Wren. After a while, the bird moved to the mouth of the harbor. At that point, too, the harbor mouth was a turnaround for the 10K race. So, the wren and I sat down together to watch the runners. The wren bounced up and down as each runner ran by and occasionally burst into song."

Tadas Birutis knew his answer immediately. "This one is easy," he said. "Black-capped Chickadee in Illinois. The best description of this guy is on a placard at the Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center. It reads something like this: This busy bit of fluff is a cheerful ambassador of the woodlands. How true! Anytime of the year he looks marvelous and is always there to greet!"

Forgive Tadas for referring to the chickadee as a "he," and calling "him" a "cheerful ambassador," but when people start talking about their favorite birds, they can't help anthropomorphizing a bit.

Consider Julie Stielstra's description of her favorite Illinois bird, the Black-crowned Night-Heron. "I had always been fond of these grumpy old men in tuxedos," she said. "One day, after watching some immature Green Herons for a few minutes, I turned and realized a black-crown was sitting in a tree about six feet away from me, quietly watching me. I met his gaze, and we just looked at each other.