



ILLINOIS ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

President's Message

What is a lemming worth??

That's a question being studied by our Swedish friend Tomas Viktor. Tomas is the Chairman of the Stockholm Ornithological Society, and heads up that group's Atlas Inventory Project on Sweden's breeding birds. Karen and I met Tomas about one year ago when he visited Chicago and joined us for a couple of days on the Greene Valley hawkwatch. Tomas is also part of a hawkwatch team that counts raptors from a hilltop site southwest of Stockholm. In 2011 they are setting records for many of the raptor species that specialize in rodents as prey – (Common) Kestrel, Common Buzzard, Rough-legged Hawk (Buzzard) and Northern Harrier.

The reason for these high counts? As Tomas phrased it, "A bird El Dorado in the northern reaches of Scandinavia, Lapland in particular." The lemming population this past summer was close to historical highs, reaching levels last seen 50-100 years ago in some parts of their northern territories. Tomas was part of a team conducting studies of Snowy Owls in Lapland during the summer; they found record nesting success, not just of Snowys, but also of other owl species, including both Short-eared and Long-eared Owls. Long-tailed Jaegers (Skuas) had equally high nesting and fledging success. And the Arctic Foxes were having a field day!

The hawkwatch data compiled both in Sweden and elsewhere in Scandinavia, clearly suggests avian predators of lemmings and small rodent are prospering. What does this have to do with Illinois birds and birding? In pursuit of our beautiful array of breeding neotropical migrants each spring, summer and fall, we tend to forget that Illinois is an important wintering area for certain Arctic and boreal species, especially raptors, including owls.

Arctic Net field researcher Frédéric Bilodeau reports that lemmings are doing equally well in the Canadian Arctic. Nesting success has been high for the birds that depend on these small rodents for food. That should translate into more Rough-legged Hawks spending time in the open fields of Illinois this winter, and the possibility of more Short-eared Owls coursing over grasslands around the state.

Unfortunately, it may also mean Snowy Owls will be few and far between this winter season – no need for them to head south with a good food source still available on their home grounds during the frigid Arctic winter. In a four-year long study by Bilodeau, he demonstrated that lemmings favor nesting locations with large amounts of loosely packed snow; long term weather data shows snowfall in the Arctic increased by 1.4 per cent each decade, from 1900 to the present. This in turn has meant more lemmings, with ever higher peak populations during the boom years of their population cycle.

But there may be a problem looming on the horizon: Warmer temperatures means shorter winters, converting some of that increased precipitation into rain. Lack of snow cover equals fewer lemmings. Today's abundance of lemmings may translate into tomorrow's scarcity.

So, what is a lemming worth? As a keystone species, the lemming controls the abundance of those winter birds brightening our February days with their presence – whether it be a gorgeous dark morph Rough-legged Hawk flying over a field in LaSalle County, or a huge pod of Snow and Ross's Geese tightly packed on one of our large southern impoundments (when lemmings crash, foxes switch to eating eggs), or Short-eared Owls over Goose Lake Prairie just past sunset, barking to each other as they effortlessly glide just over the brittle, dead grasses. Karen and I (and, I suspect, all IOS members) want to keep seeing those sights, so we wish the lemmings well.

— Robert Fisher

Publisher

Illinois Ornithological Society

Robert Fisher, President

Sheryl DeVore, Chief Editor

Marj Lundy, Vice-President

Alex Meloy, Treasurer

Barbara Williams,
Membership Secretary

Board of Directors

Tara Beveroth

Joan Bruchman

Scott Cohrs

Jon Duerr

Robert Fisher

Urs Geiser

Brian Herriott

Marj Lundy

Barbara Williams

Associate Editors

Steven D. Bailey

Jeffery Walk

Staff Illustrators

Peter Olson

Michael L. P. Retter

Jenny Vogt

Barbara Williams

Pre-Press Production

Kathy Ade

TKAde@aol.com

Printing

CityWide Printing

Des Plaines, Illinois