

# IOS awards two grants for research on Red-headed Woodpeckers and American Golden-Plovers in Illinois

One of IOS's objectives is "to promote scientific research and education in order to improve knowledge and awareness of birds in Illinois." This year, IOS is proud to award two \$500 research grants, one to Megan Atterberry-Jones and the other to Benjamin J. O'Neal. Their projects are detailed below, and at the end of this article you can find out more about the IOS grant programs and how you can help.

Megan Atterberry-Jones of Western Illinois University will be studying the Red-headed Woodpecker (*Melanerpes erythrocephalus*) population at Spring Lake Park, in Macomb, Illinois. Her goal is to determine whether a link exists between telephone poles, high density populations, and cooperative breeding behavior in the Red-Headed Woodpeckers at this location.



*Megan Atterberry-Jones with a Red-headed Woodpecker.*

Red-headed Woodpecker populations have declined steadily over the past several decades. One of the possible reasons is loss of dead trees and snags used by these woodpeckers as nesting and food storage sites. Current conservation management plans for this species propose retaining dead trees and tree limbs, but aesthetic and safety issues often prevent these plans from being implemented.

Some *Melanerpes* woodpeckers are known for cooperative breeding behavior. Anecdotal observations suggest that Red-headed Woodpeckers may also occasionally breed cooperatively. The study site, Spring Lake Park, has an extremely high density of Red-headed Woodpeckers.

Based on some preliminary data, there appear to be many more woodpeckers than nesting territories, suggesting the Spring Lake population is cooperatively breeding. The study question: What is so unique about this area that allows it to support such a high density of woodpeckers? One obvious feature that distinguishes Spring Lake Park is the large number of telephone poles. This study aims to determine if telephone poles make this habitat so productive that the younger Red-headed Woodpeckers remain on their natal territories to assist their parents, rather than attempting to form their own breeding territories in poor habitats.

Benjamin J. O'Neal of the University of Illinois will be studying American Golden-Plovers (*Pluvialis dominica*). His goal is to determine habitat preferences of this



*Benjamin J. O'Neal*

species during migration through Illinois. The Grand Prairie was once a continuous expanse of grassland, dotted with marshes and wet meadows, serving as essential stop-over habitat for Arctic-bound shorebirds. Although the landscape of Illinois has changed drastically, some shorebird species still stop over each spring. Tens to hundreds of thousands of American Golden-Plovers pass through east-central Illinois during their transcontinental flight from wintering to breeding grounds. In most years, Illinois supports a substantial portion of the hemispheric population. Like many Arctic-breeding shorebirds, the American Golden-Plover population appears to be declining, and is listed as a species of high concern by the United States Shorebird Conservation Plan.

Birders and biologists have reported large congregations of this species throughout our region, but few data have been recorded to document area-wide abundances. American Golden-Plovers are one of the few bird species that appear to coexist/use the agriculturally dominated landscape of east-central Illinois. Migrant flocks are most often observed in row crop fields, especially soybean stubble. Beyond that association, little is known about the types of habitat selected for foraging and roosting. These flexible foragers apparently are not limited by habitat in a landscape dominated by seemingly uniform row crop production, but have been shown to concentrate in a small number of fields. This pattern suggests they may rely on a specific combination of conditions to select stopover habitat that is both safe from predators and saturated with the high protein invertebrates necessary to fulfill their high energetic demands in a short time.

Volunteer student technicians from the University of Illinois chapter of The Wildlife Society will conduct concurrent roadside surveys at the peak of migration during spring of 2007-2009, focusing on counties with the highest historic American Golden-Plover abundances based on the Illinois Spring Bird Counts and seasonal reports from *Meadowlark*. In addition to abundance estimates, the project plans to document and analyze the characteristics of habitat used by plovers, including crop type, tillage practice, relative moisture, and landscape position.

This project could contribute to future conservation efforts for American Golden-Plovers, by documenting the number and proportion of this species that migrate through Illinois, and by identifying priority locations that reliably