

Letter from the Editor

From the rare to the common

A decade ago, I witnessed one of the biggest Great Gray Owl invasions of my lifetime in Minnesota. Driving along curving one-lane roads, my companion, Steve Bailey, and I saw Great Grays perched perhaps every few miles, their white bibs standing out against their dark bodies in the snowy landscape.

A farmer invited us into his yard to get closer to one that was living in his field, and Steve took beautiful photos of the bird, which gave us a lasting impression of the joy we felt in experiencing such a rare occurrence.

Last winter season, we witnessed one of the biggest invasions of White-winged Crossbills right here in Illinois, and we had more Common Redpolls at our backyard bird feeders than we likely ever will have again. At one time, Steve counted more than 120 redpolls perched on thistle feeders, in the serviceberry and on the ground, voraciously snatching food for sustenance. I recorded the event with my new camera – taking one rather poor photo of a redpoll.

We saw White-winged Crossbills perched on a Douglas fir, Norway spruce and blue spruce in our yard. We observed crossbills drinking water from melting snow at St. Mary's of the Lake Seminary. We watched males and females extract seeds from cones and observed falling seed coverings that would lead us to another group of crossbills. Steve documented the types of cones the birds fed upon and watched as they moved to Norway spruces later in the season. Steve kept telling me – this may be the only time in our lives we see this magnitude of an invasion of crossbills in Illinois.

So, revel we did in this rare experience – especially Steve.

This winter season, we bemoaned the fact that crossbills, siskins and redpolls did not grace our backyard. Hopefully they have found sufficient food in their northern breeding grounds and did not need to fly south.

Still, we longed to see pink birds perched atop evergreens and feisty redpolls with their black chins shooing away the goldfinches from “their” feeders.

Winter birding this year is going to be boring compared with last year, Steve told me. I concurred.

Recently, Steve led an owl prowl at the Reed Turner Woodland. After his talk, he led us outdoors under a full moon and tried to call in an Eastern Screech-Owl. The stars were aligned that night to treat 16 observers to close looks of not one, but two screech-owls. One sat right above us giving its tremolo call on a cold, but windless evening when we again witnessed the miracle of nature. One flew in, landed, posed, then flew across the line of observers, landing for another pose. We could clearly see it was a gray phase, and no one even needed binoculars.

Screech-Owls are numerous in Illinois, Steve tells me. “They’re easy to find,” he says. Well, maybe for him. But that magical night gave me just as much of a thrill as seeing a White-winged Crossbill sipping snow and picking out a Hoary Redpoll amongst all the Commons at the Chicago Botanic Garden last year.

Mind you, if I had to choose, I might go with the crossbills, redpolls and Great Gray Owls. But that evening with the screech-owls was a reminder that when we pause to go beyond our daily lives and enter another dimension called birding, there's always something wondrous to see.

See you in the field.

Sheryl DeVore

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About Our Cover:

Barbara Williams drew the cover of a White-winged Crossbill, which staged an invasion in Illinois the winter season of 2008/2009. Barbara is a member of the IOS board and serves as the membership secretary.



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