

Winter Birds in the UW Lakeshore Nature Preserve

Text and photos by Chuck Henrikson, February 2021

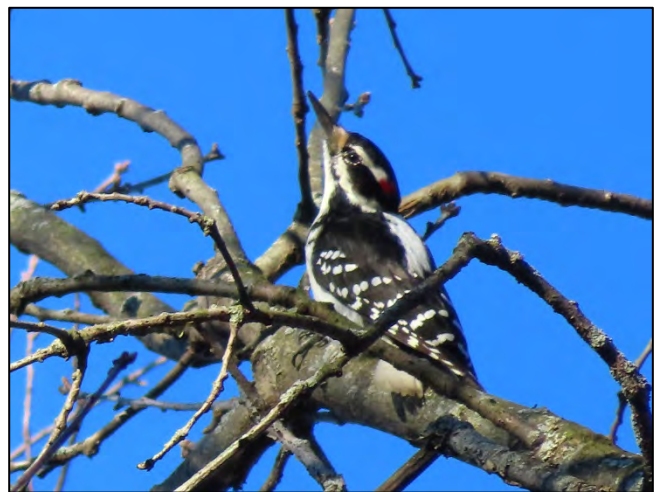
The number of bird species in the Preserve in February are really reduced compared to fall and early winter. The primary reason is that University Bay and Lake Mendota are finally frozen over, so all the waterfowl like ducks, geese, loons, swans and bald eagles are mostly gone. You can still see a flock of **Canada Geese** flyover and even land on the ice, but they don't stay long. What is there for them to eat? Instead, they have been replaced by ice fishermen who are trying to catch all the fish that the diving ducks, loons and eagles missed! There may be a bit of open water in Willow Creek, that enters the southwest corner of University Bay, which may contain a few **Mallards**. Open water is now found only in flowing rivers like the Yahara River or associated with springs, like the ones around Lake Wingra, which continuously supply water at constant temperatures of 50 to 55 degrees and prevent the water from freezing.

So what birds are found in the Preserve during February? First, there are the birds that are there all year round. These include common birds like several **woodpeckers**, and the **Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, American Crow, Northern Cardinal** and **Blue Jay**.

The **woodpeckers** include the **Downy Woodpecker, Hairy Woodpecker, Red-bellied Woodpecker** and **Pileated Woodpecker**. Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and Northern Flickers migrate south but there still might be one of each that stays for the winter. Red-headed Woodpeckers are usually not seen in the Preserve in winter. **Downy** and **Hairy Woodpeckers** look very similar. If they could be seen side by side, it's easier to distinguish the two. The Hairy is slightly larger than the Downy. That seldom occurs so the other way to tell them apart is by the differences in bill length. It takes two Downy bill lengths to measure its head from front to back. In the Hairy it takes one or slightly more than one bill length to measure its head from front to back. In both species the males have a red patch on the back of their heads while the females have no red. The **Red-bellied Woodpecker** is larger than the Downy and but similar in size to the Hairy. The red belly is subtle and is simply a reddish wash. The male has a red nape (back of neck) and red crown extending to the base of the beak whereas the female has is similar but the red crown stops at the caudal part of the head with gray extending to the base of the beak. Some people mistakenly identify the Red-bellied Woodpecker as **Red-headed Woodpeckers**. The latter have totally red heads.



Downy Woodpecker



Hairy Woodpecker



Red-bellied Woodpecker



Red-headed Woodpecker

The **Pileated Woodpecker** is much larger than all the other woodpeckers and is unmistakable in its plumage. It has a bright red crest, a black-striped white face and a mostly black body with white wing linings.



Pileated Woodpecker



Pileated Woodpecker

The **Black-capped Chickadee** is a small, very active, black and white bird. The **White-breasted Nuthatch** is primarily white below and gray with some black above. It's easily distinguished by its ability to climb all over branches and trunks.



Black-capped Chickadee



White-breasted Nuthatch

The **Northern Cardinals** are especially colorful this time of year because of their colors against the white snow. They are a classic example of sexual dimorphism where the male is one color pattern and the female a distinctly different color pattern. The males have a bright red body and crested head. They also have a black mask and chin. The females are brownish gray with grayish red wings and tail. The beak in both sexes is red. The Northern Cardinals have been singing for about three weeks now. It's always great to hear them start singing again. Spring can't be too far away.



A single male Northern Cardinal



2 male and 2 female Northern Cardinals

Blue Jays and **American Crows** are best known for making a lot of noise especially when chasing hawks and owls. The Blue Jays actually can make several sounds and can imitate the call of a Red-tailed Hawk almost perfectly. They are mostly blue with accents of white and some black. They also have a crest. American Crows are large birds that are all black. Besides the common caw they can make a variety of other sounds.



Blue Jay



American Crow

There's another group of birds that only come to this area in the winter. Examples are the **Dark-eyed Junco**, the **American Tree Sparrow**, the **Pine Siskin**, the **Red Crossbill** and the **White-winged Crossbill**. The Dark-eyed Juncos and the American Tree Sparrows always come in the winter, whereas the other three may or may not come depending on food sources way up north. Ample food up north keeps them in the north, while short supplies drive them south. This year the Pine Siskins and the Crossbills are in Dane County and may be in the Preserve on occasion, too. Last year they did not come down here.

The American Tree Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco and Pine Siskins are often found in and around the Eagle Heights Community Gardens. They are illustrated in the following three photos:



American Tree Sparrow



Dark-eyed Junco

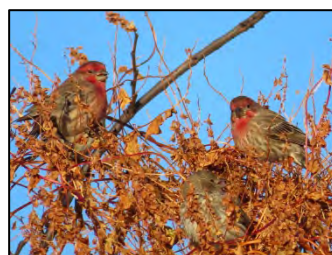


Pine Siskins

Other small birds that are found in and around the Eagle Heights Community Gardens include the **House Sparrow**, **House Finch**, **American Goldfinch**, **White-throated Sparrow** and **Tufted Titmouse**. A couple large birds also frequent that area. The **Red-tailed Hawks** love the gardens because of all the small rodents, like meadow voles, that are numerous in the gardens and great for hawk diets. The **Wild Turkeys**, the largest of all, often walk over from student housing to browse on leftovers in the garden. Photos of these species are below.



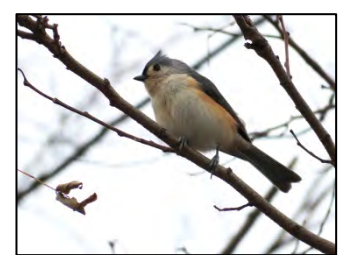
House Sparrow



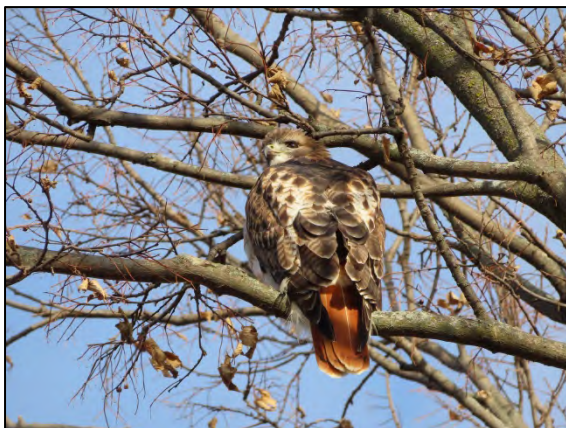
House Finch



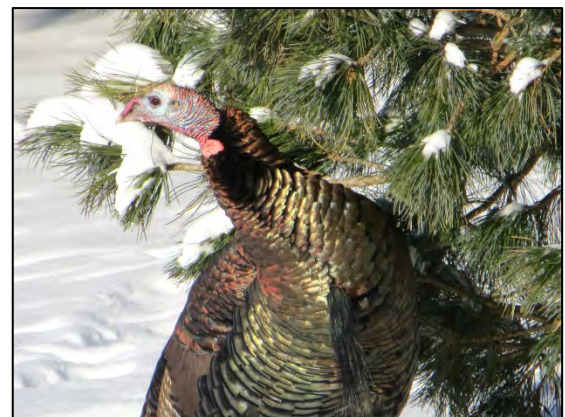
White-throated Sparrow



Tufted Titmouse



Red-tailed Hawk



Wild Turkey

The last bird to present is the **Barred Owl**. Normally there are both Barred Owls and **Great Horned Owls** in the Preserve. Since the first of January 2021, there have been no Great Horned Owls reported in eBird from the Preserve. There are reports of them in adjacent areas, like Shorewood Hills, so they are nearby. They may also show up in the Preserve in the near future. On the other hand, there have been sightings of one or two Barred Owls in the Preserve since January 1, 2021. I saw what might have been two on January 29, 2021. One was perched in a tree by the old metal, six-foot tall cylinder at the top of the hill up the road from the stone gate entrance. Later I saw another Barred Owl perched inside a large hollow space in a tree out near the tip of Picnic Point. That tree is located between the center path and the south path on the Point. It is not a nest cavity but the Barred Owl seems to like to perch there occasionally. The opening of the cavity faces approximately west. The following photos show the tree, the large opening and the Barred Owl.



This is not a complete list of all the birds one might find in the Preserve, but it includes many that might be found there this time of year. My recent walks there have been disappointing in numbers of species seen, when I have seen 10 species or fewer. The cold weather and snow may have kept the numbers low. Another factor might be that the birds may be out in local neighborhoods where bird food is presented buffet style at feeders, so why go to the Preserve to hunt for small bits of food when there is an abundant supply at feeders.

Even though the birds may not be plentiful, a nice walk in nature at the UW Lakeshore Nature Preserve is always good for your health and your spirit too.

Good birding to all of you and good wishes too,

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