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High Species Count at Annual Sarpy County Spring Bird Count

by Clem Klaphake

On May 14, 2011, participants in the Annual Sarpy County Spring Bird Count tallied 174 species, besting the previous high count of 143 (in 2006 and 2010) by 31 species. There were a few more counters this year than in most previous years, but it was just a good year for many families of birds. There were 28 warbler species seen (previous high was 23 in 2008). Also found were 4 terns, 9 flycatchers, 7 woodpeckers, 12 ducks, 14 shorebirds and 3 grebes.

There are often unusual species that show up on the count, as illustrated by a Eurasian Wigeon this year. Previous examples include Yellow-breasted Chat in 2003, Black-headed Grosbeak in 2004, Western Sandpiper in 2005, Connecticut Warbler in 2007, Eastern Whip-poor-will in 2008, Red-necked Phalarope and two American Bitterns in 2009, and American Avocet, Osprey, Buff-breasted Sandpipers and American Golden-Plover in 2010.

The Annual Sarpy County Spring Count has been around since 1967 but has undergone changes to its boundaries and methodology. From 1967 to 1981 only species were counted, and the count took place within the Omaha Christmas Bird Count circle, which includes parts of Pottawattamie and Mills Counties in Iowa and Douglas, Sarpy and Cass Counties in Nebraska. Between 1982 and 1986 no counts were held. From 1987 to 1992, the Omaha CBC circle was again used as the boundary for the count, but numbers of individual birds were recorded in addition to the number of species.

From 1993 to 1997 the North American Migration Count (NAMC), an organization endorsed by the National Audubon Society, collected spring count species data by county from across the United States. After the demise of the NAMC, Betty Grenon kept the Sarpy County Count going from 1998 to 2002, and in 2003 Clem Klaphake took it over, counting species only.

Since Sarpy County has the least area of any county in the state and is one of the most populous and fastest growing counties, some might wonder why the number of spring bird species is so high. One major reason is that the county is in the Missouri and Platte River valley migration corridors. It is bounded on three sides by rivers: the Elkhorn joins the Platte in the extreme northwestern part of the county, and the Platte forms the western and southern boundaries. The Missouri forms the eastern boundary and is joined by the Platte in the southeast corner of the county. A second reason is that there are three small man-made reservoirs with some wooded areas surrounding them: Walnut Creek Lake, Offutt Base Lake and Wehrspann Lake. A third reason is that there are three large preserved wooded uplands that also have some wooded floodplains in the county: Fontenelle Forest, Schramm SRA, and Swanson Park. Finally, there are a few wetland areas that can produce shorebirds, waterfowl, and other water birds in some years: LaPlatte Bottoms, Linoma Beach and several unnamed sandpits in the western part of the county.