



BENJAMIN F. GOSS BIRD CLUB

THE GOSS HAWK

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A Moment from the Archives w/ Jennifer Tyskiewicz

An Oologist in Our Midst

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The Benjamin F. Goss Bird Club was founded to increase knowledge and appreciation of birds through education, research, preservation and conservation, and to provide public awareness of birds and their role in the environment - all of which remains our goal and purpose to this day.

Unless otherwise noted, events are held at Retzer Nature Center, located about 4 miles west of Waukesha, near the end of Madison Street.

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"I do not know whether I have twenty days or twenty years ahead of me. Whatever time I may have, I wish to accomplish something definite. ... This 'one thing' for me is obviously game protection."

- Aldo Leopold

(Leopold ultimately broadened his focus from just game to all of nature, creating his legendary 'land ethic', which inspired the modern conservation movement.)

Birders today are often appalled when thinking back to the early days of ornithology, when naturalists wanted to obtain a specimen of every avian species by using a shotgun.

Similarly, collectors of bird eggs, back-in-the-day, invaded all sorts of bird nests, extracting examples of common and rare eggs.

It all sounds rather barbaric to our much more heightened environmental awareness today. Thanks to the Migratory Bird Act of 1918 and its subsequent amendments, possession of bird skins, bird eggs, and in some cases the feathers of certain birds, is prohibited except by permit for research purposes.

This article is not meant to debate the "right or wrong" concerning the collection processes of the past. Though it is not what we would or could do in today's

world, it can't be denied that collections of bird skins and eggs, thousands of which are now housed in museums, have undoubtedly added to our knowledge and appreciation of birds.

In fact, a recent example of how such a collection was used for research was outlined by Greg Septon in his presentation at last month's meeting. He had tested for chemicals in Peregrine Falcon eggs from the early 1900s to compare them with chemicals found in Peregrine Falcon eggs today, in order to determine if the falcons are picking up unhealthy chemicals from our present environment.

The reason for my posturing in this way is because our bird club is closely associated with an oologist (oh-ah-lo-gist: one who studies or collects eggs).

Benjamin Franklin Goss (1823 - 1893) of Pewaukee, Wisconsin, was considered the second best authority and collector of bird eggs during his time and for many years to

come. Only Captain C.E. Bendire, an Honorary Curator of the U.S. National Museum (now the Smithsonian), was considered more of an authority, with his collection of 8,000 bird eggs.

B.F. Goss became an Honorary Curator of the Milwaukee Public Museum in the 1880s with his donation of just over 3,000 eggs, representing 720 species, to that museum's collection.

B. F. Goss had a varied military, work, and farming career, and political life, but didn't fully concentrate on egg collecting until in his 50s.

As boys, he and his younger brother Nathaniel were noted in Pewaukee as having "an ardent love of nature." Mary Stewart of Pewaukee, who knew the boys, wrote that they did not "possess personal beauty," nor were they notable for "unusual intellect," but that they had "clear eyes and a frank, open expression," and possessed "certain traits of character

that showed a difference between them and many of the rustic youths of the neighborhood."

At the time that Goss started his serious egg collecting, he was running a general store in Pewaukee in conjunction with a Mr. Henry Culver. However, Benjamin was gone so much during the nesting season that Mr. Culver was almost solely in charge. (Is that where Culver's came from? Did he have chicken tenders at his store?).

It was alluded to in research that Goss had quite a business acumen, and that he could have "left more than a modest estate if he had not found egg collecting to be such an absorbing interest."

The *Pewaukee Standard* of June 26, 1879 stated, "Mr. B.F. Goss returned last Wednesday from his extended tour of Kansas, Nebraska, and Colorado." The entry went on to say that he usually took several boys with him to climb the trees and lower the eggs.

Nathaniel Goss, Ben's younger brother, resided in Kansas and **(continued on pg. 4 "Oologist")**



Benjamin Franklin Goss in Civil War uniform ca. 1863 at age 40.

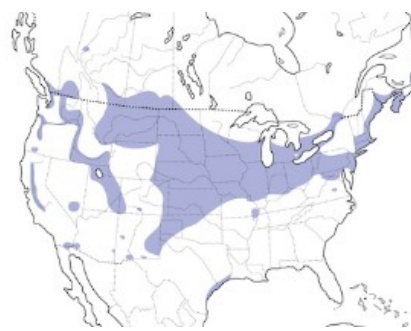
Species Spotlight:

Ring-necked Pheasant

If you think that the Ring-necked Pheasant looks “other worldly”, you’re not wrong. Before the 1880s, pheasants were not present on the North American landscape. Originally from central and eastern Asia, Ring-necked Pheasants were first introduced in America by people who had settled in the Willamette Valley in Oregon. Since then they have been released elsewhere, and remain on the landscape as local breeders in places they have been released as game birds.

The discontinuous distribution visible in the range map of the pheasant is indicative of its use as a released game bird. There are no shortage of pheasant rearing farms that breed pheasants to be released into the wild for hunting. This even occurs on state-owned land in Wisconsin such as Paradise Valley SWA. Once released, pheasants stick to grassland or shrub habitat near agricultural land.

Pheasants that survive in the wild do find plenty of hospitable land and can survive through the winter to breed. They generally stick to grassy and shrubby habitat near agriculture. Since many farm-bred pheasants are on the local landscape, when one is seen in the wild, it is difficult to know the provenance of the bird, especially when found in the vicinity of a game farm.



Pheasants practice a breeding strategy called harem-defense polygyny, in which a single male will court and keep several female mates throughout the breeding season. They can begin nesting early in spring due to their size, and will begin laying eggs as early as mid-March. The typical clutch size is 7 to 15 eggs and when they hatch, pheasant chicks are precocial, meaning they can see and have strong legs, and they leave the nest as soon as their feathers are dry to follow their mother around in search of food.

Female pheasants' plumage is a scaly brown that blends in with the foliage and terrain. As with most birds, this allows them to stay camouflaged while on the nest incubating eggs and guiding their chicks around after hatching. Males on the other hand have one of the most gaudy plumages of any bird in North America. Remember, they are from central Asia, and this plumage fits in more with other Asian avifauna. When flushed, a male can be recognized out of the corner of your eye by the streak of red flying past, just over the grass as it makes its way noisily to a better hiding spot. The long, wispy tail distinguishes it from other grouse-like birds in Wisconsin, and its copper body and white neck ring make it easily distinguished from the much larger and darker Wild Turkey, which may also flush.

Male pheasants may harass other ground nesting birds such as the Gray Partridge (another Eurasian import) and the Greater Prairie-Chicken, a state-listed threatened species in Wisconsin. Female pheasants may lay their eggs in the nests of these and other ground nesters. Parasitism victims can include various ducks, rails, turkey, and shorebirds such as American Woodcock. Self-species-identification isn't a problem for other egg-dumpers such as the parasitic Brown-headed Cowbird or Wood Ducks who make a practice of laying eggs in Hooded Merganser nests. Pheasants meanwhile seem to have problems figuring this out, which could explain why male Ring-necked Pheasants have been seen courting female prairie-chickens on occasion.

The preservation of land for pheasants is a significant source of funding for land management. Pheasants Forever and similar organizations contribute substantial amounts of money to preserve grass and shrubland as habitat for pheasants. As a result, many other species that thrive in the same habitats as pheasants also benefit from the money spent to purchase and maintain land. Eastern Meadowlarks, Upland Sandpiper, Northern Harrier, and Short-eared Owl are just a few species that cohabitate with pheasants.

The Atlas Saved My Birding Life

by Tim Hahn



Every experienced birder has been a beginner birder at some point. It's only for a brief while, but those days are some of the most memorable in this pursuit we call a "hobby". But at some point, many of us reach a plateau where pretty much every bird we see is a repeat. We start new "year lists" to give us that fresh feeling of checking birds off our list, but these pursuits can become stale. One could easily become a stagnant birder, getting distracted by other non-avian pursuits such as brewing beer, bowling, or watching baseball. Unless there is another trigger to re-ignite that birding flame within us, we can quickly become a migration-only birder.

By the summer of 2014, I had become the standard non-summer-birder. Each year was a new checklist, and migration was always a thrill. Jaegerfest was (and still is) always a highlight, and Christmas Bird Counts are always fun. But that large stretch of time between Memorial and Labor Days, I rarely logged a checklist. Birding, I dare say, became a secondary "hobby" to me rather than a life's pursuit.

The trigger that brought me back was the Wisconsin Breeding Bird Atlas, and I dare say it saved my "birding life". As a county coordinator, I had various duties recruiting and training surveyors, and reviewing and verifying that the data was sound. And I gained valuable experience from all of it. I was also responsible for my own surveys. Each block presented a new opportunity for a new checklist. And the achievement of confirming breeding evidence resulted in many fist pumps, high fives and even one jump kick when Red Crossbills were confirmed in the Kettle Moraine.

But the most fun part of the atlas was getting to know the people involved with the project. We all had a shared passion for birds, so it was easy to connect on that level. But we were all so different in almost every way possible.

In the second year of WBBA II, four recent grads from UW Madison joined our team. They weren't the most avid birders, but they knew the basics and soaked up knowledge as fast as you could give it to them. Maia, Amanda, Katie and Kyle covered four blocks and made a big contribution to the atlas.

A special birding blitz event allowed me to spend a few days in Wood and Jackson Counties birding in remote areas of the state. A birder named Tom Reed seemed extra energetic and adventurous. He was living in the area for the summer at his girlfriend's family cabin and decided to help out. We swapped stories around the campfire and became fast friends. Months later, I learned that Tom was count coordinator for Cape May Birding Observatory, and is now editor of the *North American Birds* journal published by the American Birding Association. How cool is that!?!

Thanks to great work by our surveyors, Waukesha was the first county in the state to be completed. And as a reward, Ryan and Nick (also new friends) at Atlas Headquarters sent me to the remote area of Marinette County. With its small population and expansive area (38 blocks compared to 15 in Waukesha) it was a major challenge. But along with Dale, Joan, Jack, Travis, and the great Kay Kavanagh, we'll have no problem finishing by the end of 2019.

As we near the end of the atlas project, I face significant free time in the coming summers. I could take a sabbatical from purposeful birding to enjoy other pursuits. But this experience has been so fulfilling that I actually find myself looking forward to participating in similar endeavors. This spring the Waukesha County Parks kicks off a multi-year program called Conservation in the Parks that sounds like a ton of fun. Not only can we use our birding acumen for conducting bird surveys, but there will also be opportunity to look for plants and animals of all varieties including bats and

other mammals, bumble bees and other pollinators, herps, wildflowers, and dragonflies. I can't wait to start getting dirty and learning about nature in ways most amateurs never get to!

I encourage everyone to get involved in the local parks program and similar endeavors. Or if you're not into the group thing, contribute to science in other ways. Enter your bird sightings into eBird.

We can shake our fists all we want at developers and policy makers who continue to reduce habitat for our feathered and furry friends, but unless we actually do something nothing will ever change. Policy is driven by data, and the only way to get data is through observation. But observations don't just show up in the records. They are collected by people trekking into the field, using their skills to collect observations that, when pooled together amount to data. And the data tells a story which can influence policy.

We call the birds our "feathered friends" and in life we generally take care of our friends. You may wonder what we can do because no one will listen. Go birding! And while you're birding, note the things you see and record them. Add them to the public record through eBird and similar portals such as iNaturalist. Participate in programs like Conservation in the Parks. Join the WBBA II. I guarantee you'll have fun, and you may even make some new friends. New opportunities are always popping up, and I encourage you to take advantage of as many as you can.

I did and it changed my life.

If you're looking for ways to contribute, feel free to email me at tahnbirder@gmail.com. Anyone with any skill level can contribute to citizen science. ANYONE! Being in the field, hanging with the birds and birders is the best way to improve your skills as a birder/naturalist. And if you're interested in the Waukesha County Parks program, visit this link:

<https://www.waukeshacounty.gov/landandparks/park-system/ConservationintheParks>

Owl Prowl Report

Spence Stehno

Thanks to the hearty souls that came out for owl searching Saturday evening. And thanks to Tim for organizing and adjusting everything to make it work. The road to Paradise Valley road was an ice rink, so the location changed to Scuppernong Ski Trails and then after that over to Scuppernong Springs.

We were very surprised while hiking partially into the Scuppernong woods, that after dusk, 25 to 30 men, women, and dog joggers running the icy trails were going past us, some with crampons, and others just in running shoes, and headlamps. I suspect we appeared as illogical to them as they appeared to us. "Walking" the path was difficult enough let alone imagining running on the uneven frozen ice.

We were fortunate to here a Barred Owl call "hooaaahhhh" once. And then we were entertained by the sound of a truck backing up by the tooting call of a Saw-whet owl, apparently oblivious to us or the joggers.

Over at the parking lot for Scuppernong Springs, two screech owls were heard, both whinnying and doing that warbling trill sound at different pitches.

So it was a good night even though we did not get to watch for Short-eared owls or hear a Great Horned Owl because they may be quietly sitting on nests at this time.

("Oologist" cont.) shared Ben's love of egg collecting, with his collection being donated to museums in Kansas upon his death. It was said that there was "remarkable devotion" between the brothers, and that most of their extensive field trips were made together.

The brothers are said to have traveled "nearly all of North America, including Mexico and parts of Cuba." A collecting trip to the Gulf of Mexico was particularly successful, as there seemed to be a question as to if a certain waterfowl (not identified in the description), actually nested in a particular area. B.F. Goss believed it did but had no sighting or physical evidence to prove it. He spent weeks in a small canoe searching for the nests.

Suddenly one morning, large flocks of this bird flew over his tent, and he was soon able to locate acres of nests so close to one another on the ground, that he could barely walk between them.

The work of preparing the eggs was described as being very tedious and difficult. Only a small perforation could be made on either end of the egg through which to blow out the contents. Goss gathered 20 egg specimens from this waterfowl, and it was said that the "cords and muscles of his neck became swollen and painful," from the process of blowing through the eggs.

Nathaniel Goss later wrote a book entitled, *History of the Birds of Kansas* and dedicated it to his brother by writing, "To my brother, B.F. Goss, with whom I've spent many, many pleasant hours in the field, this work is affectionately inscribed."

When Goss collected in Wisconsin, it was mostly done in Pewaukee and Horicon. However, B.F. Goss's last collecting outing, even as his health was failing about a year before his death, was to Oconto County in 1892. He explored the woods and swamps and found the eggs of the Arctic Three-toed Woodpecker, Red Crossbill, White-throated Sparrow, Blue-headed Vireo and Winter Wren.

Goss's one disappointment was that he was unable to find the nests/eggs of the Carolina Parakeet that he searched extensively for in Florida in 1891.

When Benjamin's egg collection was presented to the Milwaukee Public Museum, it was valued at \$10,000. Eggs considered the rarest were the Passenger Pigeon, valued at \$100 and collected in Pewaukee on June 3, 1873, and the eggs of the Lucifer's Hummingbird, the Xanthus Hummingbird, and the Mexican Chickadee all considered so rare that no price was ventured.

Ivory-billed Woodpecker eggs were also valued at \$100.00, with a value of \$45.00 given to Whooping Crane eggs, and \$25.00 for eggs of the White-tailed Kite. Whereas eggs of the Aleutian Tern and Canadian Pine Grosbeak were only valued at \$15.00.

Benjamin Goss's entire egg collection was washed with soap and water in 1937 by a Mr. Marvin Adams of the Milwaukee Public Museum. It was noted that not one egg was lost during this process.

However, there is still the mystery of what happened to the egg of the California Condor, which was originally said to be part of the collection, but was no longer there when our club inquired about it in the early 2000s!

Our namesake's egg collection is still at the Milwaukee Public Museum but is not part of the collection that is ever on display for the public to see. It is kept in drawers "behind the scenes," and special arrangements must be made to view it.



Goss Family home, torn down in the 1960s.