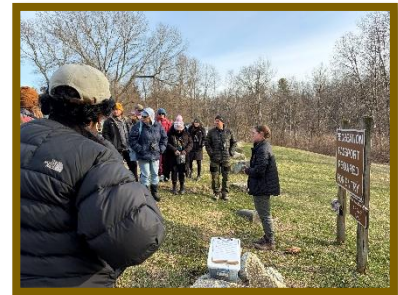


Seeking Signs of Spring at Bald Mountain

The Oakland Bird Alliance joined with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources for a special evening hike at Bald Mountain Recreation on March 28 in search of signs of spring. Bald Mountain Recreation Area is composed of three separate tracts of land near Lake Orion which encompasses 4,637 acres of woodlands, wetlands, lakes, fields, and streams. The park has an extensive multiuse trail system. It is said to be one of the most rugged terrains in southeast Michigan.

Oakland Owlets' families and friends were greeted in the by Jessica Ableson, DNR Naturalist and Kathleen Dougherty, OBA Young Birders' Club Coordinator. It was a cool, but pleasant evening with sunshine and blue skies. Being early in Spring mosquitoes were not a problem.



Once everyone arrived, the group ventured to the edge of Heart Lake to search for waterfowl. We could hear Canada Geese honking but also saw a small group of diving ducks across the lake consisting of both male and female Ring-necked Ducks. The group continued onto the trail around the lake.



In the shrubbery near the lake, a group of Black-capped Chickadees moved about the branches calling while a nearby Mourning Dove cooed. Crossing a waterway along the trail on a boardwalk, we heard the call of Wood Ducks as they took flight and watched two Mallards swimming in the wetland.

From this low point we ascended uphill into a forest. Throughout the forest, small wetlands known as **Vernal Ponds** were loud with the calls of Michigan Frogs including the Western Chorus Frog, Northern Spring Peeper, and **Wood Frog**. These small frogs breed in Vernal Ponds in early spring. These wetlands do not support fish which are predators of tadpoles and small frogs. Each frog species' call is unique, and their songs are a sure sign of spring. We paused a few times to listen to the sounds at the Vernal Ponds.



The group eventually reached one of the highest points along the trail. Looking north through the leafless trees, a string of small lakes could be seen. In the distance, we heard the ancient calls of Sandhill Cranes and the ever-present honking of Canada Geese. There are seventeen inland undeveloped lakes at Bald Mountain that provide rich wetland habitats for birds.



The sun was setting as we hiked and the quality of light changed. The group stopped for a photo near the half point of the hike. Along the woodland trail, we heard and saw our logo bird, the White-breasted Nuthatch, and the Downy Woodpecker. Jessica explained that it is common to see Pileated Woodpeckers, however the group was not lucky enough to encounter this bird. Pileated Woodpeckers need large, forested areas with dead trees for their habitat.

As the sun was setting, we encountered a Barred Owl. The people in front saw the bird first as it flew into another tree. However, it stayed in one place, and everyone was able to see this owl. Barred Owls live in large, mature, and mixed forests that are near wetlands. Barred Owls have brown and white feathers. Their dark brown eyes are striking, but overall, they are perfectly camouflaged in the forest. Everyone stopped and watched the owl at a distance until it flew away. Everyone stopped talking after this experience.



As the light was dimming, it became harder to see details in the distance. However, a few birders stopped to see some new birds including an Eastern Bluebird and a Wild Turkey that flew into a tree to roost for the night.

Back in the parking lot Jessica provided MDNR posters to everyone. Several people left but a few participants stayed to enjoy the Sky Dance of the American Woodcock. Across the road an open field provided a dance floor for this bird to display. As the light, dimmed to almost dark, male Woodcocks started their romantic displays. Several Woodcocks flew overhead. The group listened to the different sounds of the Sky Dance from the nasally peents as the bird strutted on the ground, then the twittering whoosh as the birds jett upwards to almost 300



feet in a widening circle and finally stopping to drift downward like a falling leaf in the wind back to the ground making musical chortling calls..

Everyone thanked Jessica for the posters and co-hosting this walk. Although, the birding checklist was not long, everyone went home dreaming of Barred Owls and the American Woodcocks. An eBird checklist is available for this hike from Kathleen.



Photo credits: Kathleen Dougherty, Scott Gibson- Maccauley Library, Patrick Morgan

