Saratoga Lake Wildlife Guide - Birds

- The Saratoga Lake watershed possesses abundant natural resources for all forms of life to flourish. Within the lake itself, there are submerged wetlands (think of the aquatic vegetation as a forest) and wetlands around the lake that perform significant ecosystem functions; these range from improving water quality throughout the watershed, to hosting critical habitat for Saratoga Lake and its shoreline environments, which are home to a variety of wildlife. Other natural plots surrounding the body of water are composed of scrublands with shrubby vegetation, open agricultural lands and unique woodlands. Between fishing, birding, insect catching/releasing and more, all members of the recreating public can safely admire and explore the species that spark their interest the most, at whichever distance they please.
- All information has been compiled from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "All About Birds," "Birds of the World," and "eBird" websites, as well as "Birds of North America – Eastern Region" (American Museum of Natural History, 2021).
- All pictures are sourced from local eBird and iNaturalist observations, as well as New York-based sources and national conservation organizations.

KEY:

- **Year-round resident**
- **Breeding season resident**
- **Nonbreeding season resident**
- **Migrating resident**

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Snow Goose



Hunting for this bird in the eastern portion of the continent was ceased in 1916 due to low population numbers, but resumed in 1975 once they had recovered; snow geese are now one of the most abundant waterfowl in North America, and their emphatic bounce back has come at the expense of some patches of tundra nesting land. The white form possesses elegant light feathers contrasted by dark underwing patches, pink legs, and a long bill of similar color with a black patch. An annual brood yields two to six precocial (rather advanced upon hatching) chicks, who can travel up to 50 miles by foot in their first three weeks of life; they are adept at running away from predators at an early age, and can communicate threats to the flock as adults, initiating evasive action while foraging for aquatic and terrestrial vegetation. The snow goose's travel by air is just as impressive; our region lies close to populations of snow geese that winter along the central Atlantic coast and breed throughout the High Arctic.

The snow goose's dark underwing feathers are best seen when they take to the sky for direct and strong flight (unknown date: photo from New York State Parks)

Brant



Some years, like 2017 and 2020 according to eBird, bring stocky, small-billed geese called brants to the waters of Saratoga Lake, while en route to their wintering grounds along the northern Atlantic coast. Having made their way from the shores of the High Arctic, they refuel voraciously on eelgrass and green algae patches. Individuals of eastern populations rock an incomplete white collar high up on their black neck, with an all-black head as well; pale underparts with lightly barred flanks transition into a white rump. When in flight, brants travel at high speeds with low altitudes, and create irregular formations when in flocks.

More timid than the similar-looking Canada goose, brant geese numbers are declining because of habitat being lost to more aggressive waterfowl (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Canada Goose

For a variety of reasons (including their quantity, springtime aggression, and what seems like an unrelenting appetite for vegetation), the Canada goose has established itself as perhaps the most notorious waterfowl of the region. They are easily recognizable through their large brown/gray bodies, white undertail feathers, a black head and neck, and a white chinstrap. Breeding adults are monogamous, and each pair yields 12-2 eggs per clutch. Once the chicks have outgrown their initial gold coloration, the adults can sometimes be seen in one flock along the shoreline, offering diving and swimming lessons to the collective youth.



Canada geese and their chicks forage along the shoreline of the Saratoga Lake State Boat Launch

(2024/26/5: photo by SLPID Lake Steward team)

Tundra Swan

Tundra swans were first described by Lewis and Clark as “whistling swans” on their trademark adventure, with the original name stemming from a sound produced by their flapping wings. That name is still in use today to describe the North American subspecies, separate from the Eurasian subspecies (Bewick’s swan) that boasts a bright yellow bill patch. Individuals are intent defenders against intraspecies arrogance and predation from many different organisms; in the wintertime, they tend to flock, but that was not the case in the winter of 2023-2022. Two juvenile tundra swans, with their dull gray heads and undefined pink bills, traversed and slept upon the icy waters of Saratoga Lake together for a short period, growing into their clean white plumage and dark bill during their stay.



A pair of juvenile tundra swans wade through the western waters of Saratoga Lake
(2022/29/11: photo by Jeffrey Nadler, via eBird)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Wood Duck

One of the most alluring waterfowl species; males possess a dark green to black helmet-shaped head with complex white facial markings, red eyes, and a white-flecked maroon breast amongst a flurry of other identifying features. While the females aren't as flashy, they share a blue wing patch with the males, and display a light tear-shaped eye ring to go with their brown and white spotted breast. As cavity nesters with a shy nature, they inhabit mature swampy forestland, but also frequent nest boxes around lake shorelines where they can dabble for seeds, fruit, and insects. This duck species is the only in North America to yield two broods per year, each containing 13-10 eggs.



A stunning male wood duck peers out towards the water (unknown date: photo from Finger Lakes Land Trust)

Blue-winged Teal

Brilliantly patterned; while females initially appear a mottled brown and gray all over, closer inspection of their head reveals a dark eye line that cuts through a white eye ring, paired with a bill spotted pale at the base. Males are a warmer brown overall, with tan flanks, a long black bill, and a distinctive white facial crescent. In flight, both sexes exhibit the light blue underwing feathers for which they are named. To observe and document a blue-winged teal on Saratoga Lake would be a momentous occasion, for it would be a first on this specific waterbody (according to eBird and iNaturalist) despite county-wide sightings and its range encompassing all of New York. One of the shortest breeding seasons among duck species, combined with seclusion within and around wetland habitat, contribute to the rarity of a potential sighting. Listen for females projecting evenly spaced quacks and males bleating nasally, both at high volumes.



A male blue-winged teal, with disheveled wings folded back, makes its way across rocky waters (unknown date: photo from Buffalo Ornithological Society)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Northern Shoveler



A finely specialized species of duck by way of their advanced mouth parts; northern shovelers are identifiable through a long spatula-shaped bill, dusky in females and dark in males. With a length of approximately 2.5 inches in adult individuals, 110 lamellae (fine projections) are capable of providing nutrition through the filtering of aquatic invertebrates, minute crustaceans, and seeds. When dabbling underwater with their rumps in the air, females will have light colored feathers while males will have mostly dark feathers. Their occurrence on Saratoga Lake is rare, but they have been observed on the open waters before. Within their two bodily extremes, brown feathers of varying shades and a dark narrow eye line adorn the females, whereas males exhibit magnificent contrasting plumages of chestnut underparts, a white belly, dark teal head feathers, and bright yellow eyes.

Pairs of northern shovelers, male on left and female on right, remain monogamous longer than any other dabbling duck species (unknown date: photo by John Van Niel, via the Finger Lake Times)

Gadwall



Gadwalls are the pirates of the duck world; when they're not dabbling for aquatic invertebrates and vegetation, they are snatching fish away from diving birds that resurface, such as the American coot. Females look similar to mallards of the same sex, but with less mass, a white wing patch next to a scalloped brown back, and a darker eye stripe. Males have been described as somber yet elegant; a brown rounded head with a black bill sits atop a finely patterned gray breast, which blends into flanks that have even finer patterns. Some brown on the back leads to its black upper tail, contrasted well by its white belly and sunny legs. Upland and wetland conservation has assisted this species in securing its population indefinitely; a preference for nesting on islands within marshes keeps individuals even more safe. Once their annual brood of 12-7 eggs (laid at a rate of one per day) becomes chicks, females lead the fresh ducklings to an alternate brood-rearing location for cover and nourishment. These mother ducks quack nasally at her offspring, while males produce much deeper pitched, buzzy "meep" calls.

Though females are a typical mottled brown duck, male gadwalls are intricately feathered, especially in their lower body (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

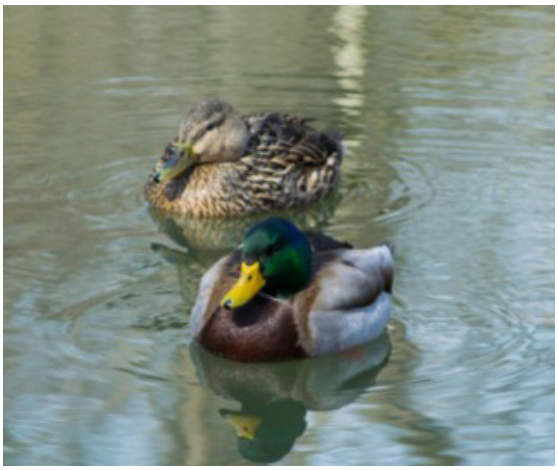
American Widgeon



While common and widespread, the collective American wigeon population is on the decline; flocks in recent years mixed with other species more frequently. To remedy this, most individuals have become opportunistic, using their black-tipped, goose-like bill to consume a higher proportion of plant matter (mostly algae, clover, grass and seeds) than any other dabbling duck. They are also known to loiter around other ducks and help themselves to adjacent food sources with crustaceans and insects during the breeding season. American wigeon males lay down the pizzazz, as per usual in duck species; a creamy forehead and crown borders a green band running from the eye to the nape. Pinkish brown flanks also contrast a black rump with a long pointed tail. Females, brown as per usual in duck species, are a warmer rufous color with a dark smudge around their eye and a narrow black line along their bill.

American wigeons (female on left, male on right) are capable of living for more than 20 years (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Mallard



A familiar duck to many, the mallard is the ancestor of most domestic ducks. The chicks are introduced to water soon after hatching by their mother, a mottled brown bird with a lighter head and neck, a black/orange bill, and a dark eye stripe and cap; the male sports an iridescent green head and a chestnut breast divided by a thin white collar, to complement its yellow bill and a curly, short black tail. Normally a strong flier, all individuals lose their blue and brown wing feathers to conclude the breeding season, leaving them flightless, secretive, and vulnerable until they inherit a more unrecognizable plumage one month later.

Mallards are strongly migratory, and can touch down almost anywhere in North America (unknown date: photo from Central Park Conservancy)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

American Black Duck

The American black duck is a dabbling waterbird very similar in appearance to the female mallard. While they do flock together, this species can be differentiated from the latter by their olive bills (more greenish yellow on males), dark brown sides, pale heads and dark outer tail feathers. Nests occur along depressions in wetter habitats, lined with plant matter; the newly hatched chicks consume invertebrates first, before a stark omnivorous shift towards vegetation, seeds and grains, fruit, fish, amphibians, insects, and more.



American black ducks, though not quite black, have the darkest plumage of any mallard-like duck in North America (2018/14/5: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Northern Pintail

Via a black, long, and pointed posterior (the longest of any freshwater duck), northern pintails are an easy waterfowl identification; tipping upward to feed upon aquatic weeds, flying rapidly through the air, or just swimming across open water showcases this flagship feature well. Even with a shorter length in females, it is still what best distinguishes them from other ducks, for they are dressed in mottled brown/gray feathers with a plain tan face. Males possess gray patterned sides similar to the gadwall (another migrating duck species), segmented off from a white breast; atop a long neck sits a chocolate brown head, holding a black bill with gray sides. These birds can be found closer to secluded wetlands on the waters, and in close proximity to different agricultural fields before wintering in the southern part of the continent. Northern pintails, much like the American wigeon, are on the decline despite being commonplace; droughts and overall habitat reduction are to blame for this.



Drought and habitat reduction, across breeding and nonbreeding grounds, have greatly impacted northern pintails

(unknown date: photo from Nature on the Edge of New York City)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Green-winged Teal



The green-winged teal's rather small migration range curves from the midwestern states up through the Appalachian Mountains, capped off by New York and some New England states. Inland marshes and agricultural fields are the places to find this bird, the smallest of North America's dabbling ducks, on its way to and from breeding grounds all over rivers in the north of the continent. The patch on their hindwings for which they are named act as a giveaway for female identification; green coloration from this patch (it will appear next to black with the wings extended in flight) is evident against buffy flanks and a dark brown body. The same goes for males, but they sport an array of distinguishing markings; a dark green ear patch against a rufous head, a small and narrow black bill, a creamy breast with black spots, a vertical white bar by their "shoulders," finely detailed flanks, and a light buffy undertail are among just a few.

Populations of green-winged teals are rising as a result of breeding further north than most prairie ducks (unknown date: photo from Edgar A. Mearns Bird Club)

Canvasback



Though they were most recently seen on Saratoga Lake in the spring of 2024, canvasbacks are a pesky duck to get a solid glimpse of. Not only are they flushed from locations easily, but they are also one of the fastest waterfowl. Individuals of both sexes are identifiable through their light bodies the color of canvas, hence their name; for males, this sits sandwiched between a black tail and a black breast, which holds a uniquely shaped chestnut head carrying a bright red eye and a long black bill. Females lack the dark tail, but are still dark in the breast, neck, and head, showing off pale tear drops around their black eyes. Populations of this bird fluctuate with various factors; for one, high dependence on aquatic vegetation (which declined in the mid20-th century) limited this species' numbers for a few decades. Canvasbacks are scientifically named after wild celery, their favorite meal, but just recently began shifting towards omnivorous diets containing snails and clams. Brood parasitism between itself, redheads and ruddy ducks also play a role in species quantity.

Legs set towards the end of the body give canvasbacks terrific swimming abilities (unknown date: photo from Wildlife in Nature)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Redhead



New York acts as the easternmost migration point for redhead ducks; populations that winter along the Atlantic coast and in the Caribbean breed (naturally and parasitically) both northward along the Saint Lawrence River, and westward in Lakes Erie and Ontario. Males have a densely patterned black-and-white body sandwiched between a black rump and lower neck. Their brick red head, with a piercing yellow eye and long slate bill (black at the tip), is capable of swinging fully backwards while its body remains motionless in a quirky courtship display. Unfortunately, the species' common name does not hold true for females, a varying brown all over with a dark crown. A nearly identical bill, however, allows both sexes to forage omnivorously throughout coastal lagoons and shallow wetlands; they do this deep into the night, and during the day you most likely won't see them do much more than float around.

The redhead species is the most parasitic amongst all ducks, particularly impacting canvasbacks and even other redheads (unknown date: photo from Birding Bob)

Ring-necked Duck



The ring-necked duck is named upon a feature that is barely perceptible, for it graces only males as a thin chestnut band against a black base; early biologists were drawn to this feature on dead organisms though, and ran with it from there. Other traits that could have served as a better species moniker include its rounded sides (buffy brown in females and a fine gray in males), its gray bill with a fashionable white stripe and black tip, and even its tall head noticeable in silhouette. Foraging exclusively in the water allows these strong birds to dabble, tip up, and dive for plant seeds, tubers, and aquatic invertebrates; within the dense marsh vegetation is where their floating nests can be found, in Canada south of the Arctic zone. Keep an eye out for massive flocks during fall migration season.

The unique bills of ring-necked ducks are apparent on both the female (foreground) and male (2018/17/4: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Greater Scaup



The greater scaup is categorized as a common bird in steep decline; human development and disturbance, subsequent habitat degradation, warmer Alaskan breeding waters, contaminants that include heavy metals, and hunting have all played a part. This duck moves within flocks, whether it's streaking through the air with agility or on the water's surface to prime itself for a dive. Congregations can reach large numbers, and can include the very similar lesser scaup; typically, the two different species will segregate themselves before splitting up by sex. Identifying between these two nearly identical birds will take practice, but fortunately there are a few key discrepancies. The two species' heads are colored the same on both males (black with green-purple gloss) and females (deep brown with a white bill patch), but the greater scaup's is more rounded, whereas the lesser scaup's is narrow with a bump at the rear; this trick works best if individuals remain motionless.

Greater scaups are tough to identify, but in the air, flocks shift and twist during prolonged flight (2019/16/4: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Lesser Scaup



A near carbon copy of the greater scaup, but far more abundant with 3.8 million estimated breeding individuals; with that being said, expect this bird to flock densely during fall migration season. The core of males are pale with dark wavy patterns, bookended by black, and propping up a head of the same color with green and/or purple gloss. Females, a rich brown with the exception of buffy sides, have a white patch at the base of their bill, next to an amber-colored eye. Immediately after their down feathers dry, hatchlings are in the water; they can't dive well at first due to their buoyancy, but are capable of reaching half-minute plunges up to 60 feet at six weeks old. Their diets are more herbivorous than the greater scaups, but still include aquatic critters such as leeches, mollusks, and other crustaceans.

A female lesser scaup (pictured) lays 11-8 eggs in an annual clutch, which can be far from water (unknown date: photo from NYC Bird Alliance)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

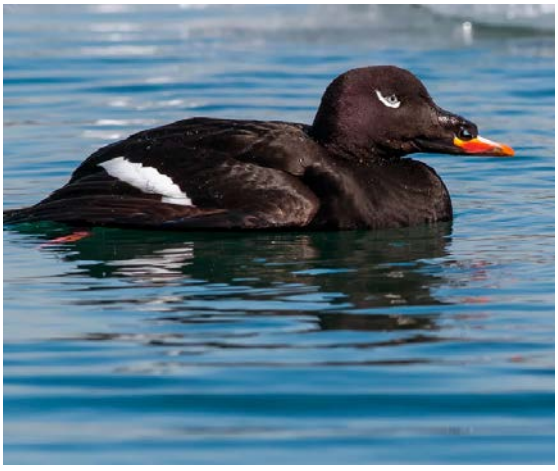
Surf Scoter



Surf scoters visited Saratoga Lake most recently in the fall of 2023 per eBird, with five individuals stopping by en route to their Atlantic wintering grounds. Both sexes can be recognized through an enlarged bill, all dark on the females and complex in males (a white base with a black spot, and orange towards the tip). Brown plumage on females is accentuated by light facial patches; on males, black bodies with long tail feathers are contrasted wonderfully by white in the forehead, nape, and eyes. When paired up or within flocks, don't be surprised if multiple ducks dive and resurface in synchronization; foraging together for mollusks and other aquatic invertebrates provides further protection from antagonism or predation.

Surf scoters are typically silent, but a male (pictured) can sound a variety of calls during courtship (unknown date: photo from The Linnaean Society of New York)

White-winged Scoter



The largest of the scoter ducks is the white-winged variety; the patch of color for which it's named is striking as these birds fly in large groupings. Closer up, an observer will be able to see that males, dark all over with brown sides, also possess white in upward curving streaks under their eyes. Both sexes have a knob at the base of their bill; females, an entirely dark brown bird, have feathers that extend over this feature, making it difficult to spot. Their surface dive is one to behold, as individuals leap forward and up before arching their neck and opening their wings; as they forage in the water's depths, holding their wings outstretched gives them propulsion and stability. Saratoga Lake could experience an increase in the frequency of white-winged scoters making a detour during migration season, as the invasive zebra mussel provides them with another source of nutrition.

White-winged scoters breed in the northwest of the continent, but winter along both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Black Scoter



Between the three scoter species that spend time in North America, the black scoter is the most talkative. Males make a high-pitched whistle, both with their vocal organs, and with their wings while taking off; they are plump and entirely black, with exception to the bright orange/yellow knob at the base of their bill. Females are a brownish gray throughout their plumage, with pale cheeks and a dark cap; their bill, smaller and black with a tiny yellow patch, is capable of producing low, raspy vocalizations, and partially covered at the base by their facial feathers. Currently, there is concern that the extraction of natural gas and oil within their nesting habitats (along the Hudson Bay and Straight in the eastern population, and along coastal Alaska in the western population) is degrading ecologically important land. While the oldest individual on record had reached a decade, scientists are still unsure of the black scoter's average lifespan, for they are one of the least studied duck species.

Distinctive from great distances, a male black scoter (pictured) can perform a swimming display which ends with a downward thrust of the head (unknown date: photo from The Linnaean Society of New York)

Long-tailed Duck



Fortunately for those who spend much time by the waters, the long-tailed duck has graced Saratoga Lake each calendar year dating back to 2018; unfortunately, all individuals of this species are incredibly variable in appearance, dependent upon the season (due to a three-part molting process) and the sex of the bird. In the winter (which is when they tend to stop in during migration), females have a dark back, banded breast, cap, and cheek, with a head and sides light in color. Males are far more intricate, with a rusty eye encompassed by a white ring, a large brown spot on the side of a light neck, a black breastband, and dark wings; they flaunt the signature twin tail feathers for which the species is named, as well as a chic creamy band around their dark bill. Long-tailed ducks are one of the deepest divers in the avian world, using their wings to reach up to 200 feet under the water's surface for their meals of aquatic invertebrates. This species is classified as a common bird in steep decline, with primary contributing factors unknown at the moment.

A female long-tailed duck (middle ground) will have brown eyes, whereas a male (foreground) will have brick red eyes (unknown date: photo from Nature on the Edge of New York City)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Bufflehead



The bufflehead might be the smallest of diving ducks in North America, but first time sightings of this bird are often huge moments for local birders. Both sexes share white facial patches, oval-shaped on the cheek of females and triangular on the side of males' heads. However, it's the luxurious color on males, surrounding the aforementioned patch, that distinguishes and stuns; iridescent gloss can appear rainbow at certain angles. When on the water, they can take off almost vertically if necessary. When away from the water during the breeding season, they stay close by, occupying old northern flicker cavities in trees adjacent to shoreline; for this reason, the northern range of the bufflehead overlaps closely with this woodpecker species.

Both female (left) and male (right) buffleheads are spark waterbirds with their intricate markings and color patches (2018/21/4: photo by Ken Beckley, via eBird)

Common Goldeneye



Saratoga Lake's sole winter-only duck; given its aggression towards members of its own species and consistent brood parasitism affecting other species, perhaps this is for the best. Known as "the whistler" to hunters for their wing noises in flight, the common goldeneye is impressive as a hatchling. Freshly born chicks vacate their nest within 24 hours, tumbling to the ground from a nest box or tree cavity, and make their way to the waters to forage on their own; the only thing they need from a mother duck is her protection. Both sexes undergo a series of color changes in their eyes before reaching their signature beady yellow. Adult females have a chocolate brown head and white wing patches among dull dark brown bodies, whereas adult males, white on the underparts, have an iridescent green head with a round white spot by the base of their bill. Try to spot them flattening their feathers before surface diving, or running on the water to take flight during the wintertime.

In their Alaskan and Canadian breeding grounds, common goldeneyes incubate an annual clutch of 13-4 eggs (2023/20/11: photo by Stella Miller, via eBird)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Barrow's Goldeneye



With most of their population residing in Alaska and western Canada, someone who spots a Barrow's goldeneye on Saratoga Lake could consider themselves lucky. Compared to their far more mainstream counterpart, the common goldeneye, they are slightly darker, larger, and have a steeper forehead. A black base on males is adorned by white on the breast, on the face (in a bold crescent next to the bill), and on the sides (which are reminiscent of piano keys). On females, the bill color varies based on genetics and season; a darker brown head with a narrow white wing patch are good identifying features. If one is super lucky, perhaps they'll witness a Barrow's goldeneye male performing a courtship display, which entails him throwing his head back, belting an intense cry, and propelling forwards to hopefully entice a female.

Barrow's goldeneyes (female on left, male on right) are frequent brood parasites of other cavity nesting ducks, and young chicks require little parental care (2023/20/11: photo by Stella Miller, via eBird)

Hooded Merganser



A piscivorous diving bird, the smallest of the three merganser species; females have brownish gray bodies with a thin orange to yellow bill and a rusty-colored eye, while males have a distinct black and white combination (excluding their vibrant brown flanks) to go with a thin black serrated bill and a yellow eye. All individuals can raise or lower the crest of their head (a red cinnamon color in females and mostly white in males), a typical courtship action; as a brood parasitism initiator and target, they lay up to 13 eggs in a single cavity or nest box but end up with as many as 44!

While the male hooded merganser is more recognized for its crest raising, a female (pictured) can also perform this action to varying degrees (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Common Merganser

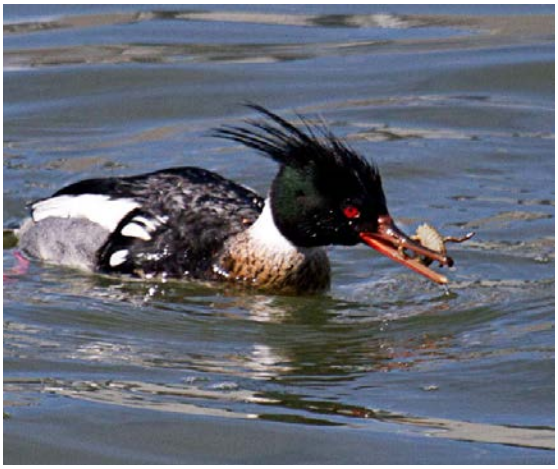
Rarely heard outside of alarm or courtship, this bird is swift in the water when it hunts for fish, aquatic invertebrates, amphibians and other opportunistic prey. Part of its underwater foraging success is thanks to its black-tipped red or orange hooked bill, serrated in males; on the surface, this identifying feature helps it cling to its catches as eagles and gulls attempt to hustle them for a free meal. Common mergansers will attempt to nest in tree cavities at varying elevations, as not all nest boxes will fit the largest of the three merganser species. Adult plumage consists of a mostly silver body with a rusty brown head in females, and a mostly white body with a black head for males.



Common mergansers, these ones pictured in Saratoga Lake (female on left, male on right), prefer freshwater to saltwater locations (2024/3/3: photo by Barb and Lynn, via eBird)

Red-breasted Merganser

The red-breasted merganser possesses much character, most of it stemming from the long and disheveled double crest on the back of its head. This feature is less prominent on females, with their heads a dull rufous color atop a brownish gray body; the heads of males are entirely black with a red eye, separated from their bodies by a solid white necklace. Unlike the two other mergansers of North America, the common and hooded varieties, the red-breasted variety nests in shallow depressions along the ground, often with gulls and terns. They are also more social than their closely related counterparts, feeding in loose flocks throughout the year. Researchers have determined that in order to sustain its growth and wellbeing, an individual red-breasted merganser needs to consume 15 to 20 fish per day; this calls for anywhere from 250 to 300 surface dives, equivalent to 4 or 5 hours underwater.



On their hundreds of daily dives, red-breasted mergansers typically eat fish, but can also come up with crustaceans (unknown date: photo from Bluedot Living Brooklyn)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Ruddy Duck



Its appearance, its behavior, and even its name contribute to the goofy nature of the ruddy duck. Females possess a two-toned body and a dark head; males are richly cinnamon-colored, which blends into a black top of the head. Both sexes have large white cheek patches, a bill with a slight knob at the base (blackish in females and bright blue in males), and a long tail often cocked upright. With their two large feet set far back on their body, they are adept at swimming but incredibly awkward navigating outside of the water, sometimes pushing themselves along instead of walking. From this to its wonky courtship display, to the harassment that it initiates and receives from other duck individuals and even rabbits, naturalists are beyond intrigued by this goofy species.

When courting a mate, a male ruddy duck (pictured) will cock his tail near upright and beat his bill against his breast (unknown date: photo by mikey_birds, via r/whatsthisbird on Reddit)

Grebes

Pied-billed Grebe



The range map of pied-billed grebes shows year-round residence in the southern half of the continental United States, but eBird records show an individual last photographed on Saratoga Lake in mid-December 2023. Migration occurs nocturnally over distances of more than 2,000 miles, but only if their breeding grounds ice over and diminish their food supply; we can attribute climate change to the northward movement and threatened status of New York state's populations. Fortunately, the pied-billed grebe is a nifty little waterbird who's not afraid to settle and nest near developed areas of shoreline. They are able to control their buoyancy by trapping water in their feathers (potentially reducing drag during underwater pursuit of prey), and webbed toes further heighten their swimming abilities. Listen for them throughout the spring and summer, as they produce two broods and their courtship is more vocal than visual; summer attire consists of a light bill with a dark stripe, that goes with a dull auburn neck and brown/gray body. Nonbreeding plumage depicts an off-white throat underneath a yellow bill.

Pied-billed grebes incubate 7-4 eggs in a floating nest of partially decomposed plant material, incorporated into existing live vegetation in marshes (unknown date: photo by Adirondack Explorer)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Horned Grebe



Fashionable and fashionably late to its destinations, the horned grebe is a sight to behold during the breeding season with their raisable golden feather patches behind their eyes. Saratoga Lake viewers catch these birds outside of their summer molt, but they are still fun to watch; chicks ride on their mothers' backs while in their infancy, and resting adults put their neck on their back with one foot tucked under a wing. Like other bird species within their family, the horned grebe isn't afraid to eat up to half its stomach capacity in feathers. As weird as that may seem, this diet choice forms a matted plug that filters fish bones until they can be digested, and adults even establish this in their young by feeding them feathers. This grebe species is best identified via their flat cap and a red eye that bridges into a short bill.

As a declining species, it is imperative that our waters are conserved in case horned grebes visit during their migration (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Red-necked Grebe



They rarely take to the air like other members of their taxonomic family, but red-necked grebes are direct and rapid fliers; migration happens in the dark of night usually, though large flocks have been observed jetting over bodies of water during the daytime. A yellow bill base, black cap, and rich chestnut frontside give this bird away during the summer, whereas a pale auburn facial crest near the ear is tougher to discern in the winter months. Primarily piscivorous, these grebes trend towards opportunistic foraging of amphibians and aquatic invertebrates when fish stocks decline. Listen for their many vocalizations while on the water's surface, spanning from honks and rattles to hisses and purrs.

Red-necked grebes can show varying amounts of chestnut coloration in their neck region (2014/13/5: photo from Birds of New York)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Rails/Cranes/Relatives

Virginia Rail



Secretive is the Virginia rail, a well-adapted marsh dwelling bird that seldom leaves the ground outside of migration. One has not been photographed on or around Saratoga Lake, per eBird, but they are likely to give their positions away via loud grunts if they're present during the breeding season. Individuals stand atop long red legs and toes, walking cautiously to search for and stalk their aquatic invertebrate prey; a curved salmon-colored bill about the length of their skull proves a great foraging tool too. Red eyes within gray cheeks, a solid brown breast, black-and-white barred flanks, and streaked dark upperparts complete this skinny-bodied bird. If Virginia rails decide to mate, pairs build many nests by weaving vegetation into a substantial cup with a canopy cover; the one they defend vigorously is where one or two broods with 12-5 eggs are raised.

Insects, snails, spiders, and even seeds are fair game for foraging Virginia rails (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Sora

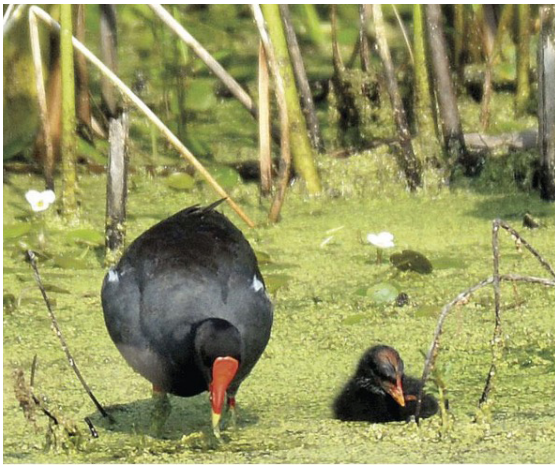


Even as the most widely distributed North American rail species, soras are somehow tougher to see than their taxonomic family members. Their olive legs and toes, long and sturdy, support a slender brown body with intricate black and white streaks along its upperparts; a short yellow bill is attached to a black mask, lying next to a brown cheek patch and above a gray breast. Flicking its short tail, a signature twitchy movement from this bird, reveals a white rump. Some regions refer to them as meadow chickens for their odd struts through emergent vegetation, and they even bob their heads while swimming. Courtship entails a 30-15 minute staring contest followed by preening of each other's feathers; whether solitary or paired, soras defend their territory with aggressive intention. If you are near a local marsh, try producing an abrupt loud noise, as individuals give off a whinnying call upon being startled.

When calling, soras produce a loud high-pitched noise, with an up-slurred whistle at the end of its whinny (unknown date: photo from The New York State Museum)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Common Gallinule



Birders are more likely to spot common gallinules throughout Saratoga Lake's marshes than other coot and rail species. Formerly known as the common moorhen, these marsh birds are equally tailored to land and water with their ridiculously long toes attached to powerful olive legs. They wisely use these appendages to flip over leaves and reveal insects and invertebrates for consumption, to go with the other plant material they eat. A red facial shield, square-topped above the eyes and blended into the end of their yellow-tipped bills, makes them almost impossible to miss; a shiny body, slate gray in the breast and brown on the back, further identify this species. Much like the sora, nervous tail twitching reveals white feathers on its rear ventral side. On newborn chicks, wing structures start out with spurs that allow for climbing into the nest, or grabbing onto vegetation to stabilize their movement.

Anywhere from 11-5 eggs can be laid in 3-1 broods each breeding season, and it is suspected that common gallinules can breed year-round in Florida (unknown date: photo from Finger Lakes Times)

American Coot



A very duck-like species upon distant observation; swimming like one is made possible for the American coot through broad lobes of skin on their long toes. These waterfowl have a dark gray bulbous body, topped by a black head with red eyes and a white bill (with a black ring) that can extend up the forehead. In the wintertime, they blend with other duck varieties on lakes and ponds to form groups of several thousand individuals; if gadwalls are present and looking to pluck a meal for themselves, this species will steer clear of fish consumption and stick to their primarily herbivorous diet. To fly, American coots run atop the water's surface for quite a distance before taking to the air along a labored, low-altitude path.

When foraging, American coots search for plant material before snails, insects, spiders, fish, tadpoles, and even carrion (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Shorebirds/Gulls/Auks/Relatives

Killdeer



At first, 18th century naturalists named this bird the chattering plover, or the noisy plover, for its talkative lifestyle; the common name eventually evolved into “killdeer,” for the shrill calls it wails often. If one hears these vocalizations, they can look for a plump shorebird (tapered at their long tail) with white lowerparts, brown upperparts, and horizontal black-and-white striping along the frontside. After flying northward from Central America for the breeding season, killdeers can descend ubiquitously to establish a simple ground nest; anywhere natural (like mudflats and shorelines) or anthropogenic (like flat gravel rooftops and golf courses) is sufficient for them, though there can be many dangers. While some predators can be lured away from the eggs by an intelligent broken wing acting scene, larger ungulates need to be diverted from crushing the eggs through a fluffed-up charging move (which is impressive for a bird whose wingspan tops out at 2 feet). When foraging, they’ll sprint for a short distance before halting abruptly, pausing to sense for any small critters or seeds, and plucking swiftly from the topsoil at their feet.

Against drab-colored grounds, the killdeer is camouflaged well enough to raise an annual brood of four eggs in the north (2024/30/3: photo by Lindsey Duval, via eBird)

Semipalmated Plover



“A miniature killdeer, but with only one black band across the breast,” per the All About Birds website; the semipalmated plover, with its pleasant whistle, is one of the more likely shorebirds to make its way over to Saratoga Lake during spring and fall migrations. The lake’s mudflats, sandbars, and nearby fields would be the best places to get a glimpse; much like their aforementioned lookalike, they too run and stop on a dime to sense prey in the soil with their sensitive soles. Semipalmated plovers can forage with other shorebird species, and one should look for their beige back, short black bill with an orange base, and a curved white eyebrow.

On their way to/from Alaskan and northern Canadian breeding grounds, semipalmated plovers can stop and touch down in any of the continental United States (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Dunlin



Last photographed on Saratoga Lake in November of 2023 per eBird, the dunlin is a seldom seen shorebird in this region despite a vast North American migration range. This is because their flights to and from breeding grounds are typically a one-and-done continuous flight. They were once called the red-backed sandpiper but are now known by their original name. A long and tapered black bill is perfect for probing mudflats and sandy beaches for a wide range of aquatic invertebrates; clams, crustaceans, insect larvae, worms, small fish, and plants aren't consumed as often, but are also fair game. Depending on the time of year, dunlins might possess a dark belly patch and pronounced streaking along the breast and upperparts. Plumage patterns may vary, as three of the dunlin's 10 subspecies breed in North America.

Dunlins probe for clams, worms, insect larvae, crustaceans, small fish, and plants when foraging (2023/18/11: photo by Yana Levchinsky, via eBird)

Semipalmated Sandpiper



The semipalmated sandpiper is more abundant than any other species in their genus Calidris, but individuals can be tough to identify. Juveniles and breeding adults show variations in plumage; both will have a short dark bill with a blunt tip, but older birds are a lighter or rustier color, and have minute streaking across their breast. Ample reserves of fat within their bodies, provided by a diet of mollusks, spiders, and worms, permit these birds to fly nonstop for up to 2,500 miles. If they are to descend upon Saratoga Lake during their migration, they'll most likely do so in very large flocks; shorelines with little vegetation and muddy areas would be the places to find this tiny shorebird.

This semipalmated sandpiper, a juvenile, will grow to have an approximate 14" wingspan (unknown date: photo from Buffalo Ornithological Society)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Wilson's Snipe



In the late 18th century, the term "sniper" was coined for British soldiers who hunted snipes; fast and erratic flight by the Wilson's snipe, however, proves a challenge for even the most skilled shooters. Their display flight is also volatile, silently ascending 330 feet before returning to the ground rapidly, with a spread tail that produces a vibrating winnow. Evident through their solo taxonomic classification, Wilson's snipes are one of a kind; the large beady eyes set high on their head yield near360- degree vision. When probing for insect larvae in the subsoil, their long and tapered bill can remain shut while the flexible tip slurps up prey. They build intricate woven ground nests, and once their brood of four chicks fledges, the family splits; males and females go their separate ways with the older and younger offspring, respectively. According to the American Ornithological Society, the Wilson's snipe is soon to be renamed after both habitat preference and physical traits.

This picture of a Wilson's snipe provides a great view of its short russet-colored tail feathers (unknown date: photo from Birding Bob)

Spotted Sandpiper



Spotted sandpipers have a lot of character to them; despite their petite stature, their widespread distribution and quirky behavior makes them "a great ambassador for the notoriously difficult-to-identify shorebirds." Dark polka dots on white underparts are its signature, and observers should also look for brown-gray upperparts with dark barring, a thin white eyestripe, and an orange bill with a dark tip. When walking, individuals will walk briskly while teetering their relatively short tails; when in the air, flights take place above water, with shallow and stiff wingbeats at a low altitude. Contrary to most migrating wildlife, it is the female spotted sandpipers that arrive at breeding territories first, patrolling them with rigor. In some instances, populations can convert from a monogamous mating system to a polyandrous one, where one female defender can mate with up to four parenting males.

Spotted sandpipers are considered the most widespread shorebird in North America (unknown date: photo from Brooklyn Botanic Garden)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Bonaparte's Gull



Bonaparte's gull was named after Napoleon's nephew, ornithologist Charles Lucien Bonaparte; these delicate gulls are very social, and they blend in seamlessly with flocks of terns during their graceful flight. They are always prone to making a pit stop on Saratoga Lake during their migrations, so it is helpful to know both of their plumages. Individuals flying northward to breeding grounds in the spring display fluorescent red legs, white underparts, gray upperparts, and a black hood with partial eye rings colored white; flying southward to wintering grounds in the fall brings a white head with a dark "ear" spot, and much duller legs. White wing patches with black tips are a key identifying feature when these birds take to the air. Unlike any other gull species, Bonaparte's gulls regularly nests amongst trees; they do so in Alaskan and Canadian conifers, 20-5 feet above ground and in close proximity to water.

Bonaparte's gulls have brown wing patches and dark ear spots as immature birds, before growing into their adult plumage with a signature black hood; both are pictured above looking out onto Saratoga Lake (2017/13/5: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Little Gull



As the smallest gull in the world, little gulls sure live up to their common names; native to Eurasia, it is unknown how this species established in North America. Individuals were first observed in 1819, but the very seldom seen nests weren't recorded until 143 years later! Saratoga Lake most recently got a glimpse of this dainty shorebird in the spring of 2017, in a breeding plumage that resembles the Bonaparte's gull's summer attire. They can fly with larger flocks of the aforementioned gull species, so if they're not migrating in solos, pairs, or trios, a thin white border along the upperwings on mature birds can distinguish little gulls. A thin dark bill seizes aquatic invertebrates and flying insects from above the water, below it, and at its surface.

During breeding seasons, little gulls look similar to Bonaparte's gulls, but don't have an eye ring and stand much shorter (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Ring-billed Gull



Its dubious reputation precedes it; the ring-billed gull is just about universally known to be menacing, even gluttonous for food in the hand of passersby. They are the gull most well-suited for inland dwelling, where they fancy parking lots, beaches, fields, and even garbage sites. When waste management practices shift from open landfills to closed incinerators, populations of this species can sharply decline. Ring-billed gulls are birds of habit; many return annually to the nesting grounds where they hatched, and many utilize the same wintering grounds each year as well. A vertical black stripe on a yellow bill is this skittish species' namesake feature, if one can get a clear look at it.

As abundant as they are today, ring-billed gulls faced crashing populations, which ultimately recovered with enforced protection. The ring-billed gull pictured is experiencing their second winter, with their black vertical bill stripe showing and still mostly mottled on the neck (2017/16/12: photo by Lindsey Duval, via eBird)

Herring Gull



Very much a stereotypical gull species; while herring gulls reside year-round along the northern Atlantic coast, they are only winter residents in New York's interior. They have made a spectacular population recovery following pre-industrial egg collecting and plumage hunting, much in part to their savvy use of bait and an omnivorous diet. Individuals spending the colder months on Saratoga Lake will display gray streaks on a white head and neck, gray wings with white spots on black wing tips, and a white tail; definitive identifying features include pink legs, as well as a yellow bill with a red spot on the underside. As these birds get older, they tend to migrate less.

Amongst other wintering birds, herring gulls will stand out with the bright red spot on their lower mandible and their size, as seen here on Saratoga Lake (2021/15/11: photo by Jane Tatlock, via iNaturalist)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Iceland Gull

If one takes the patience to try and spot an Iceland gull in the winter months, a rewarding encounter is most certainly possible; these graceful birds are worth the wait. Nonbreeding residents migrate all the way south from the cliffs of the Canadian Arctic, and feed on anything accessible (small fish, crustaceans, mollusks, carrion, and garbage) to restore their energy reserves. Their plumage is very similar to that of the herring gull, but Iceland gulls do not possess black on their wingtips; they are dark gray in the North American populations of the west, whereas the eastern populations that visit Saratoga Lake possess a near-pure white wingtip coloration.



The plumage of Iceland gulls varies greatly, but this immature bird must be patient to acquire its gray coloring and streaked head (unknown date: photo from Birding Bob)

Glaucous Gull

While the great black-backed gull is the world's largest gull, it's the glaucous gull that takes the title for largest wingspan amongst their taxonomic family members, topping out at 6 feet. If individuals don't live in the Arctic permanently, they migrate to Alaskan waters or parts of the north Atlantic coast; many adults return to the same sites annually, and form lifelong mates. Winter plumage on Saratoga Lake is almost identical to that of the Iceland gull, but a smaller size can rule that species out. Another distinguishing feature is white wing tips all along gray wings, best seen in flight.

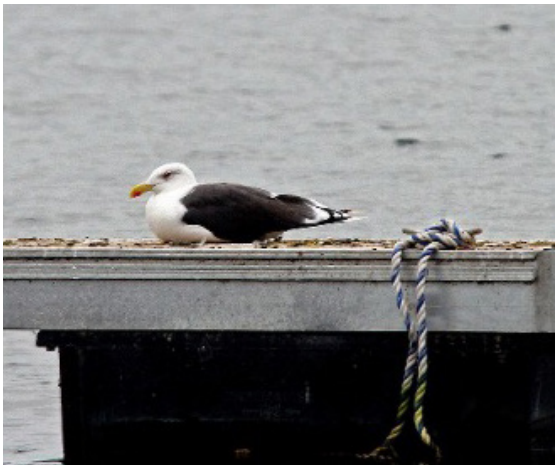


Since glaucous gulls are infrequent visitors, any sighting of them on Saratoga Lake is a lucky encounter (2021/27/12: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Great Black-backed Gull

While its size already distinguishes it from other gulls, a rather intricate winter plumage adorns the great black-backed gull during its Saratoga Lake visits. Standing atop pale pink legs and toes, a signature black back extends onto the wings, colored white on the tips; a white head is faintly streaked, and a large yellow bill is spotted red on the underside. Once facing vulnerable period due to the feather trade, great black-backed gulls have ascended to the avian throne of the Atlantic. Human waste management practices have only expanded their reign of terror, which involve bullying other individuals for their food and even hunting adult shorebirds!



Evidenced by this photograph of a lone adult bird peering out onto Saratoga Lake, the great black-backed gull is the most solitary of its taxonomic relatives (2019/3/10: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Caspian Tern

A thick fluorescent red bill with a dark tip, extending outward from a slightly crested black cap (heavily streaked in the winter), is the flagship identifying feature of the Caspian tern. As the largest tern species in the world, they are highly aggressive, but don't typically make any contact with other birds. On their sparse but concentrated breeding grounds, nests are defended by rhythmic bill openings (a threatening display), hoarse calls, and even chasing away birds and humans that venture too close. They are also guilty of stealing food, not to mention their egg and chick predation. Light gray wings power Caspian terns during migration, a nocturnal venture which can sometimes be heard through their rolling calls.



Individual Caspian terns can survive for up to 30 years on a diet of fish, snails, and barnacles (2018/13/4: photo by Lindsey Duval, via eBird)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Black Tern



An infrequent Saratoga Lake visitor, the black tern is an outcast in relation to its fellow tern species and other shorebirds. They are marsh birds that undergo a drastic molt cycle; charcoal upperparts accentuate a jet black breast, head, and bill in the summertime, whereas white upperparts and a light forehead in the wintertime highlight a much paler appearance. On pointed wings anchored by a slender body, individuals can swoop with the utmost agility to pluck insects and small surface-dwelling fish on the fly. Black terns are highly social, breeding in loose colonies and flocking often in groups from dozens to thousands. While monitoring this species isn't easy, it is necessary to preserve the breeding population, which lost half of its members across the most recent five decades.

Black terns are most vocal during the breeding season, but call throughout the year (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Common Tern



Another near victim of the outdated feather trade, the common tern is still struggling to shake the endangered label that has followed this species across centuries. Populations expanded following the 1918 Migratory Bird Treaty Act, but have since declined in lieu of anthropogenic disturbance to ecosystems and natural resources. A forked tail and a thin red bill with black at the tip bookend this graceful gray-winged flyer, capable of snatching prey by plunging into the water or plucking it from the air. When their nests are at risk of flooding, common terns are intelligent enough to add anything nearby to raise their nests above the surface.

Fish is the common tern's primary food source, but they also eat insects, crustaceans, and squid (unknown date: photo from New York Natural Heritage Program)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Arctic Tern

Arctic terns spend much of their life in continuous daylight, migrating from one polar circle to the other and back annually. Individuals can travel 25,000 miles each year, which accumulates unbelievably across a lifespan of up to 34 years. The only instance in which they come to land is to nest. Appearance-wise, they possess a thin maroon bill, a black cap that extends to the nape, white underparts, and gray upperparts that include long wings; translucent outer wing feathers are evident against strong sunlight. Since they mostly stick to coastal pit stops during migration, an arctic tern sighting on Saratoga Lake is special no matter the circumstances.



Arctic terns, such as this one, scrape a shallow depth in the ground to build their nest in the far north of the continent (unknown date: photo from The New York Times

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Loons

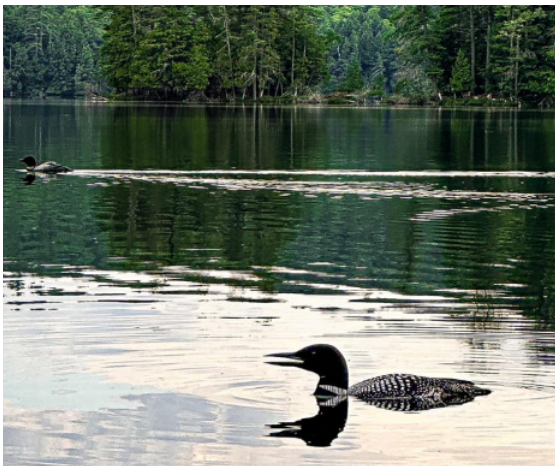
Red-throated Loon



A rare upstate New York visitor, the red-throated loon was spotted most recently on our waters in November of 2023. Their nonbreeding plumage consists of dark upperparts with white speckles, and a white face; the feature for which they're named, along with stripes on the back of their neck, only appears during the breeding season. Red eyes are suited to track fish underwater, and their upturned gray bill is even better suited to catch them. Unlike the common loon, however, these birds don't need a long runway to take flight; they can leap directly into the air, whether they're on land or water. Because of this, they are better suited to small ponds than lakes of varying sizes during the breeding season. Keep your eyes out for their presence on Saratoga Lake in the late fall and early spring.

Nonbreeding red-throated loon adults, such as this one, exhibit white speckles on their dark upperparts, as well as white running from the breast to the bill
(unknown date: photo from Nature on the Edge of New York City)

Common Loon



Majestic in every sense of the word; a staple to the Adirondack Mountains and Canada, the common loon is a local favorite amongst birders and other citizens alike. Its blood red eyes are helpful during underwater dives, which can last up to 10 minutes with the aid of lung suppression and heart deceleration. On a black plumage base, a white vertically striped necklace portrays dominance with a raised head and submission with a lowered head. Ever territorial during the breeding season, white checkers and spots on its dark backside communicate to other common loons flying overhead to land in a different area, or even a different lake. It takes a long runway (up to a quarter mile) to achieve any altitude, but they are speedy once they take to the air, flying more than 70 miles per hour on occasion. Chicks ride on their mothers' backs for weeks before slowly learning how to forage for fish on their own, eventually being abandoned to figure out their migration to coastal waters and the rest of adulthood. Saratoga Lake is proud to be loon-friendly certified through the Adirondack Center for Loon Conservation!

Elegant as ever are common loons, a favorite breeding bird of many upstate New Yorkers (unknown date: photo from Pyramid Life Center)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Frigatebirds/Gannets/Cormorants/Anhingas

Double-crested Cormorant



While it is native to North America, some consider the double-crested cormorant a persistent problem to local ecosystems. This large matte black bird, with vivid blue eyes and orange facial skin that blends into a long hooked bill, is piscivorous to the point that research suggests they are depleting specific fish stocks. When it's not underwater plunging for fish, it can often be spotted perching with its wings outstretched, in order to dry them. The double-crested cormorant can wreak ecological havoc on land, too; if they nest in trees, the interior of said tree is degraded due to the accumulation of acidic excrements, eventually killing it. When this happens, the individual finds a spot on the ground, or in another unfortunate tree, to build its nest made of plant matter and anthropogenic materials like plastics.

A closeup of the double-crested cormorant's face will actually reveal a teal eye with an intricate light blue eye ring (unknown date: photo from NYC Bird Alliance)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Pelicans/Herons/Ibises/Relatives

American Bittern



If one hears awkward pump-like sounds originating from secluded wetlands along Saratoga Lake, one can infer they are listening to the vocalizations of the American bittern. Naturally camouflaged by variable brown throughout its body, individuals (if seen at all) can be visually identified through a long straight yellow bill, a rusty crown, a black streak on the sides of their neck, and a short tail. Olive legs with long curled talons help them stabilize during slow strolls through the water as they forage; yellow eyes (orange during the breeding season) can focus downward, giving American bitterns a funny appearance as they lock in and target amphibians, crustaceans, fish, insects, and even snakes. Nests are constructed with available vegetation, over shallow sections of sheltered lake. To capture and perform research on them, scientists play the calls of males, which draw territorial species members from over 1,500 feet away sometimes.

American bitterns are best spotted against the edge of shoreline vegetation, where they stroll slowly (unknown date: photo by Robert Sena, via Audubon New York)

Great Blue Heron



Great blue herons are considered a majestic sight by many. Their deep wingbeats while flying are captivating, and a special observation along a shoreline can be made even more memorable with the catch of a fish from a quick bill jab. These quiet waterbirds can be distinguished from other herons through their navy blue patches on the head and shoulder, as well as a gray neck which contracts during flight. When flocking, they can be found in trees adjacent to water for both nesting and roosting purposes.

Soaring to their next destination with deep wingbeats, great blue herons can be seen scrunching their neck and trailing their black legs behind them (unknown date: photo from New York State Parks)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Green Heron



Annually seen growing up along the Saratoga Lake State Boat Launch during summer, green herons are intelligent waterbirds; they are one of few avian species that constructs and utilizes tools for foraging purposes. More often than not, however, you'll see them creeping along inundated vegetation or riverbanks on sleek orange legs (yellow in the nonbreeding season) to nourish themselves. A thin and straight black bill is perfect for snatching fish, frogs, insects and spiders from its lures. Plumage-wise, breeding season colors are deep emerald all along the back, cap with a varying crest, and wings; a deep mahogany along the neck is accented by a long, vertical cream streak. The flights they take tend to be shorter distances, with wingbeats slow and their flight a little clunky.

A green heron with a mini-mohawk crest scans the waters where Saratoga Lake and Fish Creek merge (2024/8/8; photo courtesy of SLPID Lake Steward Team)

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Hawks/Eagles/Relatives

Osprey



The osprey is a spectacle of a raptor, who has made a recovery similar to other birds of prey species; once it was discovered that DDT ingestion was interfering with their calcium metabolism, the pesticide chemical was banned in the United States. Also referred to as the fish hawk for their near-exclusive piscivorous diet, reversible outer toes with barbed pads give these birds a vice grip on their catches; most are kept face forward during flight to reduce drag. Built long white legs transition into a speckled brown chest and a white head, with a dark mask running through its yellow eyes and a dainty crest. The mask trails into dark upperparts and strong wings that span up to 6 feet in flight; angling dives are 20 to 70 percent successful, and some individual birds may crack 160,000 flight miles in their lifetime. If one or a pair is nesting near Saratoga Lake, one should be able to see their massive stick nests on telephone poles, and maybe constructed platforms installed in the near future.

A short black beak can be seen on an osprey when they're perching outside of the nest, as seen here (2020/8/9: photo by Brett Kaminsky, via iNaturalist)

Bald Eagle



Upon facing extinction as a result of DDT insecticide (417 known pairs in 1963) and prevailing through this population bottleneck, the bald eagle became recognized as a species of resilience by many. These large piscivorous birds tend to nest high in treetops adjacent to water bodies, asserting themselves through a dominant view of the surrounding landscape and lots of soaring within their territory. Each individual takes between 4 and 5 years to fully mature, cycling through gradual dark brown and streaked plumages to ultimately inherit their distinctive sleek dark feathers, white head, and yellow hooked beak.

A pair of nesting bald eagles look out onto Saratoga Lake

Lake/Shoreline/Wetland Birds of Saratoga Lake

Kingfishers

Belted Kingfisher



The belted kingfisher, a small but stocky piscivorous species, is one of few in the avian world where the female garners more color than the male; both are white on the underside with a slate blue chest band, head, and upperparts, but the females have an additional chest band and flanks that are chestnut. Aside from their plumage, a shaggy crest and a long, thick bill (evolutionarily selected for jabbing at fish and crustaceans during aerial dives) are sufficient identifying features. These birds nest in subterranean burrows within earthen banks, gravel, or sand, which are approximately 3 to 6 feet deep and well defended by individuals all year round.

Male belted kingfishers are diligent in their breeding territory defense, which spans for more than half a mile (2024/10/10: photo by Ari Cassella, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Quails/Grouse/Turkeys/Relatives

Ring-necked Pheasant

The ring-necked pheasant is a plump grassland bird; the females blend into their drab surrounding with a mostly pale brown plumage, whereas their male counterparts stand out strongly with copper and gold plumage, a long forked and striped tail, and fluorescent red face waddles on a forest green head. Their habitat can vary, extending into marshes and riverbanks at times, but they are most often seen in the fall and winter when crop and shrub cover has reached its minimum. They are often vocal and can be heard cackling when flushed from their cover.



Unmistakable against greenery are ring-necked pheasants, with males presenting many a color and pattern
(2017/21/10: photo by Laura Labbe, via eBird)

Ruffed Grouse

An elusive forest dweller; despite both color forms of this species being bland for camouflage purposes, their behavior is anything but discreet. They are capable of consuming plants that would otherwise be bitter and rather toxic to most birds, as well as larger portions of fibrous vegetation due to an adaptation in their intestines. More notably, the males perform a signature wing beating display, where they produce a sound (reminiscent of an engine turning to start, oddly enough) that projects up to a quarter mile.



In addition to plants, ruffed grouses can also consume fruit and insects on occasion
(unknown date: photo from Animals of Northern New York)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Wild Turkey

If it weren't for the bald eagle, the wild turkey could very well have been the symbol of the United States today thanks to a proposal from Benjamin Franklin. Much like the current national emblem, these large birds were almost driven to extinction, this time in the early 1900s from habitat degradation and over-hunting. Females are dark with a bronze and/or purple iridescent hue; males are highly similar with the exception of an unfeathered red and blue head, a patch of long "beard" hair on their breast, and a long rusty tail sometimes fanned in display with other males. They are often found along forest edges or other open woodlands supplementing their omnivorous diet.



Roaming wild turkeys are common, but a shot of one perching (pictured) or even one swimming is seldom captured (unknown date: photo from Audubon New York)

Pigeons/Doves

Rock Pigeon

The rock pigeon has polarizing qualities across its diverse and very secure population. On one hand, these clumsy birds lay their eggs in nests that are highly unconventional if not lazy; on the other hand, they have been instrumental in Charles Darwin's theorization of evolution and long distance message carrying. Regardless of one's opinion on this species, taking note of plumage patterns for each rock pigeon reveals an impressive variability in their collective coloration.



Rock pigeons, or rock doves, particularly enjoy spending time underneath bridges; the one pictured above near the Saratoga Lake State Boat Launch is doing just that (5/22/2015: photo by Lindsey Duval, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Mourning Dove

Mourning doves are frequently identified via their melancholy call; visually, they exhibit long pointed tails, dark wing spots, a thin dark bill, pink feet, and a small head amongst a gray to creamy light brown body color. They forage for seeds when at ground level, storing them within an esophagus enlargement (called the crop) to later digest on telephone wires or other safe perches. Other adaptations, such as their ability to drink brackish spring water, have allowed for this bird to grow into one of the most abundant and recognizable across the continent.



Pale blue can be seen on the eyelids of mourning doves whenever their eyes are closed (4/25/2024: photo by Kate Schnurr, via eBird)

Cuckoos

Yellow-billed Cuckoo

While the yellow-billed cuckoo is named after its vocals, the word has become synonymous with quirky and unconventional behavior, a perfect moniker for this species. These old world birds, whose breeding range doesn't extend north of New York state, are one of few avian species capable of stomaching hairy caterpillars; when food sources such as this one are in abundant supply, they will initiate brood parasitism, or egg laying in the nests of other species. Pairs are close to equal in their contributions towards tree nest building, egg incubating, and nestling brooding. From initial incubation to hatching, two and a half weeks pass, one of the shortest cycles in birds; young chicks grow at a quick rate, however, and are fully feathered after a week, prepared to leave the nest. If they make it to adulthood, they'll sport a long tail with large white spots, bright rufous wings, drab brown/gray upperparts, a curved primarily yellow bill, and a white frontside. Try to listen for their 12-10 low note call that progressively slows, since they are difficult to spot amongst dense vegetation.



When away from their breeding grounds, yellow-billed cuckoos spend their winters in South America (10/3/2017: photo by Elizabeth Curley, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Black-billed Cuckoo



Secretive like its yellow-billed relative, the black-billed cuckoo prefers to remain discreet within its habitat of dense woodlands, in close proximity to water. They too eat hairy caterpillars, but are prone to spines lodging in their stomachs, prompting a natural removal of the digestive blockage. Ornithologists and other naturalists suspect that the chemical control of this food source is the primary reason for the decline of the black-billed cuckoo. These solitary birds, remaining stationary for hours at a time, perch with zygodactyl feet (2 toes facing both forward and backward) to forage; a long curved black bill assists with this mission, which lies in front of a dark eye surrounded by bare red skin. Brown/gray upperparts, juxtaposed by white underparts, trail into a long tail with small white spots. You'll hear this species utter a 5-2 note whistling tone many times before, and if, it chooses to reveal itself.

On occasion, black-billed cuckoos are called "rain crows" because folklore depicts them calling just before the fall of precipitation

(unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Nightjars

Common Nighthawk



Camouflaged dark to the point that they don't even need a nest to raise their young, common nighthawks are usually seen in the air when the sun rises and sets. Their flight is erratic with deep wingbeats, and displays include sound production from their wings; from above the tree line, males suddenly dive to the ground before peeling upward and flexing their pointed wings downward, emitting a rather loud boom for a bird its size. These males have white bars on their outer wing feathers, but females are nearly identical otherwise, sharing large dark eyes, a tiny bill for airborne insect consumption, and barring on their underparts. They can fly and reside in a wide range of open habitats, so birders should remain vigilant during the hours of dawn and dusk. If the stars align and you spy a common nighthawk perching as opposed to flying, try to snap a photo and capture a rare moment in time!

When airborne, male common nighthawks will show a white throat patch

(unknown date: photo by New York Natural Heritage Program)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Eastern Whip-poor-will



Unless your close footsteps flush it away from the ground of a mature forest with open understory, the eastern whip-poor-will is very seldom seen; their name stems from the loud whistle they belt throughout summer nights. eBird's records show a presence to the woodlands south of Saratoga Lake in the early spring of 2024. This species is enigmatic as ever, for they align their nesting cycle with the lunar cycle; towards the full moon stage, nestlings are approximately 10 days old when their parents are taking advantage of increased insect activity to nourish the offspring. One theory suggests that their huge eyes are capable of seeing the silhouette of these insects against the sky, thanks in part to an adapted retina. In unusual fashion, the males feed the first brood until nest fledging, when a subsequent second clutch of eggs is laid.

Once taxonomically lumped together with the Mexican whip-poor-will, both birds became separate species in 2010 (unknown date: photo by American Bird Conservancy)

Swifts

Chimney Swift



Some birders describe chimney swifts as a "cigar on wings" during its erratic yet acrobatic flight; from capturing aerial insects to drinking and bathing, an individual's life is spent almost %100 airborne. They are adapted to structuring twig nests with saliva in anthropogenic structures, but as chimney usage has both modernized and declined across the eastern United States, their population has dwindled. Dark brown overall, their short square tail and extended black wings slowly transition into a pale brown throat and a short bill; their large beady eyes sit below a flat cap. If anyone without a chimney would like to provide an adequate nesting site for these birds, they can contact the North American Chimney Swift Nesting Site Research Project.

Chimney swifts will only feed near the ground during cloudy and cold weather (unknown date: photo from Brooklyn Greenway Initiative)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Hummingbirds

Ruby-throated Hummingbird



Ruby-throated hummingbirds are the only bird in the world that can accelerate and decelerate in any direction, as a result of their wings moving in a figure eight pattern more than 50 times per second; they are the only member of their taxonomic family to spend summers east of the Mississippi River. If those living on or near Saratoga Lake have red/orange flowers and feeders, these tiny birds are a welcomed regular sight. Males are eloquent as ever, with shimmering green upperparts and a flashy red throat patch. They are capable of patrolling a 1,000 square meter territory for nesting and sometimes foraging purposes; females, buffy brown with partially white underparts, defend nests if they aren't feeding on nectar and small insects within a half mile radius. To prepare for their continuous 800 mile fall migration to Central America, individuals pack on approximately 16/1th ounces of fat (equivalent to 2 grams, anywhere from 25 to 40 percent of their bodyweight).

Immature males will present their green coloration, but must wait for their flashy ruby throat to grow in (unknown date: photo by Patricia McGuire, via Audubon New York)

New World Vultures

Black Vulture



With the first official New York sighting of the black vulture being recorded in 1981, this new world vulture species has been a prime example of populations creeping northward, all but certainly due to climate change. Their all black plumage is accompanied by long gray legs and toes, a short rounded tail, and wrinkled gray skin on their heads. Socially structured by loose colonies, they host large communal meetings to exchange food locations; aggression as a group tends to prevail in the battles waged against the larger but more solitary turkey vulture for mammal carrion.

Black vultures tend to remain silent, but can produce barks and hisses on occasion (10/6/2024: photo by Kate Schnurr, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Turkey Vulture

The turkey vulture is currently classified as a breeding bird in New York state, but there is potential for it to become a year-round resident, much like its black vulture relative. Overall bigger than the aforementioned competitor, they possess a small red featherless head, dark brown upperparts and black underparts atop strong pink legs, and a long spade-shaped tail. On extended wings, the outermost feathers are flared individually. Flocks of these new world vultures, with their impeccable sense of smell, locate carrion and other available live prey from vast distances; without their acidic stomach's ability to digest almost anything, carcasses and disease would run rampant throughout natural ecosystems.



Much like double-crested cormorants, turkey vultures also open their wings up to the sun, as seen here, to increase their body temperature (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Hawks/Eagles/Relatives

Golden Eagle

Even larger than bald eagles are golden eagles, last photographed to the east of Saratoga Lake in 2021. With a six to seven foot wingspan, a few slow and steady wingbeats are all these huge birds of prey need to sustain a long glide. Various species of prey allow them to employ many swift maneuvers and hunting techniques. The claws they use to clutch unfortunate birds and mammals are nearly hidden by feathers covering their sturdy legs. On their head and neck, golden feathers merge into a large and powerful beak; dark brown is the primary plumage color, and immature birds have varying white strewn across their wings. Sightings in the eastern part of the continent are fewer and farther between than in the western part, where these raptors breed from Alaska to Mexico and winter along the great plains.



While it can kill and feed on large prey, the golden eagle prefers to consume rabbits, squirrels, and prairie dogs (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Explorer)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Northern Harrier



Despite northern harriers being average sized raptors, they are quite recognizable from great distances if one knows the right identifying cues. For one, they are the most owl-like of the falcon species, especially in the head; the shape and rigidity of the facial feathers helps direct sound to the auditory organs. This, in combination with gliding at low altitudes over grasslands and marshes, amplifies rodent sounds from within vegetation. Males are patterned uniquely; slate blue/grey in the head and upperparts transition into white underparts with small rusty spots. One individual can mate simultaneously with five females, birds with dark brown on top and a white ring around the face. Predation upon their offspring is avoided by raising newly born chicks in tall and dense plant cover, where the water table remains high.

Northern harriers, before growing into their lemon yellow eyes, have greener and browner eyes as juvenile males and females, respectively
(unknown date: photo by Scott Dere, via Audubon New York)

Sharp-shinned Hawk



Blink and you'll miss it; the sharp-shinned hawk quietly jets at an unsuspecting bird, snagging it with sharp golden talons (on long and thin legs, hence its common name) in an instant, before taking the prey back to their nest for consumption or adaptive chick feeding. The velocity at which it travels, even within its preferred habitat of deep forest, is what allows for this smaller hawk to spectacularly conquer prey larger than itself! Adult individuals have auburn bars on a white chest, contrasted against grayish blue upperparts and a crown of the same color. In flight, their square-tipped tail is a good identifying feature.

Sharp-shinned hawks are one of the many raptor species whose population was impacted by DDT pesticide during the mid 1900s

(unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Cooper's Hawk

The name of the Cooper's hawk came to fruition through the nephew of French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, Charles, who named this species for New York naturalist William C. Cooper. As opposed to the sharp-shinned hawk that likes to perform flybys on prey, these daredevils prefer the thrill of a high speed pursuit, even with the risk of injury to chest bones like the furcula (wishbone) when darting through a concentrated forest. Its round-tipped tail is a main identifying feature that rules out the aforementioned hawk.



While the northern United States is only utilized for breeding, the rest of the country can host individual Cooper's hawks all year (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Red-shouldered Hawk

Four overlapping subspecies of the red-shouldered hawk inhabit the deciduous forests of the eastern United States, and over 1,000 miles away, a fifth has established itself on the Pacific coast. Slight differences between these birds should not hinder identification; if the shoulder patch for which its named is not visible, the black-and-white barred tail and translucence in the wings can act as the distinguishing features. They also have a fair amount of rufous coloring on their underparts, and it transitions smoothly into a gray head with thin dark streaking. No matter how hard they try, these raptors just can't seem to shake the nuisances that are American crows and great horned owls; all three species share similar diets and aren't afraid to seek out the hatchlings of their antagonists.



Red-shoulder hawks almost always return to the same nesting territory, year after year (unknown date: photo by Heather Wolf, via Brooklyn Eagle)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Broad-winged Hawk



Broad-winged hawks are one of many raptor species that take advantage of thermals, or columns of rising air due to their temperatures. Flocks of these birds (called kettles) numbering in the thousands utilize them to glide across the landscape; when migrating, they can soar almost 70 miles in a single day. They are very regal-looking; short golden legs prop up a slender body, brown with white flecks on the upperparts and opposite in the underparts. When wings are outstretched for catching the aforementioned thermals, a dark border is clearly visible. Despite being tough to spot during the breeding season, it is likely that broad-winged hawks will make their presence known through their calls, a two-part whistle with the first note shorter and higher pitched.

Banding on the tail is another visual cue for broad-winged hawks, exhibited in this photo (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Red-tailed Hawk



There's a good chance you've seen a red-tailed hawk before; they are the most widely distributed and commonly seen of all North American hawks. You've most likely heard them as well, as their calls tend to be substituted for the bald eagles' chatter in movies and television shows! The easiest identifying factor is their pale underside with a brown streaked band across their belly. Adults will have more vivid brown plumage, especially in their tail which can appear rufous at times. A varied diet (small mammals, ground-dwelling birds, small reptiles, and carrion) and diverse habitat preference (agricultural fields, grasslands, scrub desert, tropical rain forests, woodlands, etc.) are primary contributing factors to this bird's security.

Red-tailed hawks are known to live for more than 30 years; the male in this picture, named Pale Male, blossomed into a New York City celebrity of his own while nesting above Manhattan for three decades (unknown date: photo from NYC Bird Alliance)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Rough-legged Hawk



Rough-legged hawks, primarily migrating from the continuously illuminated cliff ledges of the Arctic, only stop through our region if they deem it a suitable source of food for that winter season. They'll consume one quarter pound per day (approximately %10 of their bodyweight), or about five small prey organisms. If not perched, one can witness these birds soaring on thermals, or even more peculiarly, hovering in one spot to scan fields for their meals (ground squirrels, rabbits, mice, and shrews while they're here). Unfortunately, they're tougher to identify beyond that; plumage varies incredibly, and they do not vocalize during the nonbreeding period. If anywhere, they'll pop up along the marshes of Saratoga Lake, or the fields and rough grasslands surrounding the waterbody.

Expect rough-legged hawks to be most active during the hours of dawn and dusk
(unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Falcons

American Kestrel



The American kestrel is the smallest of the North American falcons, clocking in averages of 9" and 22" for length and wingspan respectively. While their size makes them geared to snatch insects, small birds, and other prey (such as voles, whose urine trail they can see with their ultraviolet vision), they are also geared to become the prey of many larger birds. The coloration on this grassland species is quite intricate; rufous upperparts blend into a cinnamon breast and light undertail feathers, and different markings all over the bird accentuate that. You can put nest boxes up weeks before breeding season to attract a pair and preserve their vulnerable population, but don't expect a cleanly space upon vacancy!

American kestrels can hide surplus captured prey in grass clumps, tree roots, fence posts, and cavities such as this one, in order to save the food or hide it from pirating birds
(1/31/2022: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Merlin



Much like other birds of prey, merlins have also recovered well with the 1972 federally ordered ban of DDT, a pesticide chemical that was causing their egg shells to thin. As smaller falcons, they were once called pigeon hawks; their flight is characterized by powerful wingbeats, rapid velocities, and sharp turns on a dime. They are, however, larger than American kestrels, and therefore launch faster aerial attacks on small birds and mammals, clutched by yellow claws. One SLPID floating classroom was fortunate to walk past a female merlin perching along the state boat launch shoreline, pictured below; like the male, its underparts are streaked brown, but their backs are also brown as opposed to the males' slate gray. The barred tail (visible below) and pointed angular wings (in flight) can help with identification as well.

A female merlin perching along the Saratoga Lake State Boat Launch shoreline (7/24/2024: photo from SLPID Lake Steward team)

Peregrine Falcon



The origin of the peregrine falcon's name stems from its wandering nature, for it is distributed worldwide and their flights cover great distances. They are known even better for their title as the fastest bird species; when "stooping" for birds from astounding heights of more than half a mile, speeds of more than 200 miles per hour can be achieved! Both sexes are dark hooded with a yellow eye ring, finely striped dark on light underparts, and colored a slate blue/gray on the upperparts. When paired, peregrine falcons return to the same nest sites year after year, primarily located on cliffsides; recently, they have adapted to raising an annual brood of 5-1 chicks on the ledges of tall buildings in booming cities, living on pigeons.

Peregrine falcons are one of the most globally widespread bird species, occurring in all continents with the exception of Antarctica (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Owls

Eastern Screech-Owl



100 percent nocturnal is the eastern screech-owl; it's hard to believe, but the spooky vocalizations one hears at night (screeches, trills, and whinnying) come from this bird, no larger than a pint glass. They reside in natural tree cavities or artificial nest boxes, where a nest isn't even built. If there are multiple hatchlings in the annual brood of 6-2 eggs, fighting for food and siblicide can occur. Those that grow up to adulthood will sport small "ear" tufts, yellow eyes, white spots on the inner wing feathers, and camouflaged gray or red coloration determined by genetics. The rufous plumage form is more common in the easternmost populations, and the establishment of intermediate plumage forms is possible.

By recovering regurgitated pellets from beneath the nest of an Eastern screech-owl, one can better understand its dietary habits (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Great Horned Owl



Widely distributed throughout almost all of North America, the great horned owl is divided into +13 subspecies. The species is named for the large "ears" on adults, jutting outwards atop a rusty facial disk surrounding wide yellow eyes. There is white in the chin and throat; underparts and the undertail are heavily barred, with the upperparts mottled dark. Wings are long and broad, some individuals flaunting dark arcs on the underside. Great horned owls aren't fully nocturnal like Eastern screech-owls, but with a larger size they can capture a wider range of prey. This includes birds ranging in size from wrens to large raptors, frogs, rodents, reptiles, and even scorpions. In unorthodox fashion, their annual brood of eggs is laid towards the beginning of the calendar year, in January or early February.

When clutching their prey, great horned owls can exhibit a gripping force of up to 30 pounds(unknown date: photo from New York Times)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Barred Owl



The barred owl is closely related to the spotted owl (native to western North America), and the latter has begun to experience further population displacement as a result of recent range overlap, showcasing the former's adaptability and aggression. As a mostly nocturnal species, a sighting of the barred owl is a treat; they typically perch quietly throughout forested habitat while observing the ground below, waiting patiently to pounce on small birds and mammals, amphibians, insects, and reptiles. Don't fret if you can't locate this bird right away, however! Barred owls don't migrate, so they stay close to a home location, and they sometimes hunt during daytime hours. Keep a lookout for a yellow bill, a white belly with buffy streaking, brown upperparts with white spotting, and dark, enchanting orb-like eyes. Their call is a classic vocalization with four hoots, the third a slightly lower pitch.

With an enigmatic hooting call and soulful eyes, the barred owl is a very captivating bird of prey (8/27/2021: photo by Gary Chapin, via eBird)

Northern Saw-whet Owl



A teeny owl with, funnily enough, a cat like face; when the eyes of the northern saw-whet owl widen, it's most likely they've spotted a mouse or a vole from above and are prepping their attack. This nocturnal bird of prey is seldom seen, even when it returns to the same sites for weeks or months at a time. If spotted, they will freeze more often than fly; a white facial patch, chestnut upperparts with white spots, brown-and-white streaked underparts, and a short tail will characterize this standstill bird. More often than not, you'll hear their whistle, consistent in high pitch and timing. Ornithologists from Project Owlnet have utilized recordings of this call to band individuals of this elusive species and study their migration.

Northern saw-whet owls are capable of migrating over large bodies of water, even despite their tiny size (unknown date: photo from Finger Lakes Land Trust)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Woodpeckers

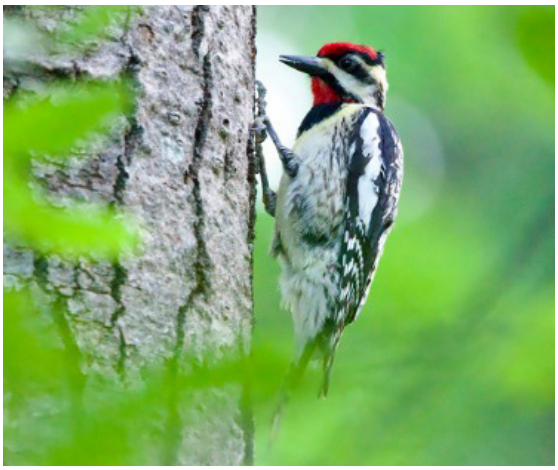
Red-bellied Woodpecker



Birdwatchers should be advised that the name “red-bellied woodpecker” is rather misleading; if anything, this animal will have a slight red tinge by their undertail feathers, barely perceptible unless they’re positioned perfectly. Most of the red on this bird comes from the vivid crown (gray in females) and nape, which stand out brilliantly next to black-and-white finely striped upperparts and wings. You can find individuals of this species in the middle heights of forest environments, where the male drills many holes for the female to select one nesting site (these locations are usually prone to hostile European starling takeovers). They forage for insects during the breeding season, but do not excavate trees in their search like other kinds of woodpeckers.

Upstate New York, within the Capital Region and along the Lake Champlain basin, mark the northeastern-most breeding territory of the red-bellied woodpecker (unknown date: photo from Brooklyn Botanic Garden)

Yellow-bellied Sapsucker



Yellow-bellied sapsuckers perform two types of tree excavation for the consumption of its viscous product; small round holes give the bird an area to wedge its bill and probe for sap, whereas rectangular holes are shallower, require continuous maintenance, and force the bird to lick the liquid sustenance. New holes are created upon a range of more than 1,000 trees and woody plant species, but these birds prefer birch and maple trees; any drillings they make will be in line with preexisting holes, whether horizontally or vertically. While both sexes have the yellow-tinged breast, a red forehead, and black-and-white throughout (neatly striped on the head and barred on the upperparts), only males have red on the throat. The yellow-bellied sapsucker is the one entirely migratory woodpecker species; wintering throughout wooded areas in the southeastern United States and other Caribbean/Central American lands, they migrate to the northeastern United States and southern Canada for the breeding season.

The namesake feature of the yellow-bellied sapsucker, much like the red-bellied woodpecker, is barely perceptible (5/23/2024: photo by Jan Rothe, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Downy Woodpecker



It can be tough to differentiate between the downy and hairy woodpeckers; they are both black and white all over, with one small spot of red towards the back of their head. As a rule of thumb, the former's smaller size (a 7-6" length) matches with its shorter pointed bill, in comparison to the latter (a 10-9" length, with a wider wingspan and longer bill in relation to its head). This bird's stature allows it to coexist with other woodpecker varieties, since it can access smaller insects and spiders within bark crevices on both dead and live trees; occasionally, it will even be found attempting to crack open plant galls for the larvae they contain. In wintertime, they often join mixed-species flocks with males occupying the more productive small branches and weed stems (females tend to take the large branches and trunks).

Downy woodpeckers are most comfortable perching on branches whenever they're not acrobatically foraging (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Hairy Woodpecker



In addition to size, sound can also be used to figure out whether a woodpecker is of the downy or hairy variety; the latter's call is similar to the former's with greater volume and a deeper pitch. To coexist with its smaller relative, the hairy woodpeckers occupy trunks for foraging over branches and smaller vegetation. When they're feeling lucky, they trail much larger pileated woodpeckers, where they can explore freshly excavated tree cavities and consume any insects that were initially missed. Furthermore, some individuals have been exhibited drinking the sap leaking from maple tree taps.

In North America, the settlement of the hairy woodpecker is not limited by elevation (unknown date: photo from Town of Marlborough, NY)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Northern Flicker

As ground foragers, northern flickers are a unique variety of woodpecker. A long bill and barbed tongue serves them well for plucking ants during the breeding season and fruit otherwise. To add onto this, their plumage is also distinct for a woodpecker species; eastern North America is home to a yellow-shafted form, with a vivid gold color in the underwings and undertail. Individuals of this form will also possess a black "mustache," a red nape, a black crescent necklace and light brown body feathers with detailed dark markings all over. If one ever hears a rapid drumming on what sounds like a loud metal object, this could be a northern flicker attempting to communicate or defend their territory.



Northern flickers, unlike other North American woodpecker species, are strongly migratory (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Pileated Woodpecker

Seeing a pileated woodpecker in the forest for the first time can be quite startling, as they are by far the largest of the North American woodpeckers. Slow and deep wingbeats translate to powerful flight, and slight undulation occurs with the brief tucking of the wings between each stroke; their swoops to decelerate and latch onto a perch are just as eerily breathtaking! Both sexes share a mostly black plumage with large white wing patches, a bright red crest and a black eye stripe, but their foreheads and "mustache" differ in color (both black in females and red in males). If you ever see dead trees stripped of their bark with oval-shaped cavities, you can be certain one has been in the area scouring for insects such as beetle larvae, carpenter ants, and termites.



Pairs of pileated woodpeckers stick together all year round on their territory, defending it intently (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

New World Flycatchers

Great Crested Flycatcher



An ornate insect-catching bird; to snatch flying insects out of the air, the great crested flycatcher glides with intention. They also soar directly between canopy perches to find small berries/fruits and caterpillars, hovering to grab them with a long and thin bill. Olive on their crest extends onto their back, and the gray in their face and breast turn to a bright yellow in the belly. They also have a long tail, and wings have rusty edges and some white barring. Listen for their loud whistles in deciduous and mixed woodlands with clearings and a water source nearby; when building their nests in the cavities of trees, they incorporate shed snakeskin and other crinkly resources, such as onion skin, leaves, bark, and even plastic.

As a bird of the upper canopy, great crested flycatchers rarely spend time on the ground (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Eastern Kingbird



Eastern kingbirds are one of the easier passerine (perching bird) identifications; their white tipped tail is conspicuous, as is the countershading of dark slate gray upperparts and light underparts. They'll be easy to spot when they perch on many lookout points, or when they're staunchly defending their breeding territory from any overhead intruders. Root/stem/twig nests in open tree habitats, sometimes recycled across multiple breeding seasons, yield a brood of 5-1 hatchlings; brown-headed cowbird eggs are recognized as imposters and booted if possible. Because of their nearly 2 month period of parent dependence for nourishment, the adults are limited to one annual brood. When they grow up to the self-feeding stage, they regurgitate the exoskeletons of insects that have them.

Eastern kingbird nestlings begin to perform adult calls about two weeks into their lives (6/9/2020: photo by Richard Guthrie, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Olive-sided Flycatcher



A new world flycatcher on the decline, primarily due to the loss of wintering habitat and other factors; while their primary food source of insects are also decreasing, they prove abundant in freshly burned coniferous forests, a habitat frequented by the olive-sided flycatcher. When nests composed of lichen, roots, and twigs are built, both females and males defend it vigorously from squirrels and other pests. They are difficult to catch around Saratoga Lake, since their plumage is a dull gray/olive (with the exception of white feathers on the throat and belly). Fortunately, their three note calls (an evenly spaced “pip-pip-pip”) and songs (a loud “whip-wee-deer”) are unforgettable if heard at forest edges near sources of standing water.

Of all breeding flycatcher varieties in the United States, the olive-sided flycatcher performs the longest migration (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Explorer)

Eastern Wood-Pewee

The geographical denomination of the eastern wood-pewee is as accurate as can be; this species breeds across the eastern half of the continental United States, not crossing the 50th parallel north (a latitudinal line running just north of the Canada/United States border) or the 100th meridian west (a longitudinal line running from North Dakota to Texas). Thin white wing bars, a yellow lower mandible on its bill, a partial eye ring, and slight yellow on its underparts are key identifying features. If walking amongst mixed forests with clearings, keep a ready ear for its slurred call coming from the middle of the canopy; do not expect a presence of this bird species where white-tailed deer consistently forage, however.



Eastern wood-pewees utilize lichen to cover their nests, camouflaging
it almost perfectly (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Alder Flycatcher

The Traill's flycatcher was split into two separate species, the alder flycatcher and the willow flycatcher, in 1973; the songs of the once-joined pair have been noticeably different, and the former breeds further north than any other taxonomic family member (in western Canada and Alaska). Countershaded with drab olive above and white below, two wing bars on each outstretched wing are among the best ways to properly identify this species. Given their nests are extremely tough to locate, little is known about the breeding behaviors of the alder flycatcher.



Even when willow flycatcher songs are imprinted on them during their first two months of life, alder flycatcher nestlings grow up to sing the song of their own species (5/21/2022: photo by Jennifer Wilson-Pines, via eBird)

Willow Flycatcher

While it used to be lumped with the nearly identical alder flycatcher as one taxonomically, there are a few specific distinctions that help justify the willow flycatcher being a species of its own. They glean insects from the atmosphere almost always as opposed to from plants, they fall victim to brown-headed cowbird brood parasitism more frequently, and they inhabit slightly different wintering grounds. It is the vocalizations, however, that primarily set the willow flycatcher apart from its visually resemblant relative. Calls are soft and buzzier, whereas songs are sharp and accented.



Because of brown-headed cowbird parasitism and loss of viable breeding habitat, willow flycatcher populations are currently declining (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Least Flycatcher



As tiny deciduous forest birds, least flycatchers face instigation from many other larger avian species within their breeding territory, but this does not deter them whatsoever from aggressively responding. Individuals are extremely efficient with the defense of their turf, which they hold for a two month duration and perform an entire nesting cycle. During this period, they are brown/olive on the back, pale yellow on the breast, dark with two white bars in each wing, and have a white eye ring. Since they immediately commence migration upon offspring independence, a plumage molt waits until after the 4-3 week, 70-60 mile per day traverse, on the Central American wintering grounds.

To reach their Central American wintering grounds, least flycatchers fly an average of 60-70 miles per day across 3-4 weeks (5/17/2019: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Eastern Phoebe



1804- marked the first ever banding of a bird specimen in North America; John James Audubon, with a silver thread, tracked the annual return of a singular eastern phoebe. The bird was named for its prevalence throughout this side of the continent and its song, emphatic and raspy during their breeding period. Unlike other related species, these flycatchers migrate early in the spring and therefore raise two broods, doing so on buildings, in culverts, under bridges, and more. Anywhere near water is a perfect place for an eastern phoebe observation; adults will sport a round and dark capped head, olive/yellow tints on the underparts, and a long dark tail. In flight, each dark rounded wing will have two faint wing bars.

Eastern phoebes are known to reuse nests across breeding seasons, even when barn swallows inhabit them between visits (unknown date: photo from Brooklyn Botanic Garden)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Shrikes/Vireos

Northern Shrike



Their presence is not strong in the developed and residential areas of upstate New York, but if one sees a northern shrike, they are likely to meet again; this species facilitates a wintering territory, which could lie close to a feeder and potential prey birds. When a meal is secured via their tomial tooth (a spike and corresponding notch on the mandibles), they sometimes store it for later by impaling it on barbed wire or nearby spines. Appropriately nicknamed "butcher birds," they are visually discerned best by their narrow black mask, which runs through their already dark eyes. Black feathers are also present on a long tail (bordered white) and along the wings, each having one conspicuous white bar. When searching for a northern shrike, their plumage base is a pale gray, which isn't the most visible against fallen snow; keep this in mind as you look atop fenceposts and many other perches.

Adult northern shrikes from both sexes sing their songs across the calendar year (unknown date: photo from Saranac Lake)

Yellow-throated Vireo



An elaborate species in many regards; for one, the breeding specifications of yellow-throated vireos are very refined. Collectively, these birds are associated with the edges of mature mixed woodlands, but only raise broods successfully if the forested area is of sufficient size, typically more than 250 acres. If not spending time on mid-level branches close to a tree's trunk, they can be found vocalizing from the apex of the canopy. Their plumage is hard to miss, with vivid gold appearing on their breast, throat, and "spectacles" that contrast dark eyes. An olive back, a gray rump, dark wings (each with two white bars), and white on the belly are also apparent. The range of the yellow-throated vireo continues to expand despite population pressures from forest fragmentation, brown-headed cowbird brood parasitism, and insecticide use.

To raise an annual brood of 3-5 eggs, yellow-throated vireos bound animal and plant fibers together with spider webs (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Blue-headed Vireo



Since blue-headed vireos tend to remain close by trees of undisturbed forests, they are much more likely to be heard as opposed seen; their sound is harsh and chattered when calling, or high-pitched and slurred when singing. However, if patiently spotted within a mature woodland (deciduous, mixed, or even coniferous) setting, these birds will have a slate blue/gray head with white "spectacles" similar to that of the yellow-throated vireo. From a green back extends dark wings (each with two white bars), flanked with yellow; the white on their breast continues up to their throat. From their taxonomic family, blue-headed vireos are most likely to migrate towards breeding grounds first.

Blue-headed vireos, while flying, appear to exhibit heavy undulating flight, with bursts of deep wingbeats (unknown date: photo from NYC Birding Alliance)

Warbling Vireo



Per All About Birds, the warbling vireo is "a great bird to learn by ear, because its fast, rollicking song is its most distinctive feature;" with previous descriptors such as cheerful, melodious, and sweet as apple blossoms, it is safe to say this bird is properly named. This species is most likely to dwell in deciduous and mixed wooded terrain situated near water, often times towards the top of the canopy. A white eyebrow, amongst countershading with green/gray above and white/yellow below, will stand out more than anything on this bird visually. Brown-headed cowbird eggs often end up in the nests of warbling vireos against their will; it is up to them whether or not they'll puncture and eject the imposter, or incubate and raise the newly adopted offspring.

Of all vireo species, the warbling vireo is most likely to breed in anthropogenic settings (unknown date: photo from National Geographic)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Red-eyed Vireo



One of, if not the most persistent breeding season singer; when red-eyed vireos migrate from equatorial South America and land in the forests of North America, it's almost like their wings turn off and their vocal organs turn on. These birds prefer hopping through the canopy to flying, and are truly nonstop with their sound production. One individual male can retain 30 or more different songs, and sing over 22,000 times in one day. The red eye it is named after has a white eyebrow, sandwiched between dark gray; underparts are white, and upperparts show more olive than gray. Look for a longer bill relative to other vireo species as well.

Red-eyed vireos actually have brown eyes as juveniles, before growing into the red hue shown here (unknown date: photo from Birding Bob)

Jays/Crows

Blue Jay



For a very raucous organism, the blue jay could be considered a formidable bird species. Their unmistakable plumage consists of primarily blue upperparts (plain on the mantle but patterned with sophistication on the wings and tail) to go with light underparts and a uniquely colored head; combine this with a harsh screaming call and you have one of the most recognizable backyard flyers in the eastern United States. Most observers of this species regard it as cruel due to the frequency at which it displaces smaller birds at feeders, not to mention the nest raids for egg and chick consumption. In these observers' defense, most are likely unaware of the numerous complexities of the blue jay; its social systems (incredibly tight family bonds and cooperative flocks), advanced communication (including mimicry), facial recognition, and mysterious migrations are among just a few.

As heavy omnivores, blue jays can be seen eating many different nutritional items (unknown date: photo by Heather Wolf, via Bluedot Living Brooklyn)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

American Crow



The American crow is a highly social species with a widespread distribution throughout nearly every habitat type. A notorious “caw” is the signature sound for this bird, and juveniles can be singled out by a higher pitch; the younger individuals also sport a dull black appearance and a shorter bill which will eventually grow in dark. Much like the common raven, their larger, very similarly shaded counterpart, American crows are widely omnivorous and never too “boujee” to pick through garbage for a meal. With many a trick up their wing to sneak meals, complemented by their construction and use of tools, it’s easy to see how they can be long-lived birds; one captive individual in the state of New York reached 59 years of age.

American crows are considered very inquisitive birds, always looking out for an attention-catching signal (12/18/2021: photo by mickingles, via iNaturalist)

Common Raven



Right away, an observer will be able to notice a common raven; they are approximately twice the size of an American crow, which allows for a series of surreal vocalizations with deeper pitches. Sleek black with a faint purple gloss, the long wings and tail of this bird are accented by flared outer wing feathers and a spade shape respectively, contributing to its acrobatic flight maneuvers. Extending outwards above shaggy throat feathers, a thick and long bill with a noticeable curve permits an omnivorous diet of carrion, small crustaceans, fish, fruit, garbage, grain, nest contents, and more. A cornerstone of classical literature, common ravens are widely considered to be one of, if not the most intelligent of all the world’s birds.

When flocking, common ravens can communicate food source-related information to its groupmates (unknown date: photo by Clara MacCarald, via Ithaca Times)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Larks

Horned Lark



Extensive barren habitat is where one can potentially find horned larks; unfortunately, they'll be tough to spot when snow isn't on the ground, since the dark streaks on their rufous upperparts allow them to blend in with the ground seamlessly. The only outstanding parts of their plumage are in the face, adorned with black/yellow striping and tiny "horns," most prominent during the breeding season. To initiate this period, a female horned lark will court their male counterparts by bathing in dust; she, once the nest is built, gathers "pavings" for concealing any displaced soil. Whether composed of pebbles, corn cobs, or even dung, this collection resembles a walkway, though its actual function has yet to be discovered.

When foraging along the ground, a horned lark's legs will be bent to the point that they disappear under their bodies (unknown date: photo from NYC Bird Alliance)

Swallows

Tree Swallow



One has not seen a tree swallow until they witness this species zipping after airborne insects; spontaneous twists and turns on dark pointed wings make for one of the best avian shows around. These birds, with their upper body shimmering teal above a solid white underside, also have a slightly forked tail. Although they are among the best studied birds in the North American continent, little is known about the details of their migration and winter habitat. What is known is the quantity of their flocks upon arriving at the breeding grounds; once a landing spot has been decided, hundreds of thousands of tree swallows swirl downwards to rest their wings. Year-to-year population numbers will vary with fluctuations in cavity availability, and shoreline property owners are encouraged to install a nest box if possible.

When perching, the dark flight feathers of a tree swallow can be seen clearly (unknown date: photo from Buffalo Spree)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Northern Rough-winged Swallow



Northern rough-winged swallows appear to be the dull relative of their family with monotonous brown plumage, but they do have pleasant intricacies upon much closer inspection. Observers equipped with binoculars will be able to notice the light crescent behind their eyes, as well as a pale gray belly and a square tail in flight. However, it is only those handling birds of this species that can sense the tiny and rigid serrations on their outer wing feathers; Stelgidopteryx serripennis, the binomial (genus and species) name for northern rough-winged swallows, translates to the phrases “scraper wing” and “saw feather” respectively. Individuals can nest at a wide range of altitudes, preferring exposed banks near water with an abundance of insects.

In unorthodox fashion, northern rough-winged swallows molt some of their feathers while in flight (unknown date: photo by Buffalo Blueway)

Purple Martin



In the eastern United States, including Saratoga Lake, community residences suited to purple martin nesting preferences are managed by devoted bird lovers. The rich violet feathers on this endearing bird make it difficult not to fall for; males showcase this color better with a black forked tail and long dark wings, whereas females are more slate overall with a pale collar and underparts. Older birds will always make their way to breeding grounds earlier than younger birds, claiming previous nesting sites. In flight, they nearly skim the water’s surface to open their bill and drink If those who maintain purple martin nesting grounds would like to do more for this species, a snack of crushed eggshells near their summer home will help digest the insects it consumes at 500-150 feet above ground.

Between breeding in protected communal spaces such as this one, and roosting in flocks, purple martins are a highly social species (4/7/2018: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Barn Swallow



The first Audubon Society was founded in response to the hat-making trade's impact on barn swallows; fortunately, they have thrived in their modern ecological role. Having nested in caves before New World settlement, barns and other buildings now provide shelter from natural elements like wind, precipitation, and most if not all predation. A deeply forked tail with twin streamers brings much flair to these birds, as do the metallic navy head/upperparts and the rich chestnut forehead/throat; even streaking through the air on long pointed wings is dazzling, for they capture insects lower to the ground than any other related taxa. In an instance where one barn swallow can't deliver sustenance to their young, older siblings of that bird or unrelated juveniles step up to feed and nurture the offspring.

(unknown date: photo from Nature on the Edge of New York City)

Chickadees/Titmice

Black-capped Chickadee



A northeast backyard staple, the black-capped chickadee is endearing to many who consistently enjoy its presence. It is named for its black cap and bib, which are separated by white cheeks and a short black bill; a dark tail and wings are highlights by white edges, and brown/gray upperparts above sandy colored underparts complete this bird's look. The word "chickadee" is what their call sounds like, with the last syllable being repeated more for a higher threat level. For a petite organism, the neuroplasticity in their brains is incredible; old neurons with unnecessary information are replaced by fresh neurons every autumn, keeping this species adept to slight changes in their environment and flock. Individual birds can also recall thousands of seed hiding spots, if their supply of insects dwindles.

To cope with frigid winter temperatures, black-capped chickadees can lower their body temperature, to conserve energy in a controlled hypothermic state
(unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Tufted Titmouse



A valiant feeder friend; tufted titmice are the small spiffy forest birds of eastern backyards, recognized by their prominent head crest and orange flanks that fall between their two-toned gray pattern. They are springtime breeders, and their life cycle is a testament to why we should leave the natural world unaltered as best we can; since titmice can't carve out their own tree cavity, they must rely on the presence of dead trees where woodpeckers have previously excavated. When its diet shifts from insects, spiders, and their eggs to small fruits and seeds, they begin to utilize secret storage sites that sit a short flight away from one or multiple feeder locations. A small but pointed bill can crack even the toughest of acorns with a few whacks.

The orange flanks on a tufted titmouse can vary in hue, dependent upon how long it's been since they last molted (unknown date: photo by Audubon New York)

Nuthatches

Red-breasted Nuthatch



-The red-breasted nuthatch shares a nasally sound with its white-breasted counterpart, but with a more horn-like, musical touch at a wide range of speeds. Individuals of this species flaunt a black-and-white facial coloring, complete with dull blue/gray upperparts that are countered by rusty underparts. Its bill is shorter than the white-breasted nuthatch, however, the red-breasted nuthatch is capable of physically carving out a home for itself, and it does so in pine trees. They collect resin and sap from all coniferous trees with tools, utilizing it around the entrance of their nest hole to ward off competitors and predators. At feeders during the winter, observers note energetic behavior from these birds; some even call it inquisitive.

The extent of red-breasted nuthatch migration, during autumn, is highly dependent upon food availability and population cycles (unknown date: photo from Times Union)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

White-breasted Nuthatch



Don't be offended if you hear what sounds like a nasally laugh coming from the forest; that's just the white-breasted nuthatch's way of communicating! This tiny bird is extremely agile while moving on tree trunks, walking with ease in all directions and even descending head-first. Individuals give a thorough inspection to the crevices and furrows they travel, intensively searching for insects with their long and pointed bill reminiscent of a chisel. Despite its qualities, it is unable to excavate trees for their space, and the white-breasted nuthatch resorts to old woodpecker cavities, much like the tufted titmouse. This species is one they often join forces with in the wintertime, in order to reduce energy finding food and increase vigilance. Keep an eye out for slate blue/grey upperparts and gray/white underparts with a chestnut lower belly; in flight, their wings are rounded, as is their tail which has white flashes.

Of North American nuthatch species, the white-breasted variety is the largest (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Creepers

Brown Creeper



One of the toughest forest birds to spot; diminutive and camouflaged to the trees they cling to, the brown creeper can be a well sought after checkmark on a birdwatcher's life list. Individuals are often observed zipping around on a singular tree trunk, propping themselves upwards with the help of their long forked tail. Other physical identifying features include light streaking which starts above the eyes and weakens towards the tail, entirely white underpart feathers, and a thin and downward-curving bill. Brown creepers probe all throughout the exteriors of trees for insects and their larvae, eggs, and pupae, as well as aphids if they are present. These birds perform an odd nesting ritual, opting to set up hammock-esque abodes behind loosened bark flaps on dead trees.

Depending on the individual, the rusty rump and undertail feathers of a brown creeper can be slightly tinged or moderately colored (unknown date: photo from Bedford Audubon Society)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Wrens

House Wren



With an inhabitance spanning almost all of the western hemisphere, the northern house wren is a highly familiar songbird by sight and/or sound. Visually, they'll present a pale throat, a dull brown crown, deeper brown upperparts, and wings with faint barring. Their weight in grams barely cracks double digits, but this species is as fierce as they come; if they are insistent on inhabiting an already occupied cavity, these birds will puncture eggs, drag nestlings to their demise, and even kill adult birds on occasion. In the early 20th century, the turmoil had reached a point where naturalists and other bird lovers called for its eradication. Not for nothing, humans let nature run its course and it was later discovered that these birds have formed a mutualistic relationship with different spider species. When northern house wren nests accumulate parasites that pose threats to offspring, the parent birds introduce spider egg sacs to the home; the freshly hatched spiders tend to enjoy this first ever meal, while the health of the growing birds is preserved.

In 2024, taxonomists reclassified the house wren into seven different species: the northern house wren we know and love, the southern house wren, and five other species endemic to the Caribbean
(unknown date: photo from Buffalo Spree)

Winter Wren



Along the bottom of forests with dense understory, a winter wren is more than willing to belt out its song at extremely loud volumes; it often goes back and forth between that and bopping around tangled roots and upturned trees, daintily searching for different insects along the ground. Distinguishing features include a small and thin pointed bill, a tan eyebrow, dark brown barred wings, and a stubby barred tail that cocks upright when alarmed. They are very similar to pacific and Eurasian wrens, and 2010 marked the instance in which one species was split into those three, primarily based on genetic variation. Males will build multiple well-hidden nests, feather-lined mounds that occur in cavities of dead wood and creviced grounds; the first clutch of eggs is laid once the female makes her preference known.

It is not uncommon for several winter wrens to roost together in order to retain heat
(unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Marsh Wren



Much like their name suggests, marsh wrens spend their lives within wetland environments, both freshwater and saltwater. It isn't rare to spot them with their barred tail cocked and their twig-thin legs clutching to two different branches; an observer will also notice a light eyebrow, a brown forehead and cap, black-and-white behind the head, and rust on the inner wings and rump. Characterized as "pugnacious," these birds are similar to other wren species that forcibly remove established nesting families, but can exhibit intraspecies aggression too. Each male builds up to six dummy nests per mate, and up to 22 have been observed in a territory; this lies amongst the cattails and other tall vegetation, above water up to three feet deep. Ornithologists have conflicting opinions on whether the eastern and western subspecies (slightly different visually, but much more so behaviorally and vocally) should be taxonomically split.

Marsh wrens are capable of singing across all 24 hours of a day (unknown date: photo from The New York State Museum)

Carolina Wren



With a wintering range expanding northwards, the Carolina wren has made its mark on New York woodland ecosystems since the 1970s. They aren't the most visible to the public eye, but they are hard to miss when an appearance is made; its white eyebrow is prominent, and rufous upperparts with white wing spots are bordered by buffy underparts. Individual birds are capable of getting comfy within the smallest of cavities, whether they're natural or anthropogenic. Nests, a cup of weeds with leaves and twigs, hold 8-4 eggs broods, which occur two to three times per year. The wintertime can pose life or death scenarios for this miniature bird; heavy ice and snow temporarily withholds food resources, and forces an emergency dependence upon suet and other nutritional items.

The Carolina wren can appear anxious to the casual observer, flicking their tail and scanning their environment endlessly (unknown date: photo from National Geographic)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Gnatcatchers

Blue-gray Gnatcatcher



Nicknamed the little mockingbird by some, blue-gray gnatcatchers like to mix up their soft nasally wheezes with short soundbites from the songs of other birds; their tail even resembles the northern mockingbird, black with white outer tail feathers. Outside of this, white eye rings, and black eyebrows, the plumage is countershaded a pale slate above and light below. They are the only truly migratory species within their family, and they are smart enough to reuse nesting material many times over if struck by a series of unfortunate events. Do not be misled by their official denomination; blue-gray gnatcatchers rarely consume gnats if at all, hopping amongst deciduous trees or pine woodlands of all elevations to glean other small insects.

Populations of blue-gray gnatcatchers are both expanding in area and increasing in numbers (5/5/2018: photo by Gary Chapin, via eBird)

Kinglets

Golden-crowned Kinglet



A breeding bird of the coniferous north; unfortunately for golden-crowned kinglets, their fiery orange/yellow mohawk does not provide heat when temperatures reach their coldest, down to 40- degrees Fahrenheit in their year-round range. Females possess only the yellow coloration atop their head, but both sexes have black mohawk borders, broad white eyebrows, olive upperparts, and a white bar on each wing. Astonishingly, it is typical for these tiny birds to raise two large broods annually, even with a shorter nesting period; females feed the first batch of hatchlings, with males taking over upon the mother's incubation of the second set of eggs. He even gathers nourishment for his mate, a selection of insects and their eggs, if energy and time are permitting.

For each nostril, golden-crowned kinglets have one singular feather for protective coverage (unknown date: photo from American Bird Conservancy)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Ruby-crowned Kinglet



While the breeding range of ruby-crowned kinglets is continuous through some New England, Great Plains, and Pacific interior states, a lone isolated summer habitat exists in New York state. This includes Saratoga Lake, but also the southern forests of the Adirondack Park; attracting a mate is one of few occasions in which males will reveal their full crown, vivid red which can be slightly crested. He shares incomplete white eye rings, white bars running through dark wing patches, and olive coloration throughout the body with his female companion. As a small-statured bird, ruby-crowned kinglets are remarkable in their ability to lay up to 12 eggs in a brood, most likely a songbird species record. On top of this, only ~10ish (kilo)calories are burned daily by bouncing around the upper edges of small branches for insects, fruit, and seeds. Constant and energetic wing flicking can help with this species' identification.

The oldest ruby-crowned kinglet on record was just more than eight years old upon repcature and released in 2017 (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Thrushes

Eastern Bluebird



The state bird of New York; many avian species have endured population roller coasters, and the eastern bluebird is no stranger to that experience. The habitat they occupy (cavities along clearings and woodland edges) became degraded with the agricultural boom of the 1970s, so nest boxes were designed and constructed to their specifications, all throughout their range. Males, bright blue in the upperparts and rufous in the underparts (excluding their white belly and undertail), will transport grass, twigs, and weeds in between flashy calls to the female. She, a grayer bird with tinges of the signature colors, ends up furnishing the home and incubating the eggs, as the male ventures off to other partners. Two broods of 7-3 eggs are laid annually, where chicks are immediately introduced to an insect-rich diet supplemented by berries and wild fruit.

In the northern and western portion of their range, eastern bluebirds tend to lay more eggs per brood (unknown date: photo from Audubon New York)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Veery



Long distance nocturnal migration from Brazil brings veeries to the damp deciduous forests of the northern United States and southern Canada, who often situate themselves near flowing water. Though their breeding territory isn't as vast as other thrushes, they still show geographic variation across four subspecies, primarily in their "dusky" upperparts. They also lack prominent spotting, with faint brown marks appearing on the light underparts towards the throat. As a bird of woodland understories, they build a ground nest, safe from brown-headed cowbirds and their eggs if within thorny shrubs. Veeries forage low to and on the ground for insects, snails, and if they have already bred, fruit and berries. Any undisturbed woodlands nearby are subject to the vocals that inspired the name of the bird; calls are chattered whistles, and songs descend spookily across a series of metallic trills.

In one night, veeries can fly more than 150 miles, at elevations greater than 2,000 meters (unknown date: photo from Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies)

Swainson's Thrush



Swainson's thrushes can breed in upstate New York, but their true summer grounds lie further northeast and northwest, amidst conifers. More often than not, they'll visit the Saratoga Lake region during migration to and from Central/South American old growth forests. Unlike other thrush species, they are known to forage and nest in the intermediate growth of woodlands, more so than at ground level. Also called "mosquito thrushes" for their aerial pursuit of insects, Swainson's thrushes have some intriguing qualities to their vocalizations; songs are described as ascending flute-like whirls with odd reverberations. Volume control is also exerted, at both ends of the spectrum; quieter songs create an illusion of further distance, while louder songs are utilized in territorial disputes until one or both male birds are physically exhausted, chased, attacked, or all three.

A buffy face, especially in the eye rings, are a great indicator of a Swainson's thrush; this bird was named after William Swainson, an English ornithologist (unknown date: photo from Birding Bob)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Hermit Thrush



Solitary and sweet sounding are hermit thrushes, set apart from other thrushes by a reddish-tinged tail. Very light beige flanks, dark smudgy spots on a buff breast, and a thin white eye ring also adorn this species, Vermont's state bird. They nest on the ground in the eastern United States, and can forage there too, using their bill and feet to ruffle through dead and live plant matter for insects. Males will typically gather food for his family, with the mother of their babies feeding their offspring larvae at first. Larger arthropods and invertebrates, such as earthworms and salamanders, are fed later on to the brood, often a batch of four nestlings if all goes well. Bogs and other hidden away locations are among the best for hermit thrushes to raise their young, offering protection from ground and aerial predation.

As a result of geographic variation, nine subspecies of the hermit thrush have been recognized (unknown date: photo by Sue Barth, via Buffalo Ornithological Society)

Wood Thrush



Unfortunately, the wood thrush is one of the prime examples of songbird decline in North America; this is primarily attributed to their habit of recognizing brown-headed cowbird eggs as their own. To compound this issue, their eggshells need at least tenfold more calcium than other birds of a similar size, and the food items that provide this essential nutrient (such as snail shells) are very rare in areas prone to acid rain. The head is what sets this thrush apart from others; the crown is rusty colored, and a black bill is pink at the base. Wood thrushes perform duets with themselves during a three part song, and also does not repeat any tunes in head-to-head vocal battles. It is imperative to conserve this species as best as possible, for the food chain and seed dispersal patterns associated with this bird would be disrupted with further decline or extinction.

The dark triangular spots on a wood thrush's front side extend all the way from its neck to its flanks (8/30/2017: photo by Lindsey Duval, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

American Robin



Familiar to much of the continent; a thrush most notable in the early spring, the American robin is one of the first birds to sing its song every year. They own brick red underparts bordering gray upperparts (that become dark at the head and long square tail), punctuated by a broken white eye ring and a yellow bill. Many are familiar with their turquoise eggs as well, with up to four in one brood. While American robins can lay up to three broods annually, only %40 of nests are successful in bearing young that fledge; of those successful chicks, a quarter of them survive to November. Summer diets consist of insects and earthworms from suburban lawns, so whether or not they migrate in the winter is dependent upon fruit availability and concentration.

An American robin retrieves nesting material at Saratoga Springs' Waterfront Park (5/3/2024: photo by Yana Levchinsky, via eBird)

Thrashers/Mockingbirds/Catbirds/Relatives

Gray Catbird



Named for their feline-esque mewing call, and rightfully so, gray catbirds are a great beginner bird to learn by sound; they are also easy to recognize by sight, with a neutral gray base, dark cap, large black eyes, brick red undertail feathers, and a long black tail. If one happens to catch this species vocalizing, they'll also come to find that it mimics more than 40 birds, one or more frog species, electronic devices, machines, and other sources of sound. Songs sung from within thickets can last up to 10 minutes with randomized series of noise, in order to declare a territory establishment; females will only sing with their mate if he does so at a softer volume. When incubating a clutch of eggs, a pair can recognize and remove any brown-headed cowbird deposits. Gray catbirds love fruit and insects, consuming whichever is more available to them at the time.

Even though they are considered shy, gray catbirds tolerate the presence of nearby humans (5/6/2018: photo by graichen & recer, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Brown Thrasher



The already difficult to spot brown thrasher is becoming even further seldom seen, even though it can remove parasitic brown-headed cowbird eggs from its nest like other Mimidae family members. When forest fragmentation cuts up this bird's natural habitat into discontinuous patches, they lose the core of the scrubland area they so desperately require. An individual's vocal repertoire can accumulate over 1,100 imitations and songs, sometimes considered more impressive and richer than the related northern mockingbird. Both sexes defend the nest aggressively (to the point of drawing blood at times), incubate the eggs, and feed the young; without the shrubbery to conceal them, they become even more available to nearby predators and must therefore fledge quicker than other species.

Along the forest floor, brown thrashers consume insects and worms mainly, and have been observed pecking at cultivated grains, fruit, and nuts (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Northern Mockingbird



Much like its name suggests, Northern Mockingbirds are beyond skilled at incorporating many birds' songs into one audible display. Up to 100 different phrases from other species can be grouped together; typically, phrases are repeated with slight variation between each. Males even have separate spring and fall song catalogs sometimes, which can be heard day or night (which is boosted with the presence of a full moon). Visually, Northern mockingbirds can be discerned by a long dark tail with white outer feathers, dark wings with a white patch on each, a white ventral side, a gray head, and yellow eyes. A thin, pointed and curved bill proves excellent for berry consumption and secondary ant, beetle, and grasshopper snacks. Ornithologists are currently trying to theorize why mockingbirds, including the Northern, perform a wing flash display; one hypothesis posits that the action startles insects into revealing themselves.

Many were under the impression that northern mockingbirds were going to go extinct amidst the caged bird trade in the 18th and 19th centuries, but the species has recovered well since then

(unknown date: photo from Bluedot Living Brooklyn)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Starlings

European Starling



Originally non-native to the United States, the 1890s marked the introduction of 100 European starling individuals to New York City's Central Park. Little did many know just how the bird's quantity would explode to become one of, if not the most successful bird in North America. Fueled by insects and larvae as chicks before graduating to full omnivores, the adaptable and aggressive adults go head-to-head with larger native species for nest spaces; seldom do they collect a tally in the loss column. The appearance of an individual European starling is nothing short of brilliant; an overall dark black glossy plumage is detailed by sheens of blue, green, and purple. They also possess pointed triangular wings, bookended by a short, notched tail and a yellow bill of decent length. While many consider this species a pest, many also consider it one of the best vocal mimics in the bird world.

All European starlings are closely related, given their relatively recent arrival in the United States (4/16/2021: photo by amandaandmike, via iNaturalist)

Waxwings

Cedar Waxwing



Cedar waxwings are spark birds and they know it! Their plumage is splendid; a yellow belly smooths into a brown neck and head, where a black eye mask outlined in white extends to a wispy head crest. The only dull part of their coloration (a brown back that blends into a gray tail) is made flashy by red feather tips on the inner wing and yellow-tipped tail feathers. Seeing nomadic flocks of the cedar waxwing consume berries should not be taken for granted; there is no guarantee that this species will return to that very plant, let alone region. The seeds are able to pass directly through the digestive system of these birds, unlike other species who need to regurgitate them. If they are not careful, they can become intoxicated from the consumption of overripe fruits that have begun to ferment and produce alcohol.

Female cedar waxwings can take more than 2,500 individual trips to a nest site in order to furnish their summer home (7/8/2021: photo by Gregory Hamlin, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

House Sparrow



Across 170 years of residing in North America, the house sparrow has assumed a role living in close quarters with human society. As opposed to a natural cavity site for their nests, these birds prefer anthropogenic structures; individuals are very aggressive in defending their nests, whether they be in street lights, nest boxes, or different buildings. They have become so frequent outside of our front doors that many have begun to disregard them, but this species has some intriguing behaviors. If you get the chance to observe one for an extended period of time, you might catch a dust bath, which establishes a point of defense for that individual bird. House sparrows also, like farm poultry, share a pecking order; the larger a black facial patch is on a male, the older he is, translating to more dominance over younger birds.

House sparrows were introduced to the United States, more specifically Brooklyn, New York, in 1850 (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Finches

Evening Grosbeak



Evening grosbeaks are irregular visitors of winter birdfeeders throughout all of New York except for the Adirondacks, where they reside year round; Project FeederWatch tracks the appearances of this species and other irruptive nonbreeding migrants. They descend in noisy flocks, delivering descending calls and buzzy notes with its huge drab beak (perfect for seed cracking). Dark heads will have distinct yellow eyebrows and blend into a mustard colored rump and underside; black appears in the short squared tail and in the wings that each possess a large white patch. This plumage is sufficient to attract a drabber looking mate, as evening grosbeaks do not utilize complex sound to woo a female bird or establish a territory, despite their placement in the order Passeriformes.

The evening grosbeak has extended its range eastward over the past two centuries (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Explorer)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

House Finch



The bird beneficiaries of pretty privilege; unlike the European starling and house sparrows who were introduced to the United States, the house finch has received a greater welcome from the general public. This is most likely due to their rosy red head and bib, more so present on the males. Streaked bellies, long tail feathers and a thick bill for cracking seeds open are other noteworthy features on this finch; they approach feeders without fear and should be recognizable amongst other songbirds. Unlike other avian species, house finches feed their babies plant material exclusively and don't need to supplement animal foods for protein.

House finches were first reported in the eastern United States in 1941, when they appeared on Long Island, New York (unknown date: photo from 98.1 The Hawk)

Purple Finch



There's a good chance you'll hear this bird before you see it, if you see it; the song of the purple finch is typically bellowed from the apex of trees, and sometimes it includes sounds from other species. An uncommon bird, you'll find that this species is very similar in appearance to the house finch. Females are streaked buffy brown, but with more of a pale gray color and a light stripe behind their eye; males adorn shades of raspberry on their head, which flow into their white belly and into dark streaks on the upperparts. Much less perceptible is the male's light brown stripe, lying in between the bird's eyes and beak. While one might expect the birds to inhabit the same environments due to their similar physical and physiological nature, the purple finch tends to steer clear of the house finch; studies have shown that the former tend to lose out on competitions to the latter more than %95 of the time.

With their conical bills and tongues, purple finches are able to crush seeds and extract the nut within (12/19/2021: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Red Crossbill



Red crossbills are part of a special group, the genus Loxia, with perhaps one of the neatest features on a bird; their mandibles, instead of meeting at a point, are crossed. Over a long evolutionary period, these birds have acquired a highly efficient means of accessing the tight scales of a conifer seed cone. The association it has shared with different tree species is a stellar example of coevolution at work; different distributions of conifers across the United States has led to subspecies and the consideration of multiple species today. Since they have access to sustenance year round, red crossbills can breed so long as the resources nearby are abundant enough. Males possess the red coloring, exhibiting dark feathers only in their tail, wings, and eyestripe; females show more of an olive coloring on their breast.

With minimal interbreeding between subspecies, the red crossbill could be taxonomically split soon (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Pine Siskin



Savor the occasion if pine siskins ever grace a nearby feeder and monopolize it; these instances are becoming fewer and further between, as predation and disease has caused this species to shrink across the conifer belt of North America. To make matters more complicated, this species' nomadic nature makes it much more difficult to estimate their numbers. Visually, pine siskins show a bland but heavily streaked body, with brown coloration by their slender pointed bill and a pale eyebrow. Yellow appears at the base of their notched tail and in the outer wing feathers, turning into wing bars during flight. When temperatures dip as low as 94- degrees Fahrenheit, individuals up their metabolic rates significantly and consume any food stored in their crop, a pouch in their esophagus.

The ability to camouflage itself amongst pine cones and pine needles contributes to the pine siskin's fascinating nature (unknown date: photo from Bedford Audubon Society)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

American Goldfinch



Bright yellow contrasted by black is a welcome sight in the spring, for the American goldfinch is a symbol of warmer weather approaching. Males exhibit this plumage vividly, with the black occurring on their head and wings, and some white occurring in the rump and wing bars; females possess more drab colors, with their yellow appearing brightest by their throat. Despite their visual discrepancies, a mating pair of American goldfinches produce almost identical flight sounds. These birds are some of the strictest vegetarians around (consumption of insects and other food items is a rarity) with milkweed, thistle, and other annuals making up their preference. A delicate balance is exercised every year by this species; nests are built in a small window during the early summer, so that seeds from the aforementioned plants can be utilized to both construct the nest and nourish the chicks that grow inside of it.

Brown-headed cowbird brood parasitism does not heavily impact American goldfinches, for the extra hatchlings can't survive on a diet of exclusively seeds (unknown date: photo from Brooklyn Botanic Garden)

Longspurs/Snow Buntings

Snow Bunting



Snow buntings are experiencing a sharp decline in their once prominent population; climate change has made insect consumption for this species difficult, with warmer weather bringing this food source out earlier than expected, and competition rising with the range expansion of other species. Nocturnal migratory adventures pose collision threats, but they are smooth flyers while grouped; each bird and wave of birds undulates strongly while cycling front row duties continuously. When amongst other flocking winter birds, striking wing patches with black towards the wing tips can help single them out. Males, before leaving very early to secure the highest quality nesting grounds, will rub their belly and head on the snow to wear down those feather tips into a pure white hue. One can also look for these birds on roadsides during heavy winter snowfall.

Snow buntings are no stranger to Saratoga Lake, including this bird who was pictured peering out onto Brown's Beach (11/30/2023: photo by Yana Levchinsky, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

New World Sparrows

Chipping Sparrow



An impeccable rufous crown gives the chipping sparrow an easy identification during its summer stay; it sits atop a black bill, black eye lines and white eyebrows, gray underparts, and a long tail. They are fairly common across the continent when nesting, which occurs low in a shrub or tree; the construction is flimsy and poorly insulated, but can support three to five eggs at a time even when hanging above the ground. Wherever there is grass with trees interspersed, one can find chipping sparrows foraging for seeds, insects, and invertebrates; when flushed, they'll typically fly to a nearby perch on beige and brown streaked wings, undulating ever so slightly.

The oldest chipping sparrow on record was approximately 11 years old (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Field Sparrow



As suburban human habitat expands, nesting field sparrow habitat declines; their population has severely diminished over the past few decades, also due to a shorter lifespan of six years and being affected by brown-headed cowbird parasitism. This sparrow can and will breed multiple times in a season, if possible, with the first nest hidden on the ground and successive nests slightly higher in elevation. To identify field sparrows in early summer mornings, listen for the male's accelerating and trilling song, which happens often until he finds a mate. Both sexes display a bright pink beak, whitish eye rings, light rust in the cheek and crown, gray underparts, white wing bars, and a long slightly notched tail while spending time around Saratoga Lake's woodland edges.

As suitable habitat for the field sparrow has declined, their population figured have done the same (unknown date: photo from National Geographic)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Fox Sparrow



Among the rather uniform grouping of North American sparrows, the fox sparrow stands out fabulously with its vivid plumage. Rufous coloration appears on their white belly in the form of vertical chevrons, and on their back and tail; a gray nape and two thin white bars on each wing also adorn this species. This variety is considered the red subspecies, with other varieties inhabiting and breeding all throughout the boreal forest zone. In the winter, they occupy the southeastern United States and the Pacific coast. One can observe this species on the grounds of residential areas in many instances; by crouching down to leaf litter and hopping in one area, leaves are noisily disturbed, revealing a variety of insect prey.

The rusty brown colors on a fox sparrow are best observed when illuminated by the sun's rays (3/19/2016: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

American Tree Sparrow



The American tree sparrow is yet another misleading common name; settlers, when first observing this species, made a connection to the European tree sparrow, despite the American variety being a ground dweller. These birds forage along grasses and sedges after arriving with the first heavy winter snowfalls. Sometimes, they are mistaken for the chipping sparrow due to their rufous crown, but a rusty streak behind the eye and a shoulder patch of the same color can help one discern this species properly. Individuals also possess a dark central breast spot, two white bars on each wing, black and rufous streaking on the back, tan underparts, and a long, slightly notched tail. Flocks during the winter season can bring hundreds of American tree sparrows together, which spells trouble if sources of nutrition have declined in abundance; if approximately 30 percent of their bodyweight is not consumed each day, they begin to lose body heat and a good portion of their weight.

Sometimes, the eggs of American tree sparrows can hatch in a different order than they were laid (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Dark-eyed Junco

With a recent population estimate of 630 million individuals, the dark-eyed junco is one of North America's most common birds. This sparrow opts to spend most of its time near the forest floor, foraging for primarily seeds as well as berries and insects. Its nest is also grounded, with most birds building a new one each year atop foundations of plant material. There are 16 subspecies of the dark-eyed junco; the variety we are accustomed to has a white belly, white outer tail feathers, and gray coloration elsewhere, with some dark streaking on the wings. In flight, look for a low and direct path within the cover of the vegetation around them.



The dark-eyed junco is also known as the "snowbird" for their arrival at birdfeeders before winter snowstorms (unknown date: photo from New York State Parks)

White-crowned Sparrow

By way of a head striped black and white, the white-throated sparrow can be easily distinguished amongst other similar species. To supplement this, these birds also have a yellowish bill, gray in the cheeks and breast, and a long, slightly rounded tail. When they migrate in the spring to their Alaskan and Canadian boreal forest breeding grounds, they are likely to stop by residential yards while bellowing their thin but sweet whistle; on the contrary, fall migrations bring them to the southern United States and parts of Mexico. During their long-distance journeys, an individual white-crowned sparrow can travel nearly 400 miles in one night, and some individuals on the Pacific coast can more than 2,500 miles per trip.



White-crowned sparrows tolerate fox sparrows within their territories, but will attempt to expel any chipping sparrows and dark-eyed juncos (5/12/2020: photo by graichen & recer, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

White-throated Sparrow



The range of the white-throated sparrow spans almost all of the eastern United States, and we are fortunate to fall in the bird's measly year-round territory. As a songbird with prominent sound generated throughout the seasons, you might hear them before seeing them; their signature song sounds like the mnemonic, "oh sweet Canada-Canada-Canada." Individuals occupy the forest floor mostly, but sometimes rise up to 15 feet in elevation if a previous ground nest has been preyed upon. Plumage on these sparrows becomes more intricate towards the upper body; gray underparts and rufous upperparts (solid in its long tail and streaked in its back/wings) transition into a striped black-and-white head, with yellow spots above the eyes and a white throat. While in flight, try to catch a glimpse of two white bars that follow the shape of the wings.

Contrary to what some believe, the color of the stripes on a white-throated sparrow does not correlate to an individual's sex (unknown date: photo from NYC Birding Alliance)

Song Sparrow



You might see more inconsistency between song sparrow individuals than any other species; according to North American field biologists and ornithologists, this bird is a contender for widest geographical variability with around 40 subspecies being described. The music for which its named after begins with well-spaced notes that quickly bounce into a trill sound; if their song happens to grace your ears, scan the surrounding area for exposed perches. When facing you, the bird's belly will have a central dark breast spot. Variable russet-colored streaking on a gray base ends at a dark, long, and rounded tail. With affinity for a range of different habitat types and specific nest spots, song sparrows can be located in annually recurring sites across the country; they often raise two clutches in a breeding season, but have been exhibited to successfully rear up to four clutches due to abundant resources or predation.

If song sparrows don't nest on the ground, they do so close to it (6/4/2023: photo by Lucas Cain, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Lincoln's Sparrow



Lincoln's sparrow may be unassuming from afar, but they sure are dainty and sneaky. This species was named for Thomas Lincoln, a travel companion of John James Audubon; upon completing an expedition to the Labrador coast, he was the only one to return with a specimen. The heads of these birds are beyond intricate, with a peaked rufous crown, broad gray eyebrows, bold eye rings, and dark brown streaks circling their cheeks. They also present fine streaking running from the throat to the belly, as well as rufous-edged wing feathers and a rounded tail. Audibly, Lincoln's sparrows can confuse the casual birder; a sweet and jumbling vocal performance is more reminiscent of a wren, and can vary greatly by geographic region.

The crest of a Lincoln's sparrow can rise with disturbance (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Swamp Sparrow



Much like its name suggests, the swamp sparrow occupies areas inundated with water for nesting and breeding purposes. More specifically, cattails and tall reeds provide proper summer habitat for this jittery bird; after darting into the protective vegetation, they can reappear and gift patient passersby with a nasally "chimp" call. It is also possible to spot them foraging in shallower water for insects and invertebrates, as they possess longer legs than other species within its Melospiza genus. Some observers tend to mistake this bird for Lincoln's sparrows or song sparrows, but the swamp sparrow's gray breast only has faint dark streaking. When the male sings his song within the wetlands he occupies, one can expect his clear and smooth trills to resonate throughout the surrounding area.

In this picture, notice how the throat of the swamp sparrow is lighter than its gray breast (4/18/2015: photo by graichen & recer, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Orioles/Blackbirds

Bobolink



If any Star Wars fans want to hear the audible personification of R-2D2 in the wild, they'll have to travel to nearby open fields to hear the bobolink sing its babbling, complex song. When first arriving at these secluded breeding grounds, males (black all over with white rump/shoulder feathers and a cream-colored hind neck) will establish a territory by aerially encircling it and belting its droid-like vocalization to potential mates. These females, buffy golden overall with a deep brown crown and pinkish bill, will facilitate nest placement and construction before the incubation of an annual brood of three to seven eggs. Amazingly, the bobolink accumulates close to 12,500 miles when traveling to and from the northern United States; they utilize both the starry night sky and iron oxide deposits in their nasal cavity to align themselves with the Earth's magnetic field and their long-distance destination.

Amongst grasses and broad-leaved plants, the diet of a bobolink is dependent upon the time of year (unknown date: photo from Genesee Land Trust)

Eastern Meadowlark



When compared to its western counterpart, eastern meadowlarks are best distinguished by voice; calls are buzzy and harsh, whereas their songs are clear and lazy whistles that can sound pensive. If they decide to travel north from the southern United States, Central America, and the Caribbean, these birds settle on farmland where insects are abundant along the ground. Caterpillars, grub, and especially grasshoppers are plucked by a long and pointed bill, attached to a light face with black stripes behind the eyes. Other identifying features include a yellow front side with a black "V" separating the throat and belly, elaborately streaked dark upperparts, and a short tail with white feathers on the outside. Despite being very similar, eastern and western meadowlarks rarely interbreed and produce hybridized offspring.

Where eastern and western meadowlarks overlap in the central United States, both species refuse to share their territories (unknown date: photo from Edgar A. Mearns Bird Club)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Baltimore Oriole



Because of its magnificent feather coloration and its tolerance of human presence, the Baltimore oriole has assumed the role of spark bird for beginner naturalists in the eastern United States. A black head, back, wings (each feather possessing white edges), and inner tail complement vivid orange on the underparts, rump, and outer tail; as is the case in most avian species, the male is more colorful, whereas the female is paler with more olive than black. Much of its time is spent high up in trees, gleaning insects and utilizing the branches of cottonwoods, sycamores, and other tall species to nest. Baltimore orioles, if not consuming insects, will seek out only dark and ripe fruits; on some occasions, they can "gape," where they use their closed bill to stab the fruits, pry it open, and drink the juice with their tongues.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the Baltimore oriole is the state bird of Maryland
(unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Red-winged Blackbird

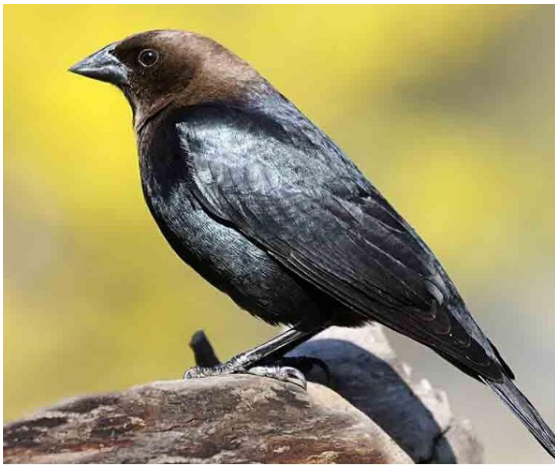


The bright red shoulder patches, or epaulettes, stick out like a sore thumb on the aptly named red-winged blackbird; these patches, outlined in yellow, contrast stunningly against a male's black plumage. While females are far less showy due to their dull and heavily streaked brown appearance, they still possess tinges of red in their shoulders. Both sexes can be found throughout wetland habitats with cattails, even tiny ones in residential areas. This bird roosts year round, with small numbers in the summer, as opposed to flocks potentially numbering in the millions when migrating; each day, the roost will dissipate as each individual travels up to 50 miles to feed on insects or seeds, before returning each night.

A pointed bill with moderate length is one of the only traits that both red-winged blackbird sexes share
(5/4/2024: photo by Ada Alden, via iNaturalist)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Brown-headed Cowbird



Revered as North America's most prominent brood parasite; each and every breeding season, one female brown-headed cowbird will lay between 25 and 55 eggs, primarily in the nests of one singular host species. If you had to guess how many avian species are afflicted annually, would your estimate be close to an answer of approximately 220? Historically a bird of the great plains that trailed bison herds for the insects they kicked up, brown-headed cowbirds were forced elsewhere as a result of land-use change and human settlement. The aforementioned parasitic behavior was also established with this change, much to the detriment of all the species it collectively impacts across its wide range; some are impacted more (endangered birds such as the Kirtland's warbler of Michigan) than others (larger birds that are intelligent enough to recognize and boot the imposter eggs). Furthering their malicious nature, brown-headed blackbird chicks often develop quicker than the original nestlings and aren't afraid to end their nestmates' lives. Females, who you'll see following other birds outside of large intraspecies flocks, are dull brown with soft streaks underparts. Males flash a brown head atop a dark body, with a blended breast and green gloss through their upperparts.

Up to 140 different species end up raising the offspring of brown-headed cowbirds each breeding season (unknown date: photo from Buffalo Spree)

Rusty Blackbird



Unfortunately, the rusty blackbird is regarded as one of the most rapidly declining species in the avian world; 99-85 percent of the entire population has vanished over the past four decades, leaving biologists bewildered as to the cause of this. In their defense, this species is incredibly obscure, breeding in remote and inaccessible swampland and steering clear of agricultural settings for the most part. Adult individuals are black overall of course, but their feathers scintillate with a teal hue; each bird undergoes one molt per year following the summer season, giving them rusty coloration all along their wing edges. They also possess a short and narrow bill, very pale yellow eyes, and a long tail.

While they typically consume insects and plant matter, rusty blackbirds have been exhibited preying on robins, sparrows, snipes, and other birds (4/15/2023: photo by Daniel Schlaepfer, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Common Grackle



Thanks to their resourcefulness and versatility, juxtaposed with environmental changes stemming from human action, a decades-long range expansion has allowed the common grackle to flourish all across the United States and Canada. These nifty birds are a type of blackbird with an elongate bill and tail, appearing dark gray with the exception of its violet head and pale yellow eye. Flocks of more than one million have been recorded during migration to nonbreeding ranges; across urban and suburban habitats, it is possible for them to monopolize a specific region. Croplands of corn varieties are most susceptible to their pest behavior, suffering multimillion dollar damages on occasion. Here, they can also forage on a variety of insects and rodents by following active plows, but an omnivorous diet allows for the consumption of fish and leeches in waterways, as well as eggs and nestlings from other species' nests. In some observations, common grackles have been seen utilizing ants, citrus fruits, mothballs, walnut juice, and other items to rid themselves of parasites.

A hard keel on the inside of the upper mandible can help a common grackle saw open acorns (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Wood Warblers

Ovenbird



The ovenbird's odd common name stems from its nest construction; on the ground in thick leaf litter, females build a singular nest structure, integrated with a dome and side entrance much like a Dutch oven. These birds are also ground dwellers outside of the nest, strutting through the trees like it's on a fashionable runway. Passersby are most likely to hear their abrupt and booming song first, rapidly distributed with many birders using "tea-cher" as the mnemonic; once they are spotted, an observer will notice dark streaking on white underparts, much like a thrush. Other prominent features include bold white eye rings, white beneath its bill, a crown striped orange and black, and olive upperparts. Impressively, the ovenbird utilizes uplands and moderately sloped areas, letting the other warblers divide the rest of the forest floor amongst themselves; when a male sings, he can ignite a chorus of song via neighboring chain reactions.

Due to its distribution and "relative ease of observation," ovenbirds have acted as a model scientific study songbird for almost a century (unknown date: photo by DaleCoopersWife, via r/birding on Reddit)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Northern Waterthrush



As opposed to its Louisiana waterthrush lookalike, the northern waterthrush is much fonder of standing water and sings a rich, accelerating whistle with staccato notes. New York also marks the very southeast of their summer range (northeast for Louisiana waterthrushes), which encompasses much of the boreal forest zone. Within this range, nests are built in bogs and swamp, as well as lake and river edges; a male's song is used to defend their territory during the summer, and they also use sharp calls combined with chasing and fighting to defend their winter ground. If one happens to spot this seldom seen bird, they'll observe dull brown upperparts from a small bill to a short tail, and fine dark streaking from the upper breast to their flanks. Along the edge of water bodies, northern waterthrushes bob their rear body as they nourish themselves with aquatic insects and small salamanders.

The underparts of a northern waterthrush can be white or yellow, depending on the individual(5/23/2024: photo by G Harrington, via eBird)

Black-and-white Warbler



With plumage reminiscent of a zebra's, the black-and-white warbler is incredibly distinctive amongst other warbler species. To supplement this, they stand alone within the genus Mniotilta; this Latin word means "moss plucking," an ode to their foraging behavior in which they attempt to locate insects and their larvae. Individuals do this while assuming vertical and upside-down positions, much like creeper species, which is made possible through an elongated hind claw and heavier legs. Despite the amount of time they spend in trees, they build their nests on the ground and are rather defensive of it, as well as their wintering territory. A sure-fire sign that black-and-white warblers are nearby is a song that sounds similar to a squeaky wheel.

A slightly downward curving bill is well suited for the black-and-white warbler (unknown date: photo from Audubon New York)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Tennessee Warbler



Despite breeding almost entirely in Canada, ornithologist Alexander Wilson named the Tennessee warbler after the state where he first found the bird, traveling along its migration route. This warbler species is discerned from others by its unstreaked gray underparts; they also possess a slate crown, white eyestripes, olive upperparts, and a white undertail. In the fall, their throat and breast become more yellow. Nests are built in very remote woodland regions, but fortunately, they are easier to find when traveling to and from their Central American nonbreeding grounds. Tennessee warblers contribute positively to northern ecosystems by thriving upon destructive spruce budworm outbreaks, but in their winter habitats, the opposite is true when they pierce flowers for their nectar without pollinating them.

The lifespan of a Tennessee warbler is approximately 5 years at maximum (unknown date: photo by Ian Davies, via National Audubon Society)

Nashville Warbler



Much like the Tennessee warbler, the Nashville warbler does not breed in the location it's named after, but was found there amidst its migration by ornithologist Alexander Wilson. They are sometimes confused with the Connecticut warbler, but are smaller and can be found hopping throughout trees; on some occasions, they'll even teeter precariously while clinging to leaves and searching for insects and spiders. Eastern and western populations of this species used to be taxonomically separate, but have since joined together; individuals migrating through the Atlantic and Midwest states will present white eye rings on a gray head, which borders yellow underparts and an olive backside.

When first establishing their summer nests, Nashville warblers will sometimes utilize porcupine quills to reinforce the structure (5/7/2022: photo by William Adamczak, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Common Yellowthroat



The common yellowthroat, a breeding bird throughout almost all of the United States, is highly recognizable by sight thanks to their bandit-like black mask. This sits between a pale stripe above and a vivid yellow throat below for which it's named; the rest of its feathers are olive-shaded. Females do not possess the aforementioned mask, but do flaunt pale eye rings. The vocalizations this bird emits are distinctive; calls are buzzy and harsh, and songs are rich triplet phrases, which sound like the mnemonic "WITCH-uh-tee" and grow more complex in flight. If brown-headed cowbirds parasitize the nest of a common yellowthroat, it is either abandoned or rebuilt, which can happen multiple times in a singular breeding season.

During the winter, common yellowthroats spend their time in Mexico and other Central American lands (10/10/2024: photo by Ari Cassella, via eBird)

American Redstart



Energetic and acrobatic is the American redstart, a warbler species that nests in the open deciduous woodlands of Canada and the United States. These birds glean insects and spiders towards the middle of the tree canopy's elevation; both sexes use their patches of color to startle these organisms into revealing themselves. Females have yellow feathers on their flanks, tail base, and on part of their wings, whereas the orange on males (in the flanks, sides of the tail, and wing bars) contrasts wonderfully against black upperparts and a white belly. Additionally, the well-developed rictal bristles, or fine feathers extending from the corners of the bill, can also sense prey when brushing through organic matter. Towards the end of summer, American redstarts will begin consuming small berries and fruits before migrating to the Caribbean, Central America, and the northern countries of South America.

In some instances, male American redstarts can hold two separate territories, for two separate mates and broods, up to a quarter mile apart (unknown date: photo from Brooklyn Botanic Garden)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Cape May Warbler



Similar to the Tennessee warbler, Cape May warblers were named for a place in which they were first collected for observation by ornithologist Alexander Wilson, not for where they breed; in addition, the two aforementioned species also thrive on spruce budworms, and their populations see increases with infestations of these larvae. When these arthropods are consumed in abundant numbers throughout clumps of needles in the middle of the forest canopy, clutches can reach up to 9 eggs, greater than other warbler species. The nests that supports these broods are towards the top of fir and spruce trees; when the hatchlings grow up to be adult Cape May warblers, they will inherit complex plumages. Females are gray overall, with patches of intricate white (on the breast and flanks) and pale yellow (on the back of the neck), but males are the showstopper, as per usual with avian species. A black cap, rufous "cheeks," yellow underparts with dark streaking, white wing patches, and some white on the outer tail define this sex's identification.

With a curled and semitubular tongue, Cape May warblers are able to nourish themselves at hummingbird feeders in the summer and flowers in the winter (unknown date: photo from NYC Bird Alliance)

Northern Parula



Northern parulas are small warblers that reside in the eastern United States and southeast Canada during the breeding season; they can be found in almost any wooded area, within the higher elevations as they glean all sorts of arthropods from the edges of branches. Some observers have compared their foraging habits to that of a chickadee, fluttering actively and often. This species' unorthodox nesting selection calls for a hanging pouch within the confines of specific lichen and plant species, such as old man's beard (genus Usnea) and Spanish moss (Tillandsia usneoides) respectively; it is assumed that the break in their breeding range (across the midwestern states and some of the northeastern states) is due to decreases in habitat and increases in air pollution, which inhibit the growth of these species they rely on. Once they have reached adult age, northern parulas are adorned with white eye rings broken by a dark patch, slate upperparts, a yellow frontside, white on the belly, and two white bars on each wing; additionally, males will have olive on their back and some chestnut coloration on their chest.

Previously, the northern parula was also referred to as the finch creeper (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Magnolia Warbler



Despite not having a strong preference for the flowering plant species it is named after, the magnolia warbler is still magnificent nonetheless; individuals have yellow front sides with black tasseled “necklaces,” a black eye mask, white eyebrows and undereye patches, and a gray crown. While both sexes also have large white wing patches and a broken white tail band, a female’s backside is greener with black stripes whereas a male’s is entirely black with a yellow rump. This dazzling plumage is on display at eye level throughout boreal forests, as are their nests on some occasions; on a horizontal branch close to the trunk of a dense coniferous tree, less than 10 feet above the ground, these birds build “a flimsy cup of black rootlets” that support a brood of 5-3 eggs. This environment is where a male magnolia warbler sings both of his songs, one for courtship and the other for territorial defense.

Unlike their highly specific summer preferences, a magnolia warbler’s preferred winter habitat can widely vary in elevation and therefore environment (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Yellow Warbler



Even casual natural observers can come to appreciate migrating songbirds, when yellow warblers make their return to the shrubby habitats of North America in the month of May. Audibly, calls are short and variable “chip” sounds; songs are also dependent upon the individual’s vocals, but are sweet on the ears even with a fast pace to them. Visually, they are almost entirely the color they are named after; the only parts on them that are not yellow include rusty streaks from the breast to the flanks (on males), and black all along the wings (a light olive on females). Black eyes on this vivid plumage, next to a thin pointed bill, will stick out sharply. When inflicted by brown-headed cowbird brood parasitism, the yellow warbler will almost always come out on top, literally and figuratively; supported by a vertical branch within a deciduous tree or shrub, this species has been observed building up to six nests in a tower arrangement.

The size of the yellow warbler leaves them vulnerable to being entangled in the webs of orb weaver spiders (5/21/2022: photo by Jennifer Wilson-Pines, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Blackpoll Warbler



Upstate New York does not host the blackpoll warbler during the breeding or nonbreeding seasons, but does so during spring migration primarily. For fall migration, this species nearly doubles its bodyweight with fat in order to fuel themselves for a remarkable flight; from the fir-spruce forests of Alaska and Canada, they travel all the way to Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela, winter abodes with small fruit and warmer weather. The individuals that travel the farthest will have larger wings and utilize winds from cold fronts better than their counterparts that nest further east. While residing in our region during the month of May, males will sport a black cap, white cheeks, and both of those colors streaked across the rest of its body atop orange legs; females will have greener upperparts and much fainter streaking. One can test their hearing by listening for the song of the blackpoll warbler, which registers at frequencies between 1,000 Hz and 10,000 Hz.

Immature blackpoll warblers are known to explore the region they're born in, perhaps to find a breeding territory for the following summer (unknown date: photo from New York Times)

Black-throated Blue Warbler



Early ornithologists struggled with the analysis of black-throated blue warblers; while the common name suits males perfectly, females are so different that early ornithologists were under the impression that the two sexes belonged to different species. This being said, identification is not all that difficult today. The males, in addition to their signature coloration, possess white in a patch on each wing and on their belly; they share this with females, who are countershaded olive above and light below, and also possess white in their eyebrows and undereye patches. Their breeding range encompasses southeastern Canada, the northeastern United States, and the Appalachian Mountain range. Here, they can utilize tangled understories within deciduous and mixed hardwood forests to nourish themselves on arthropods and raise their broods. Black-throated blue warblers typically build a bulky cup nest that supports one or two annual clutches of 5-3 eggs.

When migrating, black-throated blue warblers do so in flocks, to or from the Antilles (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Palm Warbler



The palm warbler is one of North America's most abundant warblers, but does not act like one, according to All About Birds. They are common ground dwellers and foragers who flick their tail often, and while they were named for an initial observation on Hispaniola palm thickets in 1789, they are the northernmost breeding warbler species. Canada's boreal forest, informally known as North America's bird nursery, hosts approximately %98 of all palm warblers in the summer breeding season. Individuals of both sexes have yellow strewn throughout an eyestripe, the throat, underparts and the undertail; chestnut appears on the breast streaks the cap, with gray upperparts completing this bird's look.

Even more unusual for a warbler species, palm warblers have been exhibited gleaning insects while airborne (unknown date: photo from Adirondack Nature)

Yellow-rumped Warbler



Abundant, widespread, and once considered two distinct species, the yellow-rumped warbler was merged taxonomically by the American Ornithologists Union. The Myrtle subspecies is the one we encounter in the northeastern United States; yellow appears in the rump, but also in the throat and on the flanks. Females are grayish overall, whereas males have dark cheeks, a white throat, and gray upperparts with black streaking. They are incredibly versatile foragers, and will tolerate the actions of black-throated green, magnolia, and palm warblers when searching for sustenance; this being said, they assert themselves over Blackburnian and pine warblers. Even more so than palm warblers, this species will launch itself from trees to flutter after flying insects. In the fall, yellow-rumped warblers are also quick to begin eating berries.

Male yellow-rumped warblers tend to forage higher in trees than females do (unknown date: photo from Brooklyn Botanic Garden)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Black-throated Green Warbler



-While they are named black-throated green warblers, a bright yellow face is what stands out most on this species. The green comes into play on the cap, backside, and rump; both sexes adorn black wings with two white bars on each, heavily streaked underparts, and a dark tail with white outer feathers. Overall, females are slightly duller, but are greener in their flanks. These birds occupy a variety of forest types, along a breeding range similar to that of the black-throated blue warbler (southeastern Canada, the northeastern United States, and the Appalachian Mountain range). However, black-throated green warblers do also occupy cypress swamps along the Carolina and Virginia coasts.

One persistent black-throated green warbler male was recorded singing 466 songs in just 60 minutes (unknown date: photo from National Audubon Society)

Canada Warbler



Canada warblers, with a rather late arrival to and early departure from their summer grounds, spend the least amount of time in their breeding range among wood warbler species. They are also called the “necklaced warbler” for their intricate black necklace against a yellow throat and breast. This feature, as well as a dark crown, is paler on female birds; both sexes also possess plain gray upperparts and light eye rings. Within mixed conifer and deciduous forests with shrubby understory, this species will sit and wait for flying insects to pass by before pursuing it by air. Unfortunately, the Canada warbler population is declining as a result of habitat degradation; as forest undergrowth (ferns, shrubs, and rhododendrons in this case) matures and loses its moisture, suitable nesting territories grow fewer and farther between.

In addition to its sit-and-wait strategy, Canada warblers also forage for insects along the forest floor (6/12/2016: photo by Gary Chapin, via eBird)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Wilson's Warbler



A migratory bird across almost all of the United States, Wilson's warblers are tiny birds whose plumage pack a visual punch. Vivid yellow on the face and underparts is slightly countershaded by olive on the upperparts and long but narrow tail; on their heads, they will have large black eyes and a dark cap (olive in females, black in males). Individuals have been observed consuming berries and honeydew fruit, but primarily nourish themselves with insects found in foliage and leaf litter. For these reasons, ornithologist Alexander Wilson described this species as the "green black-capped flycatcher," and eventually, the species would be named after his contributions to the field of avian biology and conservation. However, the Wilson's warbler is set to be renamed soon, according to the American Ornithological Society, based on its habitats and physical traits.

In the eastern United States, Wilson's warblers are much more likely to be spotted on their fall migrations; this picture, a rare spring encounter, occurred close to Saratoga Lake
(5/18/2019: photo by Ronald Harrower, via eBird)

Cardinals/Relatives

Scarlet Tanager



Male breeding plumage consisting of a vibrant red body, contrasted against a black tail and black wings, make the scarlet tanager one of the easiest North American bird identifications. Females have greenish upperparts and upper tail feathers, and males present a similar look during the winter months. Despite these radiant summer colors, this species can be difficult to spot, for individuals bide their time at the apex of any forests containing large oak trees. Here, males will sing slurred and whirry, yet rich vocalizations; females sound softer, less harsh, and will often respond to her mate with a shorter song. As habitat fragmentation amplifies across the natural world, scarlet tanagers have been shown to respond in different ways based on geographic location. Fortunately for those living in upstate New York, this species is tolerant of small forest patches in the northeastern United States, unlike in the midwestern portion of the country.

If either half of a scarlet tanager pair do not spot an approaching female brown-headed cowbird and drive her away, they will foster her brood parasite with the rest of their clutch (unknown date: photo from Birds of New York)

Birds on Nearby Habitats Surrounding Saratoga Lake

Northern Cardinal



Just about impossible to miss in a blanket of snow; between its stately year-round plumage and laser-esque sounds, the northern cardinal is a staple of winter wildlife in New York state, and is just as pleasant of a sight in the summertime. As their range encompassed more of North America in the early 20th century, it became representative of seven different states as their official bird. Males are a vivid red from the top of their head to their long tail with a distinct black face patch, while females are drabber with red accents and a smaller face patch. Both sexes possess a thick, orange bill and a crest that raises upon dominant self-perception; it can often be seen when the male is aggressively defending his springtime territory, or attacking its reflection in glass from hours to days, to months even in some rare cases.

Northern cardinals can raise a singular annual brood, or multiple (two or three) depending on habitat and resources (4/25/2021: photo by bobascott, via iNaturalist)

Rose-breasted Grosbeak



A large and light-colored bill on both sexes gives the rose-breasted grosbeak the latter part of its common name; unfortunately, only males display an ostentatious red breast that make up the other part of its moniker. They also present black on the head and backside, contrasted against white in the underparts, wing patches, rump, and short tail. Female plumage appears more somber, with brown/gray upperparts and white in the thick eyebrows, underparts with thick dark streaking, and in bars on each wing. When pairs are formed, they work together diligently to select a nesting site (wedged in a near-vertical tree branch) and erect a loose cup or platform; though observers can often see right through the bottom, their abode is hefty enough to support anywhere from two to five eggs. Those who spot a nest should listen for a robin-esque song that leaves many at a loss for words.

With its thick bill, a rose-breasted grosbeak is capable of consuming tough arthropods, fruits, seeds of all kinds, and buds (unknown date: photo from Bedford Audubon Society)