

Highlights from Sept 18 Bird Walk at the Wheat Ridge Greenbelt

Chuck Aid. September 30, 2021 :

Saturday was a busy day at the Wheat Ridge Greenbelt. The Denver Field Ornithologists had a couple of bird walks going on followed by their annual picnic, and participants in Denver Audubon's Master Birder class were being given a field test. And there was quite a mix of bicyclists, joggers, fisherfolk, families, etc. out enjoying themselves. Our group of nine managed to fit right in and share this popular area.

Pied-billed Grebe (c) Mick Thompson

So, with regard to the birds, it is an interesting time of year for waterfowl in the city. We had Canada Geese, Mallards, one lone Pied-billed Grebe (a juvenile starting to come into adult plumage), one American Coot, and a handful of Double-crested Cormorants. What made this lack of diversity interesting to me was that we are right on that cusp where migratory ducks and other wintering waterfowl should be pouring into our area (Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Redhead, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Hooded Merganser, etc.), and they are starting to show up just a little bit, but things seem slightly delayed this year. Hopefully, their arrival will significantly pick up by the first of October. The other interesting duck-note is that most males are still exhibiting a bit of eclipse plumage. That is they are at the end of that period that males go through late summer when they take on a female-like cryptic plumage for about four to six weeks. Give them a bit more time, and then by Thanksgiving they should have all acquired their glorious breeding plumages and be set for next spring. Most other birds wait another six months before getting their breeding plumage.



Osprey (c) Mick Thompson

We had several great sightings on the day. First, we got to see an Osprey flying repeatedly over West Lake and eventually snagging a smallmouth bass. In flight it rearranged its grip so the bass was aligned with its body and more aerodynamically streamlined, and then with deep strong wingbeats it carried its prey to shore. Then, there was a period of waiting and changing location once while the bass continued to flop around, but eventually the Osprey got down to the business of ripping and tearing. Looked to be a fine breakfast! Secondly, we had a juvenile Cooper's Hawk land right in front of us and hang out while we got great views. Coops are the intermediate sized accipiter (woodland hawk) – Sharp-shinned Hawks are smaller and Goshawks are bigger, and we have all three species in our area. Differentiating these three can present a bit of a challenge. Briefly, Coops proportionally have the longest tail, and they appear large headed with a flat crown. In comparison with Sharpies, they have an imperious look with the eyes forward in the face. Sharpies on the other hand have their eyes more centered, and the head more rounded giving them a bit of a softer, dove-like appearance. Our bird had the vertical dark-brown breast streaking of a juvenile as well as the yellow eye color. This eye color will then transition through orange to red over the ensuing 3-4 years. Finally, the big show of the day was the large number of Cedar Waxwings we saw. These were mostly juveniles born this year, but we did get to see a fair number of adults as well. The waxwings with their fluttery flight were sallying out from the trees and catching aerial insects. What we did not see hardly at all were any migrant warblers. Not sure what's up with that, whether we're seeing the results of last fall's big die-off or if warblers may end up moving through a bit later than usual this year.

Good birding! Chuck



Juvenile Cooper's Hawk (c) Mick Thompson

Wheat Ridge Greenbelt, Sept 18, 2021

32 species

Canada Goose 48

Mallard 36

Pied-billed Grebe 1

Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) 21

Eurasian Collared-Dove 2

Broad-tailed Hummingbird 5

American Coot 1

Killdeer 4

Ring-billed Gull 20

Double-crested Cormorant 8

Snowy Egret 2

Osprey 1

Cooper's Hawk 1

Belted Kingfisher 1

Downy Woodpecker 6

Northern Flicker 18
Blue Jay 26
Black-billed Magpie 5
Black-capped Chickadee 34
Tree Swallow 5
Barn Swallow 2
White-breasted Nuthatch 3
House Wren 1
European Starling 9
Gray Catbird 2
American Robin 2
Cedar Waxwing 42
House Finch 21
American Goldfinch 13
Song Sparrow 8
Red-winged Blackbird 12
Orange-crowned Warbler 1