



CENTER LINE

A Publication of Waukesha County's Retzer Nature Center

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FIRST NOTATIONS ON A COMMON FAMILY

After years of listing bird sightings, the year 2009 became a first for recording two small birds spotted June 16, 2009, and I was excited as I checked them in the Finches column on the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology Field Checklist. The tiny birds were seen that June afternoon as I visited with friends in Slinger, Wisconsin. As it happened, the tiny birds seen that afternoon were of the genus: *Carduelis*, the species: *C. flammea*. In more neighborly terms, they are called Common Redpolls.

It seems to me that nature's species that have names with Common in their identities are much more interesting and uncommon than those with complicated nomenclature, whether they be flora or fauna. The Common Redpolls became one of these uncommon anomalies. Knowing nothing about the Common Redpoll, research had to be the order of the day, and its results would be shared with all enthusiastic birders in the field.

The tiny redpoll is an adult when reaching a length of 4 ½" to 5 ½". How such a small creature can exist and breed in such cold extremes is an extraordinary feat, for redpolls are sub-Artic breeders. Apparently the redpolls that I had spotted were just visiting last June, because Wisconsin's climate is not cold enough for them to hang around. Most are found in open sub-Artic coniferous forest scrub during breeding season. Often they are found in birch or willow patches foraging in catkin-bearing trees. In winter, the bird favors open woodland, scrub, or weedy fields. The redpolls will follow an irregular migratory plan during winter months, when wild food may be sparse on their home territory. The Common Redpoll, however, is extremely resistant to cold temperatures. In winter they forage on the ground, moving in rolling waves across ground feeding areas. Pouches in their throats allow them to gather large amounts of food, then safely retreat to a better place to process the supply. In winter they can drop from a tree into deep snow and make a foot long tunnel to reach a roosting chamber. Clever little-bitties! Like most finches, in flight they have an undulating flight pattern. They are like acrobatic pilots as they flit to willow, to birch, to alder trees to feed on tiny seeds from the frigid environmental supplies. The small birds also enjoy buds, weeds, grasses, and insects, and on their menus, insects and spiders are also served to the youngsters.



Some interesting facts about the Common Redpolls are: they form monogamous pairs. They place their nests close together and well hidden in low scrubs, grass clumps, or under piles of brush. Females build open cup nests placing twigs, grass and moss. They line the nursery with ptarmigan feathers, plant down, or hair. The female lays 4 to 6 eggs which are pale green to pale blue with dark spots and speckles at the large ends. While mama redpoll incubates the eggs, papa brings her breakfast in bed, but a few days after the kids hatch, mama takes over the home management again. A dozen days after hatching, the young 'uns leave the nest and follow their parents around. They are helpless and have little down, and no parkas, but in about 26 days, they reach an age of independence. Kids have lost down-feathers and offspring now wear the good looks of their parents. Kids make their parents proud, and a proud *Carduelis flammea* is one fine looking bird.

(First Notations... continued)

Lets take a closer look at the un-Common Redpoll, the whole 5 ½ inches of uncommonness. The finch has a small conical-shaped yellow bill. Males have brown streaking on flanks and a pale rump. At times, in winter, the central breast of the male will have a rosy color. Summer may bring unseasonal rosy cheeks on the male too. Females, however, will lack these rosy tints on their bodies.



They will have brown streaks on their upper breast sides. Wings and tails of both sexes are of a darker brown and there are always two white wingbars on each of their wings. One will always identify the Common Redpoll however, when one spots the black chins and notable red dots right in the middle of their foreheads. The red dots remind me of bright-red M&M candy hats. The Common Redpolls always wear their red tams—whatever the weather!

Scratching beneath the cold surface to discover more about the Redpolls, a distant relative to the Common part of the bird family popped up. The family, *Carduelis hornemanni*, or Hoary Redpoll. Odd relatives in this family prefer even colder parts of the planet and make the high Arctic their home, and the open Arctic tundra is the ideal place to raise their families. If sheltered accommodations for adaptable nest sites can't be found in the area, they will make nests for breeding in driftwood cavities. Nature will always provide, and where there is a will, there may be a way. Nature equips the Hoary Redpoll with very soft white body feathers that help it to stay warm in the frigid Arctic temps. One cool fact that was listed in an article from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology was the fact that the Hoary Redpolls had feathers on areas of its body that were absent or bare on most other birds. If temperatures went from colder up to cold, they could pluck out a few feathers to get rid of some of their insulation. Within a few days after the plucking of their feathers, the birds grew them back. The self-service thermostats could be used in case the fluctuating temperatures would drop back to sub-normal. Like that's ever going to happen... Although the Hoary Redpoll's bodies are white, other markings on the birds are similar to the Common community. The browns and greys are much paler and there is little or no streaking on the underparts of the Arctic birds. Males and females in the Arctic circle sport black chins and naturally, they always wear their red tams no matter how bad the weather!

The Hoary Redpolls will never vacation in Wisconsin. Our area is simply not cold enough. If camping in our state, they probably would pluck out all their feathers. Then, this Wisconsinite will certainly never visit the Arctic tundra. My fly-away plan would focus on a southern exposure. There are tiny rays of sunshine, however. I did spend the June

afternoon with the Common Redpolls and there are birders who have potted a few stray Hoary Redpolls with the migratory Common Redpolls. The pale bird has been a rare winter visitor to Southern Canada and northern parts of the United States. We may one day meet. Along nature's routes, there are always surprises.

See you on the trail,

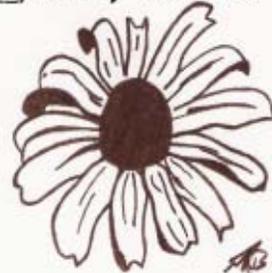
Shirley Blanchard

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The Last Prairie



THE SKIPPER, TOO

The following may be shocking to some. Likely, it will not be shocking if you are a Lepidopteran enthusiast. If the last sentence made no sense, the insect order Lepidoptera is home to Butterflies. But not only butterflies, moths are here, too. But not only butterflies and moths, skippers reside here also. All of us know a little about butterflies and moths. The story of how the ugly, disgusting caterpillar turns into a beautiful butterfly is a famous one, and we have all heard grandma complain about moths eating her clothes (or at least we have been bombarded by the fluttery dive-bombs while standing near a light on a summer evening). What we have not heard about are skippers. This story will rectify that for those of you who have not heard about the amazing, little, fluffy things that dart from plant to plant. This tale is about one of our most common, least known summer residents.

The thing "not quite a butterfly, not quite a moth" showed its abilities for those who could follow it with their eyes. Fast, erratic flight took it by flower and leaf with sufficient skill. It never rose too high off the vegetative deck, preferring to skim

the tops of whatever plants it flew over. It wasn't very big, only the approximate size of a United States half-dollar or so. It also wasn't very colorful, mostly black with white or yellow patches on the wings. It also wasn't very slow in flight or directional alterations. Finally, it wasn't quick to stop flying. To recap, we had a relatively small, unadorned, fast, quick, airborne insect that simply did not wish to land.

The family (or so I assumed) watching with me, quickly lost interest and left with their restive little ones. I thought this would entice (or at least allow) a landing. My reasoning seemed sound; agitated insect, plus fidgety kids, equals no stoppage of flight. Simple cause and effect; elementary even. However, the vacating children did not produce an immediate landing. Whatever algorithms insects use to decide to land took two minutes to reach their proper final ending states. This was a long time to hold the camera, which was not even relatively heavy, at the ready (Ever keep your hand up in class? Your hand gets pretty heavy after awhile). That bit of exercise paid off, as a lot of movement surely would have spooked our tiny friend when it did land in front of me, choosing Wild Bergamot flowers to stick its proboscis into. After feeding all the way around one flower head, it launched and landed on a nearby leaf for about 10 seconds. I was able to snap pictures of both brief landings before the skipper left for more peaceful pastures to the west. My knees protested as I rose, but soon loosened up as I went to download the data on the memory card with crossed fingers.

Thankfully, some of those images turned out sharp and crisp, with good lighting. The brief landings gave me enough time to tentatively name the creature as a skipper, but nothing more. Even had I ten minutes to look at it, the knowledge just wasn't there. So, with the help of good pictures and good books (Ebner 1970, Mitchell and Zim 1987), I can now tell you we had a resident Silver-spotted Skipper (*Epargyreus clarus*).

At a scant one and three-quarters inches, the Silver-spotted is Wisconsin's largest skipper. You could drive south and west to where Agave and Yucca plants grow wild to find larger ones. Some of the Giant Skippers, whose larvae burrow into the aforementioned desert plants, can reach over three inches on the wing (Pyle 1992). Back to our mid-western giant, it is in the majority of the skipper family (Hesperiidae) regarding its wings at rest. If you are lucky enough to see this insect land, you will see the lower hind wings in an arrowhead or triangle shape like a moth's. Their forewings will be in a similar position, only they raise them a little so you will be able to see all four wings when looking from the front, like fletching on a dart or arrow. The forewings have an irregular pattern of yellow-orange spots in the middle and



the hindwing has a silver-white patch in the middle (of the underside only). Outside of this, the wings are a brownish-black, which is just a dark blur when flying. Their antennae are clubbed (slightly larger at the tips) like butterflies, but the clubs are hooked. This club-curving is unique to skippers so look hard for it when they alight (Dunn 1996).

To make more Silver-spotted skippers, females oviposit eggs on locusts (black locust for certain, but hopefully Honey Locust as well, since black locust, *Robinia pseudoacacia*, does not belong here), where the larvae make loose nests from leaves of their food plant. Later in the year, the young will make a crude cocoon underneath rubble on the ground, where the pupae overwinter. Adults emerge when it gets hot around June. There is some evidence for at least a partial second brood in August (Ebner 1970), when you can sometimes spot newly emerged adults.

Skippers in general were once thought to be closely linked to the moths but their clubbed antennae and daytime habits more closely resemble butterflies (Pyle 1992). Mostly, their wings are small for their bodies compared to butterflies and they form loose cocoons; here they resemble moths. If you are wondering what they are, they are their own beast. The little-known, little-seen, underappreciated skippers.

As you have probably guessed, they get their name from their rapid, erratic flight habits. Start exercising those eye muscles right now. Watch cars on the freeway, follow the ball in a professional ping pong match, watch your kids as they try to evade your attentive gaze. Training happens during the off-season and come spring, quick eyeballs will give you the advantage. Remember, the Silver-spotted is considered common. To see it this summer, all you have to do is make sure the skipper is not quicker than the eye. Good hunting.

Mike

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RETZER NATURE CENTER

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