

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
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A Long Sigh of Migration

By Jeff Tome

For the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



This Pied-billed Grebe is one of many species of waterfowl that stop to rest and feed on Chautauqua Lake during spring migration. (Photo by Jeff Tome)

The lake fills with birds like your lungs fill with air. They come slowly and fill the surface of the lake like a long, deep breath. After a week or a day or less, the flocks move farther north and the lake empties of birds with a slow sigh. This is migration, filled with pulses of birds that fill an area and then move on. Sometimes we hardly notice; other times the sight takes our breath away.

I'll never forget seeing 600 tundra swans fill the Big Pond at Audubon. The pond was filled with swans from shore to shore and they could hardly move around because they were so crowded. It was a breathtaking spectacle that lasted only a day before the swans moved on.

Tundra swans are just one of the many birds on the lake that don't live here. They pass through for a few weeks around March and April on their way from their wintering grounds around Chesapeake Bay to their nesting grounds on the arctic tundra. They stay, often for a day or less, on the lake to eat, sleep and rest before continuing their long flight north.

Many birds do this. Flocks, commonly called "rafts", of common loons gather on the

lake on their journey north. Most familiar for their haunting cry especially in wilderness movies, few of these birds live in the region. Most stop, eat and move on. I have heard of rafts of hundreds of loons off of Long Point State Park, though I have never seen more than a dozen at a time.

Spring is a great time for birds on the lake. A huge variety of grebes, mergansers, ducks, geese and swans all gather on the lake as they head north.

Because of Chautauqua Lake's importance to such a huge variety of migrating birds, several years ago the National Audubon Society declared it an Important Bird Area (IBA). Flocks of 3,000 Tundra Swans, 1,200 Hooded Mergansers, 4,500 American Coots, and over 1,200 Ruddy Ducks have been spotted on the lake in the last 20 years or so.

Are you one of those people who have never heard of any of those birds? Don't worry. That doesn't matter as much as recognizing that Chautauqua Lake is hugely important to birds on a global scale. It is essential for these migrating birds to have a place to rest and feed on their journey north. Many wetlands and other areas where birds once stopped have been filled in, which makes the lake more and more important over time.

As a human, it is easy to look at things from a human perspective. The lake is a place for play, where people can fish, water ski, kayak and relax. We forget sometimes that we are not the only beings that love the lake. The only difference is that most humans won't die without access to the lake, but the birds will. If you are out boating or fishing on the lake, show some respect for the birds that share the water with you. Give them some quiet time to rest, be sure to collect fishing line that could entangle and drown hapless birds and watch the endless parade of different ducks pass through.

Who knows, maybe you'll figure out the difference between a Ruddy Duck and an American Coot.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a local 501 (c)(3) not-for-profit, public benefit corporation supported primarily by membership donations. Its mission is to preserve, and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its annual membership campaign is currently underway. For more information or to support these efforts, please call 664-2166 or go to www.chautauquawatershed.org.