

February

February is a month of one step back, two steps forward in the direction of Spring. The month may have stretches of Winter that can be every bit as cold and nasty as anything January can produce. Yet the days are longer. Snows and cold snaps are followed by warm-up periods that are usually more sustained than they were in January. Winter hangs on, but its grip begins to loosen.

Changes occur in February. Great Horned Owls lay their eggs as the month begins. Red-tailed Hawks are on the nest by the middle of the month. Red-shouldered Hawks, American Woodcock and Greater Prairie Chickens begin their courtship rituals by the end of February.

February's changes may or may not seem too slight to excite birders. Many use it to round out processes that started in January. The Year List is beginning to take shape. It is a time to fill in holes. Listers chase the Common Redpoll that has been coming to so-and-so's feeder or the Northern Shrike or Snowy Owl that has lingered in a particular location an hour and a half away from home. They know these birds may leave soon. Winter finches, Red-breasted Nuthatches, longspurs – it is wise to get them now. Irruptive species may not be so readily available again in November or December.

February is perhaps the best month of the year to look for owls. Someone has usually found the winter roosts of Long-eared Owls, Short-eared Owls, Northern Saw-whet Owls and Barn Owls by February, and it may just be a matter of going to the right place to see them. If you don't know where some have already been located, walk through stands of evergreens and see what you find. Long-eared Owls roost communally in pines and cedars. Some Great Horned Owls, Barred Owls and Eastern Screech Owls also roost in evergreens in winter. Northern Saw-whet Owls and Barn Owls are both hard to come by in Missouri, but they are here. Saw-whets roost in dense evergreens, usually close to the trunk of a favorite tree. You are apt to spot the white wash before you find one. Barn Owls occasionally roost in evergreens, more commonly in barns and grain storage structures or under bridges. If you find either at Barn or a Saw-whet Owl roosting in a pine or cedar grove, it is more apt to be in February than in any other month

Short-eared Owls often roost in ditches beside substantial stretches of thick, high grass – where Northern Harriers concentrate by day. If you can't find one in the ditch, stick around until dusk, and you will often see them flying about while there is still some light.

It is usually possible to find a Great Horned Owl just by looking at every old Red-tailed Hawk nest until you find a Great Horned Owl that has taken it over. Barred and Eastern Screech Owls often respond to tapes of their calls during the daytime at this time of year.

February is also usually the best month for good gulls and for a chance at finding a rare Barrow's Goldeneye. In years when lakes are frozen, the best chance for a Glaucous or Thayer's Gull or a Barrow's Goldeneye is likely to occur when the ice breaks up. Birds that have been driven south by freeze-up now begin to return north. A mixture of ice and open water is also the best condition at REDA for the rarer winter gulls. Such conditions may exist in January or February, or both.

Substantial northward migration becomes apparent in February. Common Mergansers are usually the earliest migrants. Suddenly there are thousands of them on an open lake. Numbers of Common Goldeneye and Bufflehead often increase noticeably at the same time. Northern Pintail and Green-winged Teal are usually the first of the dabblers to appear. Snow Geese follow the isotherms, moving ever northward as the landscape warms up. As soon as things begin to thaw, you hear their calls and see them against the sky in long, wavy lines. With the Snow Geese come the blackbirds. Suddenly there are large flocks around, where previously there were none. Both Smith's and Lapland Longspurs often move in large numbers near the end of February.

By the end of February, observant birders can usually note significant signs of the beginning of a new nesting season. Many resident birds have been singing on clear days since January, but now species that have wintered to the south of us also show up and begin to stake out territories. The first Pine Warblers appear in their regular breeding places in the more southerly parts of the state and begin territorial singing. Male Red-winged Blackbirds start singing on territory throughout the state. Groups of American Robins, almost all males at first, appear on lawns. Soon, both they and Common Grackles will be common in the neighborhood. For the next four or five months, robins, House Finches and Northern Cardinals will sing there throughout the day.

New harbingers keep appearing. The first Phoebe shows up at a stream crossing. The first Turkey Vulture appears in the distance. Sizeable rafts of scaup show up on the lakes. Redheads, Canvasbacks and Ring-necked Ducks can usually be found among them. The frogs are peeping. The grass is greening up. The illusion that March will come in like a lamb can often be quite seductive.

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