

# THE SECOND FRONT PAGE

## Bird Walk Hits High Notes as Migration Peaks

**William Meiners  
Herald Correspondent**

Mike Bishop, retired professor of biology from Alma College, put out his typical call for the weekend bird walk he leads throughout various parts of Gratiot County. Last Friday's email, however, seemed to hit more enthusiastic notes than normal.

"This should be our biggest weekend since we're smack dab in the middle of the neo-tropical species' migration," Bishop wrote. "Last night (Thursday) an estimated 1.6 million birds crossed Gratiot County. That's half again as many as the last busiest night of the spring! So, things could be rocking!"

Bishop described Alma's Conservation Park as a "good migrant trap," so he met 10 bird watchers there, just downhill from Riverside Cemetery, on Sunday morning at 8 a.m. An abundance of woods and water attracts insects, which is essential protein for traveling flocks.

Turns out that even better than having a good eye for birds may be having a good ear. As the group meandered along the park path, Bishop pointed out as many . maybe more, he heard than anyone could spy with naked or binocular-enhanced eyes.

With a phone app called Merlin, Bishop also showed images of the species in question. Folks also captured birds with both cellphones and fancier cameras. Patrick Finn, a retired physician's assistant from Alma, was out on his first walk of the season. Usually held on Saturdays, the Sunday excursion fit better with his schedule.

Finn, who enjoys hiking and bike riding throughout the parks in Gratiot and Isabella counties, appreciates the outdoors and the chance to learn about birds.

"Sometimes we see eagles," he said. "It's usually quiet. I used to fish a long time ago, but not anymore because of the quality of the river."

As is his habit, Bishop sends out a list of birds heard and scene, usually by early afternoon after the morning bird walk.

"We had a large number of birds seen and/or heard, with our tally coming in at 55 species," he reported. "Surprisingly, we were pretty lean with the warblers. Especially, given that we are at the peak of their migration. For the past several days I've been getting, and seeing other folks posting, warbler counts of 15-20 species. We, on the other hand, had to work hard for the warbler species we saw/heard this morning. Our warbler count was only nine species!"

In spite of the lack of warblers, Bishop encouraged the birders to keep their chins up (and eyes and ears open) because with a couple more weeks of migration season, those "beautiful birds" should continue to pass through Gratiot County skies.

Among the 55 species spotted Sunday were water fowl, including the Canadian goose, wood duck, and mallard. Four variations of woodpeckers, specifically red-bel-



**Up in the sky, it's a bird." Mike Bishop (below), a retired professor of biology, took his weekend bird walk to Alma's Conservation Park last Sunday morning. There they spotted 55 different species.**

lied, Downy, hairy, and pileated made some noise. Not a Woody among them. Turkey vulture, eastern kingbird, red-winged blackbird, and brown-headed cowbird all made appearances.

Bishop noted there was evidence many species nesting and feeding young.

"The Merlins are nesting in the cemetery again this year," he wrote. "The pair were noisily calling to each other around their nest tree when we first arrived at the parking area by the cemetery offices. We found an eastern phoebe nest on the Osterman Girl Scout Cabin, where a pair has nested for many years. And there were lots of individuals carrying food for babies, including American robins, European starlings, song sparrows, and common grackles."

In his list making, Bishop pointed out that some of the species he may have picked up just prior to or after the walk.

"Also, there are sometimes species I only hear once or, only faintly, at a distance that I may not announce to the group but include in my eBird checklist," he said. "So, if you see something on the list that we didn't see with the group, that is why. I promise, I'm not just making stuff up."

As the migration continues, and the Michigan spring seeps suddenly into summer, Bishop will be leading the weekend hikes. Newbie birders are encouraged to attend.



## Alma Considers Plan for Downtown Parking Lots

**Rosemary Horvath  
Herald Correspondent**

The City of Alma is considering how to pay for long-term maintenance and reconstruction of downtown parking lots used by people who work, shop or live downtown.

The issue has been discussed for several months by the Downtown Development Authority, with city commissioners weighing whether the full cost should fall on the municipality or be shared with property and business owners.

"Some people are worried we won't do anything," City Manager Aeric Ripley told commissioners during their regular meeting last week.

Estimates for crushing and reshaping one downtown lot have reached about \$680,000, while full reconstruction could approach \$1 million.

Finance Director Curtis Dancer noted Alma has a fund balance of about \$6 million, though \$3.1 million must remain on hand.

Ripley said he plans to continue discussing possible options with groups that would be affected. He is expected to continue reviewing costs with Public Services Director Dave Ringle and Public Works Director Jim Goodhall.

State and federal grant programs once provided more reliable funding options for this type of work, but those sources are no longer as readily available.

### Rates Approved

Commissioners also approved new water and sewer rates, with Commissioner Dan Wernick abrogating \$1 million.

Effective July 1, the water usage rate will increase by 30 cents per 1,000 gallons, bringing the charge to \$6.30 per 1,000 gallons. The water readiness-to-serve fee will remain unchanged.

The solid waste ready-to-serve fee will also increase July 1, moving from \$25 to \$26 per residence.

The increase is tied to a 5% increase in the city's five-year contract with Granger Waste Services and a separate 5% increase for yard waste service.

Commissioner Michelle Pitts

voted in favor of the increase after acknowledging she is an employee of Granger Waste Services.

Another issue facing the city is how to handle rental property owners who have refused access for water line replacement work.

Ripley said two remaining locations have not allowed new lines to be installed. All other affected properties have been addressed.

Faced with a state deadline to replace lead water lines while grant funding remains available, Ripley said he has consulted with the city attorney about possible options.

He plans to present a new ordinance at the next commission meeting outlining steps the municipality could legally take to secure a court order and enter the

properties to complete the work.

Public Services Director David Ringle said the city must replace the lines by June 30 before water service is shut off to the properties.

The cost of replacing the lines would be added to the tax bills as unpaid charges.

Ripley also reported the Alma Public Arts Advisory Council has partnered for another year with the Clare County Arts Council Sculpture Loan Program.

The three sculptures installed in downtown Alma for 2025 will remain this year, along with two others placed in passageways near The Cobbler Shop and the Opera House and in the pocket park by the Community Cabinet.