Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary

Clark Street and Sheridan Road
Evanston, IL 60201

clarkstreetbeachbirdsanctuary.org

Fall 2024

From the Sanctuary Stewards

One new effort this summer was posting signs along the path that goes by CSBBS to help educate the public about what they see in the sanctuary. This effort was spearheaded by Steering Committee member David Pelzer, assisted by Rob and Joan Linsenmeier. The signs will change with the season to reflect what is of particular interest. The first set of signs are about fall bird migration, monarchs and milkweed, spotted bee balm and wasps, and grasses (see stories below).

Native plants at CSBBS attract insects and birds. One aspect that is not completely natural, however, is that we use hoses to water our plants. The water is supplied by the City of Evanston—one of several ways we rely on the city. A pipe starts at the Clark Street Beach House and runs underground to supply three spigots within the sanctuary. This water is quite important, especially for new plantings, helping them to grow faster than natural rainfall would allow. We have a watering team that goes out almost daily during dryer periods and when new plants are getting started. They are supervised and scheduled by Steering Committee member Chris Steel, who also maintains our hoses and nozzles.

Chris Steel watering thirsty plants

In the spring issue of our newsletter, we reported on our new Beach House Garden, planted just north of the Clark Street Beach House and designed in collaboration with the Lincolnwood Garden Club of Evanston to showcase native plants and encourage local homeowners to add them to their own gardens. Most of the plants are now thriving, and we anticipate that they will naturally fill in some of the bare space across the next few years. In an unexpected development, a few plants that were already in that area have now grown and spread more than expected, and we may transplant some Joe Pye weed, boneset, and mountain mint to other regions within CSBBS. Special kudos to Roger Hauge for his lead role on this project!

~ Libby Hill and Rob Linsenmeier, co-stewards

Beyond CSSBS: Evanston's Natural Areas

Over the past year, Libby Hill has assembled the stewards of the nine natural areas in Evanston that feature native plants. This group, informally called Evanston Natural Area Stewards (ENAS), has met several times. Most recently, ENAS has been trying to ensure that the environment has a prominent place within **Envision Evanston 2045**, envisionevanston2045.com/, the city's guiding document for the future, which is currently being developed. Natural areas, which could be expanded, play a major role in supporting insects and birds, whose populations are declining worldwide. They also support adaptation to climate change and the

wellbeing of Evanston's citizens, who benefit by working as volunteers in these areas or just walking through or near these havens.

The City's **Environment Board** has also argued for a major focus on the environment in Envision Evanston 2045. You can read their excellent letter to planners on pages 5-10 of the July meeting minutes: cityofevanston.org/home/showpublisheddocument/96148/638562038086670000.

Grasses

Grasses were among the first plantings in 2015 as CSBBS was transformed from an expanse of bare sand into a bird sanctuary. Four grass species dominate. In the eastern part of the sanctuary, the dominant grass is **marram grass**, also known as beach grass, which grows up to four feet tall. Like our other grasses, marram is a bunch grass that generally stays confined to small areas, rather than spreading out broadly like lawn grasses. However, it *can* spread, and it has now moved out of the sanctuary, across the fence between CSBBS and the volleyball courts to the east.

Another main grass, **little bluestem**, is about the same height as marram grass, and it mixes with marram grass a little further west in CSBBS. Little bluestem is an important prairie grass with a misleading name; it only gives hints of bluish green at some times during the season. In late August and September it is recognizable by its little tufted seed heads.

Little bluestem

Our two tall grasses, which can reach six feet tall, are **sand reed grass** and **switch grass**. They are hard to tell apart until August, when the seeds of switch grass take on a reddish tint, while the sand reed grass is beige. In addition to anchoring the sand, and allowing other plants, such as beach wormwood and peas to take hold, the grasses provide food for birds. The grasses are also beautiful during the winter, when they impart a golden color to CSBBS and gently sway in the wind.

Bee Balm and Friendly Wasps

In late summer, spotted bee balm, also known as horse mint (*Monarda punctata)*, can be found all over the sanctuary. It is notable for attracting great black wasps—which look scary, but only seem to care about this plant and have never bothered a volunteer. However, they are one of several wasp species that paralyzes and buries other plant-eating insects for their larvae to feed on. Another *Monarda* species, *Monarda fistulosa*, or wild bergamot, is also referred to as bee balm, but is not interesting to the great black wasps. It has purple flowers and is less prevalent at CSBBS, but both types of monarda would be great for home gardeners who are trying to grow native plants. Neither is eaten by rabbits!

ISTEAM at CSBBS

On two mornings this August, the Clark Street Beach Bird Sanctuary served as a learning environment for students participating in **ISTEAM** summer camp. This program—associated with Northwestern University and community partners from Chicago's Indigenous community, Little Traverse Bay Band of Odawa Indians and Tulalip Tribes—provides opportunities for Chicago-area **Indigenous** students to engage in STEAM (**Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math**) projects using approaches rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

One focus for middle school and high school students was how the lakefront has changed. We walked through our area and talked with students about two types of changes. Construction of Northwestern's lakefill in the 1960s changed the shoreline and expanded the beach. More recently, our work to create and maintain a welcoming habitat for birds has transformed that sandy expanse into one filled with native plants. They were interested in seeing willows, sumacs, and prickly pear cactus and thinking about how these might be used. Their leader pointed out that Indigenous people cared for the land, and at CSBBS people are still doing that. Sometimes Indigenous people altered the environment to improve conditions for

wildlife and, at times, for human use; at CSBBS we have taken bare beach and made it a beautiful area that is useful for birds.

Younger ISTEAM students, who were learning about biodiversity, did a plot sampling activity. They placed hula hoops on the ground in different parts of the bird sanctuary, observed how many different types of plants fell within the hoop, and drew pictures of the plants they saw. This allowed even the youngest students to be actively engaged.

One exciting find was a desiccated skeleton of a dead animal. There was much discussion of what animal had died. Many students thought it was a gull, but careful examination revealed that it had teeth, so "rabbit" became their leading hypothesis.

Through working with ISTEAM staff, we learned more about Indigenous perspectives—like thinking of plants as part of our extended family. We were also delighted to be able to share real-life examples related to ideas the students were learning about, and we hope to continue this collaboration next year.

CSBBS People and Places in the News

Our **Beach House Garden** was featured in a June article in the *Evanston RoundTable*; see evanstonroundtable.com/2024/06/23/new-garden-takes-root-at-clark-street-beach-bird-sanctuary/.

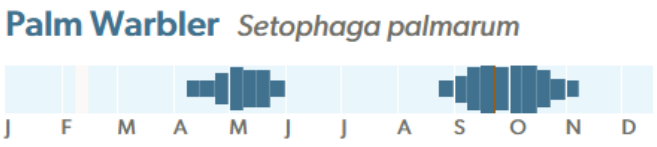
September brought attention to founding and current CSBBS stewards:

- An article on **Libby Hill**'s decision to install solar panels on her home traced her path as an environmental activist including her key contributions to CSBBS; see evanstonroundtable.com/2024/09/04/a-long-journey-to-rooftop-solar/.
- **Jerry Herst** and **Julie Dorfman** were featured in a report on *Still At It*, an exhibit prepared by Evanston-based photojournalist Alan Teller; see evanstonroundtable.com/2024/09/04/alan-teller-at-open-studio-project/.

A windy fall day at the beach

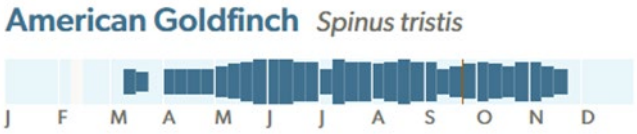
Bird Monitoring – Looking at Data and Patterns

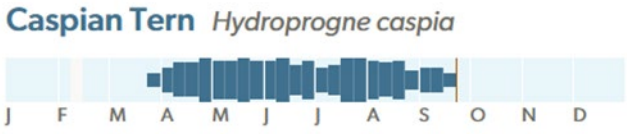
The eBird website is a powerful resource that provides summary data, visual displays, and additional information about the birds observed at our bird sanctuary. You can explore on your own! The direct link for CSBBS is ebird.org/hotspot/L3615041. One fascinating section of the site shows how frequently each species was reported in each week of the year, using data submitted by CSBBS monitors and other birders across multiple years; see ebird.org/hotspot/L3615041/illustrated-checklist. The visual displays make it clear that many species are, as hoped for, migrating birds stopping by the Evanston lakefront in the fall on their way north and in the spring on their voyage south. Here are two examples:



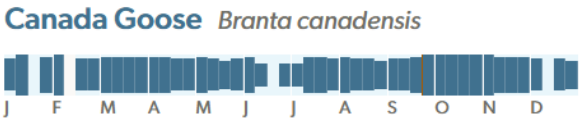
Most observations by CSBBS observers happen in two-month windows during the spring and fall migrations, so you might think that *all* birds would appear to be more prevalent in those seasons. However, eBird adjusts for the

number of observations per week so this variation does not skew their graphs. The resulting diagrams show that for some birds, Chicagoland is their summering spot. Here are diagrams for two such species:





And it will come as no surprise to anyone who frequents the Clark Street Beach area—or drives along Sheridan Road—that Canada Geese stick around here all year!



CSBBS bird monitors report not only what birds they observed but also whether the birds were seen and/or heard within the bird sanctuary or near it (i.e., in the park west of our fenced area, flying overhead, or on the beach to the east or in the water). Our lead bird monitor, Nancy Pinchar, compiles this information. Here are some findings from her Spring 2024 analyses:

- Of the 101 species reported by CSBBS monitors, 59 species were observed within the sanctuary itself.
- The five birds with the highest counts *within* the sanctuary were red-winged blackbirds, song sparrows, house finches, American robins, and swamp sparrows.
- The five species with the highest counts outside the sanctuary were mostly birds associated with water: ring-billed gulls, double-crested cormorants, Caspian terns, and the persistently present Canada geese. The other species in the top five was the common grackle, described on the eBird site as a "lanky, fierce-looking, glossy blackbird."

Nancy recently analyzed the preferred primary food source(s) for migrating bird species within CSBBS boundaries. The information on primary food sources came from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's "All About Birds" website. If they listed a species as having two key foods, she included both in her analyses, with the first listed in her categorization being the more dominant choice.

What did she find? The two charts below are fascinating to compare and contrast. Birds are eating more seeds and fruits in the Fall—when lots of flowering plants have gone to seed and there are berries, and they eat more insects in the spring when insects are the main food available. So, what they're eating is related to where the plants are in their yearly cycles. This fits well with our focus on plants as we work to maintain a welcoming environment for birds.