

Haehnle Sanctuary News



Phyllis Haehnle Memorial Sanctuary

Owned By Michigan Audubon

Maintained and Operated by The Jackson Audubon Society

Preserving and Protecting our Natural World

Fall 2023—Spring 2024



Nest boxes at Haehnle

[Editor's note: this article was submitted in fall, 2023.]

I had the joy and privilege of taking over the nest box monitoring at Haehnle Sanctuary this year. It quickly became my favorite place to monitor boxes for so many reasons, but mostly because I

found it to be such a special, peaceful, full of life place to spend several hours of my day.

I had the good fortune of almost always having the sanctuary to myself, and as I got further into the monitoring process, quickly learned the behavior of certain birds

in specific locations and could almost predict how many Tree Swallows would try and dive bomb me, how many "friends" they would bring along, and how serious they would take their defending duties.

I found one area to always include the help of the bluebirds. It would start with two adult Tree Swallows dive bombing me, then one or two more would join in, then the adult bluebirds would lend their help. It became almost comical, and I would often wonder what people would think if they saw me laughing, and ducking, and talking to these

tiny birds out in the middle of a field as if there was some huge predator threatening me. I would soon understand their instinct to protect their young when I would open a box and see the stage of life the baby birds were at, and know that they would hopefully leave the boxes as healthy fledglings.

Among the many reasons I enjoyed being at the sanctuary, there was never a moment where I couldn't count on seeing something new. Watching the sanctuary come more and more to life as the season went on included so many changes. Whether it was the moment the Skunk Cabbage (*Symplocarpus foetidus*) started poking out of the wet ground, the sound of more bird species moving into the area, the tiny turtles crossing the path, or the flocks of Red-winged Blackbirds that would congregate on the cattails, I would always appreciate the time I could spend taking it all in.

This year Haehnle Sanctuary yielded the following results: 29 nest boxes monitored, 69 nesting attempts, 225 eggs, 152 young, and 147 fledglings. This includes 3 successes in the Wood Duck boxes in Eagle Lake, which was such a treat for me to be a part of. Steve Jerant and I prepared the



Eastern Bluebird chicks
Alex Johnson



Nest box
Alex Johnson

Nest boxes at Haehnle (cont.)



Tree Swallow chicks
Alex Johnson

boxes prior to the season, including securing the post of #12 Wood Duck box, which soon resulted in a nesting attempt. I periodically checked the boxes as the summer went on, and was fortunate enough to see the female Wood Duck sitting on her eggs on two separate occasions. I would apologize to her for disturbing her, then move away as quickly and quietly as possible to hopefully give her some comfort that I wasn't there to disturb her eggs.

Along with successes come failures, and although those were hard and discouraging to see; I hope that some minor changes will help avoid some of those failures in the future. Box #40 was the big let down for me this year. Nesting attempts resulted in broken bluebird eggs, missing nestlings, dead nestlings, and visible disturbance to the nests. I proposed to Steve that we relocate that box, so that will be done in the next month or so. It will join the boxes in unit #7 in the Schroeder tract. Steve and I installed a new #86 box there at the beginning of July. We had previously seen a lot of bluebird activity there; and sure enough, by the end of July bluebirds decided they wanted to start decorating. They never completed their nest, but I'm hopeful that they will choose to move in next spring.

House Sparrows were managed by removal of many nests and eggs, primarily in the nest boxes below the overlook. Destroying any birds eggs is difficult for me. It does become easier after each removal, and especially easier when I know I'm not only preventing a non-native species from competing with a native species, but definitely when I see a Tree Swallow pair move in, nest, and successfully fledge a brood.

In total, there were 74 Tree Swallow fledglings, 41 Eastern Bluebird, 12 House Wren, and 20 Wood Duck.

The end of the season is always bittersweet to me. I won't miss battling the insects, or finding my way to boxes through rapidly growing vegetation. But despite the challenges, there's nothing more satisfying to me than seeing the amount of life that comes out of a nest box trail. It feels good to be a part of the process of collecting this data and doing my small part to ensure each box is cleaned between nest attempts, and that boxes are left available for native species. I'm sad the season is over, and even though I love winter, I can't wait for next spring.

By Alex Johnson



Wood Duck eggs
Alex Johnson

If you are interested in managing or monitoring nests and nest boxes here are some great resources:

Michigan Bluebird Society

<https://michiganbluebirds.org/>

MBS provides resources for monitoring and building next boxes.

Nestwatch

<https://nestwatch.org/>

From the folks who brought us eBird and Merlin, this Cornell Lab of Ornithology resource allows you to track nests throughout the breeding season.

Haehnle Crane Counts

Since we had high crane numbers in 2022, I thought it might be a good time to review the counts at Haehnle Sanctuary. In the table below we see the Haehnle peak count for the last 10 years. It is clear we have both a wide range and a seeming random annual variation.

I compared the data for the Haehnle and US Fish & Wildlife Services Peak Count years. When I compared the high years of 2015, 2018, 2020, & 2022 and the low years of 2014, 2019, & 2021 I found general alignment between the Haehnle Peak Count and the USFWS Michigan count for those years. This annual fluctuation of peak count does not seem to be a Haehnle Sanctuary phenomenon. This is an observed variation with the general population of the cranes that migrate through Michigan.

Year	Haehnle Peak Count	USFWS Michigan Count
2013	714	18315
2014	104	18955
2015	2516	23065
2016	151	18856
2017	495	16028
2018	903	21127
2019	487	13352
2020	1681	18874
2021	18	14416
2022	3331	18761

According to the Fall Survey of the Eastern Population [EP] of Greater Sandhill Cranes-2022 Final Report (Pierce and Fronczak):

The total number of EP sandhill cranes counted across the region in 2022 was 106,981 (97,296, 3-yr average). This is a 19% increase from 2021 (90,029

cranes) and represents the most birds ever counted in any survey period since the Fall Sandhill Crane survey began in 1979.

So the cranes are still coming to Haehnle and the numbers are increasing in Michigan as is the population of the Eastern Sandhill Crane in the Midwest US. While the numbers do fluctuate from year to year, there are always plenty of cranes to see in Jackson County. Find maps of updated crane viewing hotspots on the Haehnle website. (<https://www.haehlnsanctuary.org/driving-map>)

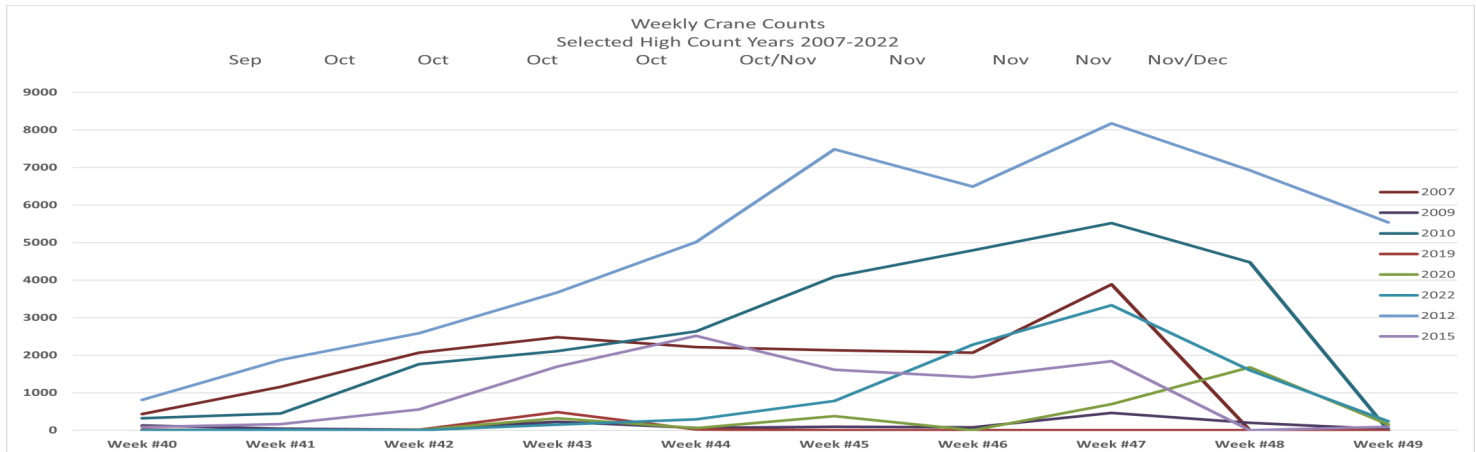
Yes, this is all very fine, but what do you REALLY want to know?
“When is the best time to see the cranes?”

There are two answers to that question: the time of day and the time of year. The time of day is very reliable, which is the two hours before sunset. That of course is dependent on the second answer. In general, late October to early November are peak viewing times.

Using our historical count data, I created a graph to see how the peaks compare with our rule. The graph [below] shows the high points based on the week number of the year for the past 15 years. Based on our data, week #47 looks to be the peak of the season. This year, that is the week starting November 19th.

While fall is our busiest season, Haehnle offers year-round opportunities for getting outside to enjoy nature. In winter you can cross-country ski or spot a shrike. Spring will bring bluebirds nesting and dogwoods blooming. And summer has sparrows chipping and wildflowers blooming. So, you don't have wait for the cranes to visit us, come over anytime!

By Steve Jerant



Haehnle Grants Update

In the Spring, 2023 Haehnle Newsletter, I discussed the grant we are doing with the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). This pollinator-focused grant is managed by our local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office in Jackson. In April we executed a prescribed burn in the grassland area. See the video on the [JAS YouTube](#) page.

The burn crew also treated forested areas to the south and west of the overlook. We are working to return this section of the property back to Oak Savanna habitat. The grassland areas of this burn were partially funded by this grant, called the Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP).

When doing grassland burns, best practices suggest breaking up the habitat when doing burns. To that end the western section was burned in April. Then in November, we did our first ever fall burn in the eastern tract. Sectioning the habitat for burns minimizes disturbance for the entire area, allowing birds, reptiles, and invertebrates to move to other grassland habitat.

Project Wingspan

The other grant we worked was the Project Wingspan program managed by the Pollinator Partnership (pollinator.org). We received the seeds & plugs with perfect timing-just after the fire was completed. Post burn is a great time to plant as the ground is very accessible and the soil just got a shot of nutrients from the burned plant material. Seeds and plugs were sowed in locations based on the recommended habitat and soil moisture requirements.

We planted the seeds in late April. Our wildflower grant awarded us 12 species of seed and 2 plugs. Of

the seeds, I designated 5 - common milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*), wild bergamot (*Monarda fistulosa*), Virginia mountainmint (*Pycnanthemum virginianum*), yellow coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*), and black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia hirta*) appropriate for the developing savanna area. The remaining

seeds were planted in the grassland, depending on moisture conditions. Dense blazing star (*Liatrix spicata*), common evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*), and foxglove beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*) were sown in the higher, dryer areas of the grassland. In a small seep we planted the wet-tolerant species: Common boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*), spotted Joe-pye weed (*Eutrochium maculatum*), Sneezeweed (*Helenium autumnale*), and blue vervain (*Verbena hastata*).

The plugs were planted in late May. The yellow coneflower (*Ratibida pinnata*) was planted in the newly burned savanna area. The foxglove beardtongue (*Penstemon digitalis*) plugs were set on the right side of the newly

burned grassland near the main trail.

We will need to survey in the next two years to see the results of these efforts.

Michigan DNR Wildlife Habitat Grant Program (MDNR WHGP)

As mentioned above, we burned forested areas to the south and west of the overlook. We are working to restore these parts of the property back to Oak Savanna habitat. It was our plan that this work could be funded under the Michigan DNR WHGP grant for improving habitat to benefit woodland bird species. This program funds practices that build and maintain native habitats. The good news was that we



Unit 1.03 west grassland burn
Steve Jerant

Grants Update (cont.)



Unit 1.03 burn completed
Steve Jerant

did win this grant, the bad news is it was awarded after the burn practice in April was executed. However, we will be able to use funds from this grant to continue our restoration program.

In March 2024, we did a significant amount of understory clearing by mowing the trees and shrubs. After normal mowing, a more aggressive grinding tool was used to grind and chip larger plants as well as old piles of vegetation that has built up over several years of management.

This work will be followed up with point spraying of invasives that resprout. We are also planning to remove some of the unwanted trees. As the name would imply, the dominant tree of an Oak Savanna is oak. Once this physical disturbance is completed, we will plant seeds, trees, and plugs in the cleared area. Next year, the area will have a prescribed burn to help control shrubs.

A portion of the grant is directed at education. We plan to install some long-overdue signage to help visitors understand habitat restoration benefits and process.

Future Opportunities

This past summer of 2023 we met with our partners at the US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the USDA. Our longtime USFWS partner Tom Eitnienar, retired in 2022 after the completion of a

large buckthorn removal project. In August, Chad Machinski from Michigan Audubon, Gary Siegrist, and I met and toured the property with the new USFWS team. We discussed possible habitat improvement & restoration opportunities in different areas of the Haehnle property. These included non-native cattail management, savanna restoration, creation of pushout ponds, invasive shrub removal, and maintenance of the dike between the Portage River and the pool along Wooster Rd.

Jeff Lolkus, our USDA contact from the Jackson NRCS office, visited with Chad and me a few weeks later. We may have an opportunity to expand the grassland that is part of the back loop of the nature trail. Currently, there is heavy growth of invasive shrubs and undesirable trees to the west. By clearing this area to expand the grassland we could provide a larger contiguous habitat for our grassland birds. By increasing the acreage, we increase our chances of supporting higher quality grassland species such as Meadowlark and Bobolink.

Grants are a very important source of funding for habitat work at Haehnle. But we also depend on donations from our visitors and readers like you. If you would like to assist financially in the protection of this sanctuary, see the last page of this newsletter for options.

By Steve Jerant

Prescribed Burn-Before & After



Unit 1.03 east post burn panorama



View to the south—before burn



View to the south—after burn



View to the north—before burn



View to the north—after burn

All photos
Steve Jerant

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***We wish to thank the many people who have generously supported
The Phyllis Haehnle Memorial Sanctuary in recent months.***

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