

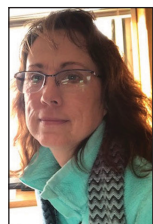
# OUTDOORS



This long-billed curlew, spotted by High Bridge-area resident Jena Lindquist, is only the third confirmed sighting in Wisconsin since 1975. Though once more common in Wisconsin, curlews now winter on the Pacific and Gulf coasts and travel to the Mountain West to breed. (Contributed photo by Jena Lindquist)

## Another rarity spotted by the bay

Farmer and photographer Jena Lindquist had just finished doing farm chores with her husband Adam near High Bridge and was heading home in the side-by-side when a bird flew up in front of them. Jena thought it was an American woodcock at first, or a bird carrying a stick, before she realized that the stick was in fact a long beak. She asked



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Adam to take her home to get her camera so she could take some photos of a bird that she knew was unusual. She then posted several shots to a local birding page on Facebook, hoping someone could identify this shorebird with the extended snout. Turns out this avian guest on the Lindquist farm was a very big deal.

Conservation biologist Ryan Brady quickly replied to Jena's post and lovely photo of the mystery bird with a very scientific declaration of "Holy crap!" The Lindquists' visitor was in fact a long-billed curlew, a "majorly rare" visitor to Wisconsin according to Brady. Large and graceful, the closest that long-billed curlews usually get to us is the

western Dakotas, where they spend the breeding season across the plains and northern Rockies. Jena's impression that her bird was carrying a stick is understandable because they have the longest beak of any comparable shorebird; their beaks are about half as long as their height. Cornell's All About Birds website

says they like wet pastures during migration, and with our recent weather this perfectly describes where this particular curlew has been hanging out. They eat a variety of things including insects and marine invertebrates, and their long, curved bills are particularly adept at digging up earthworms — something our local friend has been doing voraciously all week.

I spoke with Ryan Brady this week about this exciting bird sighting. He praised Jena's "good eye" for spotting the curlew and realizing she had something different. He says this is only the 11th recorded sighting of a long-billed curlew in Wisconsin and only the third sighting since 1975. What makes this visit unprecedented is the fact that the other birds didn't stick around for more than

a day or so. Not to be outdone, our newcomer stuck around for at least six days, and was seen and recorded dozens of times by people who visited the farm to catch a glimpse of the beaky rarity (Jena reports that she's met people from as far away as Kenosha who drove up to add the long-billed curlew to their life lists). Ryan informed me that there has been "a little flurry of western birds" in the area recently, including American avocets, eared grebes (these are super cool-looking birds!), and a furtive pair of magpies that appear to be making a nesting bid near Bark River on the Bayfield Peninsula. According to sighting reports, black-billed magpies are occasionally seen in that area, but this is the first time they've been observed building a nest.

We're not sure what's causing these western-

ers to tarry in our area, but I for one am happy to have them around and to have a chance to get a look at them.

And so I did. I noted on Facebook that the long-billed curlew was still around as of Monday, so I drove down to take a peek. I was concerned that this well-camouflaged bird would be hard to spot, but I needn't have worried. Within minutes the curlew announced itself (I have no idea if it was male or female; females have a longer, more curved bill) with its unmistakable "Cur-lee" call. It then flew across the road and hung out near some decidedly uninterested cattle, digging up worms and occasionally wiping its bill.

Long-billed curlews are large enough that they stand out even in brown grassy areas that match their coloring — about the size of a crow

but with a much smaller head and longer legs. In the 19th century, Wisconsin was still part of the long-billed curlew's breeding range, but loss of grassland habitat and hunting most likely shrank this range. They're not very common but their populations have been stable over the past 50 years or so.

If our itinerant visitor decides to head back west and raise a family, it should be well-fueled and well-rested after its sojourn by the bay. And it's probably wondering what all the fuss was about with all the humans parked on the road with their binoculars and cameras.

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### UP NORTH

## A time for exploring

In early May I go exploring, before the demands of full-blown spring fill daylight to the brim. Before foliage and understory close in and before the scars of winter are covered, I walk the woodlands and trails not knowing what I might see or find. I go with backpack, camera and a sense of exploration in the season of propagation.

This spring has been sluggish, but the opportunities are there as bugs and buds are slow to show. It's time to hike. On a gray morning, with a chill lingering, I head up the path into the woods. It's quiet and devoid of greenness or wildflowers. If I look close on the south base of large trees I find shoots of flowers begging for sun and

warmth.

I push on. Will I find a deer skull, an agate in a spring-washed creek, or a wasp nest tough enough to withstand winter? Suddenly a yellow-rumped warbler dances through the bare twigs. It has arrived, from its winter in the southern states. I pick my way along a creek, with open hardwoods rising away on

one side and a tangle of tag alders on the other. A rock in the stream catches my eye. It's not an agate, but is striped in burnt orange, grays and browns. It goes in my backpack.

Then I trace a fence line to the meadow, where another small stream flows slowly and pauses in pools between the grasses laid low by

winter. Near the stream a mangled piece of deer hide the size of a dish towel lies a couple of feet from an animal's den. The dig is a foot across, but the hole entrance, with fresh paw tracks, is only the size of my fist.

Across the stream is another piece of deer hide and more holes bored into the soft soil. I wonder what critters roam here in the witching hours. Moving on, I find a jawbone, though too far away and too old to be connected to the fresh deer hide. The bone is 7 inches long, curved on one end, with six large teeth. It too goes in my backpack.

A marsh spreads out below the main trail. The stagnant water dotted with clumps of grass and stumps of rotted trees will soon fill with the shrills and trills of frogs and toads. But not today. Two mallards

circle nervously before taking off, their squawking ringing in their wake. I notice something horizontal in black and white on one of the clumps. A Canada goose is on her nest of eggs, holding her neck low while holding her ground, hoping I don't notice. My long camera lens takes note.

As I turn to leave the sun suddenly bursts upon the morning, glinting through dainty droplets left by yesterday's rain on swelling tree buds. There will be more explorations; I will feel, like the tree buds, the warmth and wonder of spring. And I will see, perhaps, goslings in the marsh.

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While out roaming the woods, the author came upon this Canada goose, ducking its head to avoid detection. (Contributed photo by Dave Greschner)