

# Chequamegon Chirps



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7 P.M. Monday March 19<sup>th</sup> at the Medford Library

Let's see, so far this year, it is weather two, bird club meetings zero. I'm writing this on a sunny Friday morning that will get into the thirties. Still have adequate snow cover which I like to see for the rest of this month, but the air feels more spring like—most days. Now, for our March 19<sup>th</sup> meeting, if the weather or road conditions are questionable, you can tune in to Medford's K 99.9 after 3 P.M. to find out if the meeting is cancelled. Hopefully, this won't happen, but it is March—and way back when, there was more than a foot of snow one Mother's Day. Too much pleasant weather can get boring, can't it?

The March meeting will include some catch up from our two cancelled meetings plus Joe will have a short presentation on the unexpected impact of Barred Owls in some western areas. While winter doesn't have the bird activities of other seasons, this one has had more northern visitors than last year. Crossbills, Pine Grosbeaks, Redpolls and Pine Siskins have all added variety to our feeders and woods travel. Now comes our seasonal turnover of species. I've heard of several Robin sightings in addition to Sandhill Cranes, and Canada Geese coming north while some of our current visitors are declining in number. Snowy Owls are still around, but appear to be getting more restless as a prelude to their northern migration. Since there are ten more days until the March meeting, there well could be significant numbers of various species arriving by then. What's Around should have lots of interesting facts for current events—as well as other details from the last couple months. Will see you then—unless a blizzard has everything shut down.

## **Birdbrains vs. Brainiacs**

Which are you? We all have our moments at times. However, there may not be as much difference in these two terms as is often assumed. I'll admit I've used the term birdbrain in a much less than flattering way at times, but after reading some studies and articles recently, my attitude has shifted. The most recent issue of the National Geographic had another in the series *The year of the bird*. That, plus an August 21, 2017

article in the Time Magazine are the basis for most of this article plus information from Connie Decker about a remarkable member of their family for the last 22 years.

Birds are far more intelligent than once believed, but not all are intellectual equals. Parrots, as well as birds in the corvid family, such as Common ravens, Crows and Jays are among the smartest birds, thanks to proportionally large forebrains with densely packed neurons. They're also some of the most sociable, exhibiting interactive behaviors that might be expected of a primate. Bird brains are smaller than mammals, but more densely packed with neurons, the cells responsible for cognition. Recent studies show corvids, other songbirds, and parrots have neuronal densities that greatly exceed those of mammals. A 150 pound human brain weighs about three pounds, which is two percent of total body weight. A raven's brain may weigh just over a half ounce, but it accounts for 1.3 percent of the bird's body mass. The size of raven's and crow's brains is even more impressive when you consider their need to fly. Birds are under pressure to have light bodies for flying, so when we see birds with large brains, it's more remarkable than seeing it in mammals.

Bird behavior involves many skills which are instinctual, but some birds are also capable of learning as they grow and adapt to their environments. Puzzle Solving. Some birds have the capacity to reason and make logical inferences. At the University of Veterinary Medicine in Vienna, Palm Cockatoos from New Guinea have learned to open five different locks, a pin, a screw, a bolt, a wheel and a bar to gain access to a treat. Using Tools. Some can use objects—found or fashioned—to solve problems. An example of this is crows who have been observed shaping twigs into tools for fishing termites from their nests. Studying Others. Some species are able to learn through observing other bird's behavior. Vocal Learning. Birds learn vocalizations that can be used in social interactions. Green-rumped parrotlets in South America have calls that function as names. Parent parrotlets apparently assign different sounds to their chicks, much the way human parents give names to their children. Socializing. Some species engage in complex social relationships within groups. Studies of a group of Common Ravens in the Austrian Alps indicates the most basic social bond in birds is the pair-bond while in mammals it is between mother and infant. Remembering. Some birds are even able to recall episodic experiences from the past. Researchers have revealed the remarkable memories of Clark's Nutcrackers, scrub jays and chickadees. Nutcrackers harvest and cache more than 30,000 pine seeds every autumn, distributing them in several thousand tiny caches they need to remember through the winter. (A personal notation here.) I can hide Easter eggs in the backyard and not have that much of an advantage over the grandchildren in finding them. I would definitely starve the first winter and do my bit to improve the gene pool.

Playing. Some birds engage in play fighting or other forms of social play. Ravens and crows are observed riding the wind or sometimes hanging from branches for what appears to be, “Just for the fun of it.”

This information has been developed from research coming from various studies around the world. My guess is these studies will continue, become more refined and reveal many, until now, unknown factors and details. Human brains are large, powerful, and amazing in what has been accomplished so far. But that doesn't mean we are aware of or know everything. Different brains function differently. Just because we don't know of or are aware of something doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. The old saw of, “If a tree in the woods falls, and no one hears it, did it happen?” to me, is an example of extreme human arrogance. Of course it did. Just because we aren't aware of something doesn't make it any less relevant. (Just a personal bias of mine. I seem to be developing more of them as I get older.)

Kenya joined Connie and Mike Decker's family in 1996. Only fifteen days old, they picked him up in Stevens Point which was from sort of a puppy mill operation. Many babies are cute to downright beautiful—not including African Gray Parrots. Connie described him as a blob of flesh with no pinfeathers that included an outsized beak and feet. At first he was fed with specialized parrot gruel with a syringe and later with a spoon and then a stick. After that he was fed Cheerios and gradually his parrot food switched over to most foods adult people eat including nuts, greens, fruits. He must know he is a Wisconsinite because he loves cheese.

He is an exceptionally intelligent bird who knows 50+ phrases and or sounds. Some of these sounds are said on his terms when he wants to, but some are appropriate to the social setting such as good-by when someone is leaving the house. Connie is the one who talks to him the most, but interestingly, he speaks in three different voices that are obviously different. Mike and their son, Clay, have voices much deeper than Connie's. It's startling to be in their house and talking with Connie to suddenly hear something from Kenya in a decidedly bass voice. He also does spot on imitations of the micro-wave, phone, ambulances and a backing up garbage truck. Other outside sounds he has mastered include House Sparrows, American Robins, Northern Cardinal and baby chicks. Newly hatched chicks are a favorite of his and when Connie talks about “baby chickees,” he makes their peeping sound. He is also a fan of TV quiz shows and will laugh or scream in appreciation along with the audience.

Kenya has been a healthy bird his whole life. If you have questions about Kenya or details of a house bird, contact Connie. She has a wealth of information.

Editor Chequamegon Chirps

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#### CLUB CONTACTS

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#### March and April events

Full moons: 3-2, 3-31, and 4-30

We switch over to daylight savings time

Early birds have hatched

The flood of migrants increases

Spring and winter clash with spring winning!

The land awakens



**EASTERN BLUEBIRD** With their cheerful and melodious calls, bluebirds are a sure sign that spring is coming east of the Rockies. Females are a duller blue than the males, and the young have a speckled breast. They nest in holes in trees or posts but will accept the right kind of birdhouse.