

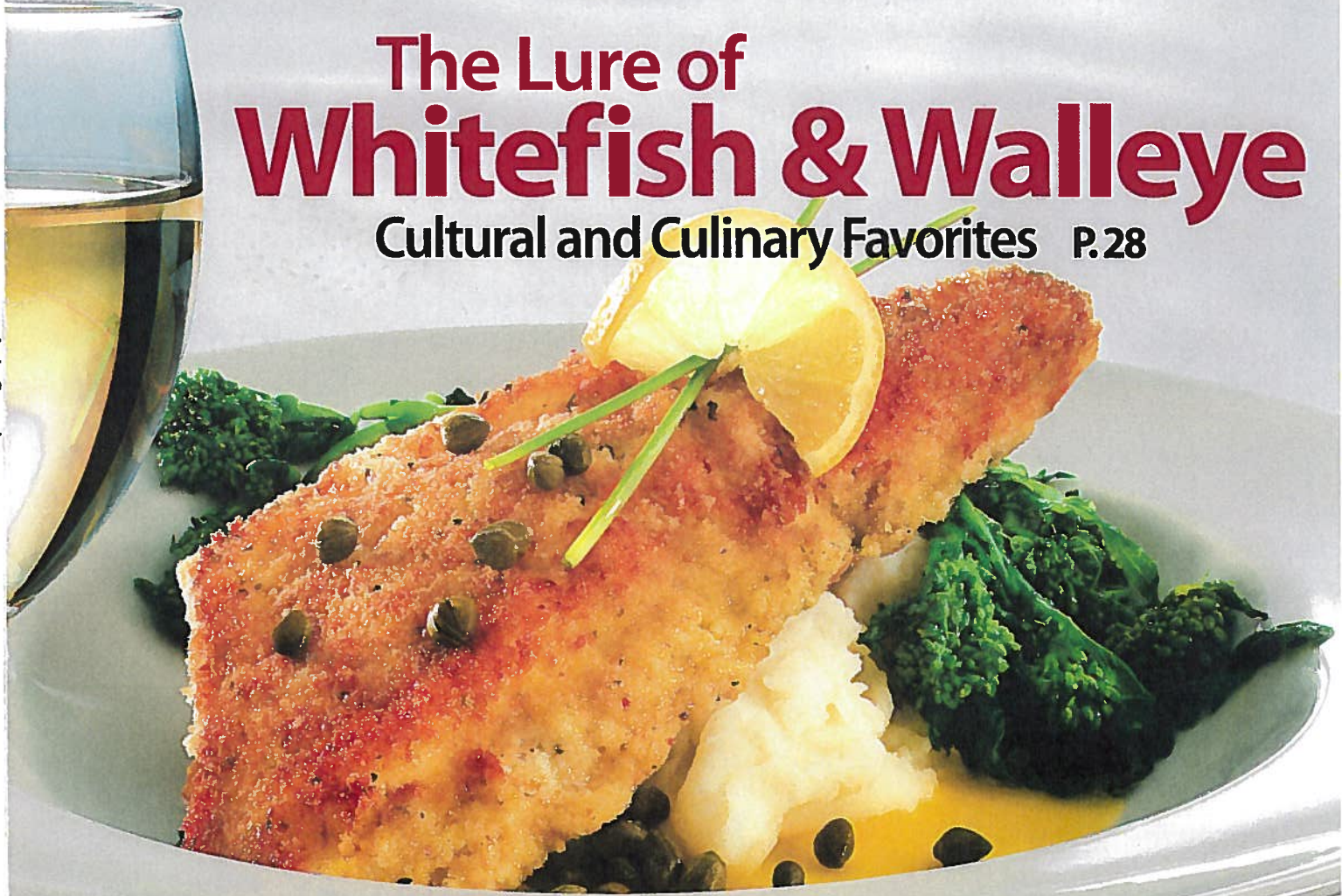
**GUIDE:** Feed Birds by Hand • Chequamegon Bay Nature Festival  
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Lake Superior Magazine April/May 2013

# Lake Superior

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Volume 35 Issue 2

# Birds & Beyond

## The Festival at Chequamegon Bay

by Julie Buckles

When you think of birding events, you probably picture lots of folks, binoculars to eyes, standing together staring skyward for a glimpse of some winged wonder far in the distance.

Things are a little different at the Chequamegon Bay Birding & Nature Festival in Ashland, Wisconsin. During this seventh year of the event on May 16-18, you might just find yourself with a naturalist directing you to discover a wondrous, not feathered,



RON PLINSKE

Wildlife, from these dunlins shorebirds to this tiny Olympia marble moth, are the stars of the Chequamegon Bay Birding & Nature Festival.



BRIAN HEERINGA

denizen of nature among the granite cliffs of the Penokee Mountains – a rare land snail, a living fossil so small that 12 can fit on a thumbnail.

“Picture a slug with a shell and eyestalks that breathes air and eats with a razor blade-armored tongue,” says

naturalist Eric North, who provides programming at the Cable Natural History Museum on snails and other creatures. “They’re really rare creatures found on the most amazing cliffs.” Eric will lead hikes to Whittlesey Mountain and to Porcupine Lake Wilderness during the festival.

The Chequamegon Bay festival is a celebration of things great and small

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# BAYFIELD

*and the apostle islands*

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– snails, spiders, bats, wild rice and edible mushrooms and, of course, the regional birds from loons to eagles. Event organizers have shaped the weekend to appeal to novice birders and anyone with an interest in the natural world. The Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center serves as base camp for the event, but there are plenty of opportunities for participants to get out into the landscape and onto Lake Superior.

The three-day event offers a combination of land and water field trips – like a ride on the loon pontoon – and tours and talks. The days start early. The first birding tour departs at 5:45 a.m. for a hike into the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest to look for thrushes, vireos, warblers and sparrows. Or one could sleep an extra 15 minutes and hit the Bark Bay field trip to look for sandhill cranes, American bitterns, LeConte's sparrows, nesting bald eagles, warblers and possibly even a black-backed woodpecker. The morning birding tours fill quickly – and yes, you'll be among others with their binoculars.

Volunteer naturalist leaders who share their expertise and passions are one reason the festival succeeds, says Wendy Stein of the planning committee. "We have such a pool of talented and knowledgeable folks around here willing to volunteer."

Another popular element is that the event isn't only about birds, she adds. "Larry Weber, a retired science teacher from the Duluth region, comes over – he is extremely passionate about spiders, the very thing most people want to smash.

And land snails ... what an interesting creature to learn more about."

An important festival component is conservation education. Talks cover coldwater stream restoration, bald eagle nestlings and toxic chemicals, invasive plant identification, shoreland restoration, Whittlesey Creek National Wildlife Refuge habitats and pine barrens' fire ecology.

The weekend features nature hikes to Houghton Falls, Lost Creek Falls and Frog Bay Tribal Park, all of which the Bayfield Regional Conservancy helped to preserve.

The lakescapes and landscapes offer rare and common sightings. Take those land snails. Only a handful of places in the world support them, one being the Penokees where conditions mimic a pre-glacial period 10,000 or so years ago. "I can only imagine the first person who saw these 150-foot

## Good to Know

### 7th Annual Chequamegon Bay Birding & Nature Festival – May 16-18

Northern Great Lakes Visitor Center, Ashland, Wisconsin

birdandnaturefest.com or Ashland County Tourism at 800-284-9484 or 715-682-2500

Registration ranges from \$21.50 for an individual day pass to \$95.50 for a family weekend pass. Part of the fee is donated to the Bayfield Regional Conservancy and the Natural Resources Foundation of Wisconsin Bird Protection Fund. "That way everyone who comes to the festival becomes a partner in conservation of this region," says committee member Brian Heeringa.



cliffs," Eric says. "It's hard not to have your breath taken away, and then you look at the minutia, and the minutia is what keeps you going back."

For birding, the Chequamegon Bay region "sizzles" for three reasons, says event keynote speaker Steve Betchkal, who authored *All of This and Robins Too: A Guide to the 50 or So Best Places to Find Birds in Wisconsin*. Steve cites:

1) Northern exposure: "The region has an exciting mix of northern and hard-to-find species ranging from gyrfalcons, pine grosbeaks and snowy owls to red-throated loons and scoters, upland sandpipers, LeConte's sparrows, yellow-bellied flycatchers, and breeding wood warblers. As well as an exciting migrant raptor pattern with birds like golden eagles, merlins and northern goshawks."

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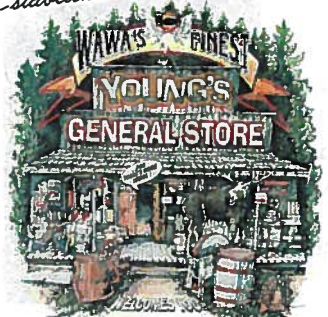
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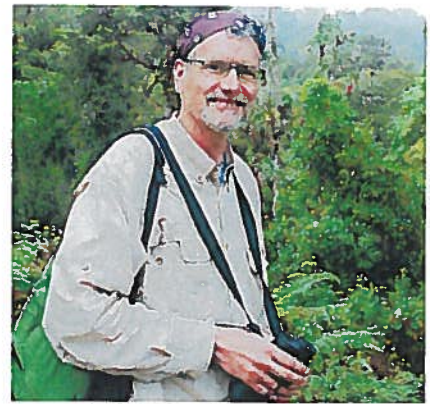
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CHEQUAMEGON BAY BIRDING & NATURE FESTIVAL

Steve Betchkal, festival keynote speaker, finds the area “sizzles” with birding opportunities.

2) Chequamegon Bay: The bay forms a natural collection basin for waterfowl, migrant shorebirds, hard-to-find gulls and even songbirds hugging the shore during migration.

3) People energy: “Chequamegon Bay birders have put the Ashland-Bayfield area on the map with active reports of sightings, and now a major birding festival. They’ve turned a collection of fine bird habitats into a must-see destination for birders.”

Biologist Brian Heeringa, also an event speaker, believes the same about bats; the bay area is a must-see bat destination. Brian coordinates bat monitoring for the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest and teaches about the importance of bats.

Brian will lead a field trip to the Les Voigt Fish Hatchery, the largest known bat colony in Wisconsin, to talk about surveying bats and other nocturnal species and offering a hands-on demonstration of bat detectors. Participants can expect to see some 500 bats emerge from roost – the number Brian once counted. This regional “bat man” is on the festival’s planning committee and will present an indoor program about bat species, habitat and threats to their health.

Bird, bat or snail, day-loving or nocturnal – all the creatures make this a fantastic festival, Eric North insists.

“The birds are great,” says Eric, “but there are so many more things to appreciate here than just birds.”

Julie Buckles, a freelance writer from Washburn, also finds a fascination for creatures great and small.

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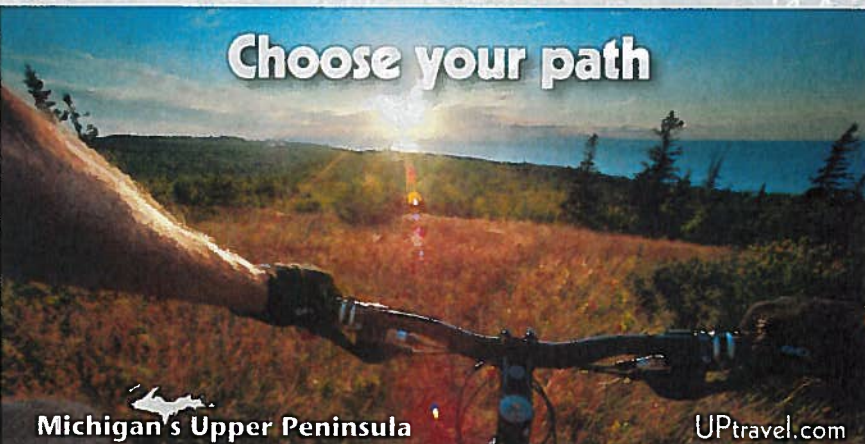


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