

Chautauqua Watershed Notes
From the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy
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Chautauqua Lake Water Bird Hotel
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for the Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy



Tundra Swans, en route from their arctic tundra breeding grounds to wintering grounds in the Chesapeake Bay region, stop to rest and feed on Chautauqua Lake in late autumn. (Photo by Timothy Baird.)

All summer long Chautauqua Lake is a people's playground. We see sunbathers on the docks that line the shoreline, hear laughter above the hum of the motorboats and "no vacancy" signs hang in front of the hotels and motels. Then autumn arrives. The docks are pulled out and piled in pieces on the shore, the boats are hauled away and placed in storage and the motels and hotels close their doors and board over the windows. The lake is calm

and quiet now. This is the way the next wave of tourists likes it. The hotels on its shores have closed but Chautauqua Lake itself has just opened as a hotel for these seasonal tourists. It is now a hotel for water birds. The birds are not here for a vacation. They are air travelers on a time-honored journey, the journey of migration. Having spent the spring and summer in private, spacious northern breeding grounds these birds now have to travel to wintering grounds where the habitat promises to be more hospitable. Some birds travel fantastic distances like the famous Arctic Tern's super marathon flight from the arctic to the southern tip of South America. The migratory water birds, which are not quite so aerodynamic, travel a more reasonable distance from northern Canada to the mid Atlantic states coastline. While it's not the balmy tropics, there is open water upon which they can swim and forage for food. Travelers get weary and hungry. Migratory birds are no exception. They must stop to rest and eat which means there must be "hotels" along their journey. These hotels, like any good hotel, should provide comfortable, clean, safe rooms and nutritious meals. If you are a water bird your hotel is a wetland, pond or lake.

Those of us interested in nature are fortunate that Chautauqua Lake is one of those hotels. Water birds are among the easiest birds to spot and identify. Many bird watching careers began watching water birds. They are large and remain visible long enough for a good long look through the binoculars and consultation with a field guide. It's always exciting to see them.

Because the birds are only visitors they do not suffer from the contempt bred by familiarity. There is some challenge in recognizing some of the water birds. Remember they are coming from their breeding grounds, which means since breeding season is over they won't be wearing breeding plumage. For example the Common Loon, whose eerie cries into Chautauqua Lake's early morning autumn mist creates images of remote wilderness, is usually depicted on Christmas cards wearing dramatic black suits with white necklaces. When they visit our hotel they are the color of the mist that surrounds them: soft tones of white and grey. Horned Grebes, also seasonal Chautauqua Lake Water Bird Hotel guests, arrive wearing casual non-breeding colors of grey and white instead of their breeding costume of chestnut and black bodies and bright orange eye makeup. Some guests come pretty much dressed as they are all year. Appearing in black and white are the toy-like Bufflehead and Common Goldeneye, the Greater and Lesser Scaup and Ringneck Duck.

There are many different species of water birds that check into the Chautauqua Lake Water Bird Hotel. So far I've mentioned just a few of the regulars. I cannot conclude this article without writing about the bird that is the grand finale of autumn bird watching. Just before ice closes the hotel the lake receives one last tour group. One night you will hear what someone once described to me as "a pack of barking dogs in the sky". The next morning a flock of spectacular Tundra Swans is floating on the silver waters of Chautauqua Lake.

It is autumn, the summer frenzy has calmed. The lake becomes natural again. Winged visitors arrive. Take yourself, a pair of binoculars and a bird field guide to Celoron Park, Prendergast Point, Chautauqua Institution or Mayville Park, which are all good public places to watch water birds. See who is staying at the Chautauqua Lake Water Bird Hotel.

The Chautauqua Watershed Conservancy is a private, not-for-profit, 501(c)(3) organization with a mission to preserve and enhance the water quality, scenic beauty and ecological health of the lakes, streams and watersheds of the Chautauqua region. Its urgent focus is to conserve the endangered natural shore lands of Chautauqua Lake, which provide fish and wildlife habitat and pollution filtering functions essential to a healthy lake. Only four miles (10%) of the lake's shoreline remains in a natural, undeveloped condition. The Conservancy is funded primarily through membership donations. Its 2008 annual membership campaign is currently underway. It is presently raising funds to conserve the Chautauqua Lake's most important remaining natural shoreline habitats, undertake programs to address the root causes of the conditions that fuel lake plant growth, and manage its preserves. It is the only local organization conserving lands in perpetuity for these purposes. Please contact the Conservancy at 664-2166 to join for 2008!