

Meet Iowa's new top bird expert

Anna Buckardt Thomas wants to protect habitat, educate Iowans about native species



Anna Buckardt Thomas, the new avian ecologist at the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, releases a golden-winged warbler after banding. (Bill Thomas/submitted photo)



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The most exotic bird Anna Buckardt Thomas has seen so far in Iowa is a yellow-billed loon, a large diving bird that breeds in the Arctic Circle and



rarely is seen south of Canada.

That sighting, at Brushy Creek State Recreation Area near Fort Dodge, was in the first few weeks Buckardt Thomas was on the job as the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' new avian ecologist.

"Many birders have been out to see it and the common loon it has been hanging out with, which is also an odd summer visitor for Iowa," said Buckardt Thomas, 26. "I get enjoyment from seeing and watching any bird. It doesn't have to be new or extravagantly beautiful."

Buckardt Thomas succeeded Bruce Ehresman, who retired in early 2018 after being the state's top bird expert for more than 30 years. Her goals include doing research that can be put into practice to help Iowa's bird populations and protecting bird habitat.

Buckardt Thomas grew up in a [500-acre forest preserve](#) in Deerfield, Ill., where her mother is an environmental educator.

"I like to tell people I was brainwashed," Buckardt Thomas said. "My mother was a birder. We had bird feeders, and we were always outside observing. She got me hooked."

Buckardt Thomas doubled majored in wildlife ecology and management and applied ecology and environmental science at Michigan Technological University. After graduating in 2015, she went on to a graduate program in wildlife ecology at the University of Maine.

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Buckardt Thomas completed her master's degree in May after finishing a project on how forest management can aid declining bird species. She worked with the [Wisconsin Young Forest Partnership](#) to see if cutting back old growth forest in favor of more young-growth trees would boost populations of golden-winged warblers and American woodcocks.

“For three summers I spent time in the Rhinelander (Wisconsin) area,” Buckardt Thomas said. Based on before-and-after data at the same sites, “there was an increase in both of those target species because of that habitat.”

Birds in Iowa and other states have declined because of development and habitat loss, Buckardt Thomas said. Iowa has one of the lowest percentages of public land in the nation at around 3 percent, with the bulk of Iowa's acres used for farming.

“This is one way the DNR can have a role,” Buckardt Thomas said. “By protecting those open spaces that exist.”

The DNR also must work with private landowners to develop more bird habitat, whether that is wetlands or prairie strips between farm fields and streams.

Buckardt Thomas, who lives in Ames, said she hasn't been in Iowa long enough to know all the good bird-watching locations. But she

recommends two organizations, [Bird Friendly Iowa](#), based in Marion, and [Iowa Young Birders](#), for people who want to learn more about the 400 species of birds that visit the state and nearly 200 that breed here.

“If you can put a feeder in your backyard and get a bird book, you can start learning what is coming into your yard,” she said. “Iowa is a beautiful state, and there’s a lot of opportunity to go outside and enjoy the natural resources we do have.”

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