

The Osprey



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Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

RARE AMERICAN GOLDEN AND BLACK-BELLIED PLOVERS IN CHARLES COUNTY

by George Jett

Shorebirds can be quite hard to identify to species. This is especially so when they are juveniles, and are the smaller species (“peeps”). Very good identification guides are now available, but it takes patience, practice, and good optics. This is not some birders’ style, but in order to have a better understanding of the birds in a region, such as Charles County, it is useful to try to identify these challenging species.

September is a good time to look for some of the less common shorebirds in our region, especially after a good storm. Species to look for then are American Golden Plover (*Pluvialis dominica*, AMGP) and Black-bellied Plover (*Pluvialis squatarola*, BBPL). Also, look for Buff-breasted (BBSP) and Baird’s (BASP) Sandpipers during September. The place to go is a turf (sod) farm or large open area with exposed earth. These species migrate from their breeding grounds in the tundra (way up north) to South America for the winter. Stormy weather is less favorable for migration, especially when the winds are blowing from the south, so they land, refuel, then move on when the weather clears and their fat reserves are restored. Some birds stay as long as a week if they find a good food source.

These storms often bring down more common species, such as Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs, and Pectoral, Solitary, Spotted, Least, and Semipalmated Sandpipers. These species occur annually in Charles County. BBPL occurs annually but in very small numbers. To my knowledge, AMGP has been documented twice, BBSP once, and BASP has not been documented yet in Charles Co.

Following a good storm on September 14, I headed out on the 15th to search for some of the rarer shorebirds. My target was American Golden Plover, and my first stop was the sod farm on Rt. 228. As usual, I found a good number of Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*, our large resident plover). I continued to scan the exposed earth with my binoculars, and eventually found another species, an immature Pluvialis-type plover. Trying to be cautious, I took out the telescope and studied the bird carefully. This bird was slightly larger than the adjacent killdeer, but very different. It was either a BBPL or an AMGP.

Distinguishing between these two species requires care, especially with juveniles or winter plumage birds, which we see this time of year. Shape is very important when identifying shorebirds. The bird was large headed, with a heavy black bill. The eye was dark and a bold eye-stripe (superciliary line) was obvious. The back had black spots all over, the

rump was white, and the primary feathers extended only to the end of the tail, not beyond. The underside was pale with a gray wash on the upper breast. The overall impression was that the bird was various tones of gray. I was hoping for a golden-toned bird, but I was looking at an immature BBPL. (See photo). No wonder the British call this bird the Gray Plover when they see it during migration.

Had this bird flown, I could have seen its distinctive black underarm feathers (axillaries), which the AMGP does not have. This is the easier way to distinguish these two Pluvialis species. Pleased, but not too pleased, I checked another sod farm I remembered and found nothing unusual to report.

On Saturday, September 16 on the SMAS field trip to Chapman State Park, Bob Eppley mentioned to Gwen Brewer that he had never seen so many Killdeer on the sod farm on Morgantown Road. Gwen mentioned it to me on Tuesday, September 19. I had forgotten about that new sod farm. A light bulb came on—it was much closer to the river than the Rt. 228 farm, had a large exposed earth area, and had great potential. With haste on Wednesday September 20, I arrived early at the Morgantown sod farm.

The large exposed earth area next to the road before the bend at the river proved to be very productive. Before I stopped the car I got a quick look at a promising bird. I safely pulled into a parking area off the road and tried to relocate the bird. AMGP looks a lot like dirt, and the bird I saw from the car was now out of sight. The earth had recently been turned with lots of mounds in front of me, and the bird could be below my line of sight.

The ground was still wet with large, shallow pools. I started searching the larger pool and soon found a pair of Pectoral Sandpipers. I then found a Semipalmated Plover (SPPL), several Least Sandpipers among the Killdeer, and Semipalmated Sandpiper. OK, where did that dirt-colored bird go?

I continued to search and suddenly a larger dull brown/golden bird popped up from a dirt mound. I quickly put binoculars down, and aimed the scope in its direction. I studied the bird carefully since I did not want to jump to the conclusion I was hoping for. The bird was about the size of the nearby Killdeer but more chunky with an appearance of being heavier. The bill was all dark, but daintier than the Killdeer and what I remembered from the BBPL from five days ago. The bird did have a bold superciliary line, and the eye was black. The next observation was that the bird did not have the black spotting on the back, and the legs were slightly duller than the BBPL on the Rt. 228 farm. The bird was a dull brown/gold color overall, and I could see that the

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rump was not white. The bird flew once to elude the tractor that was disking the earth and could see no black axillaries, although the view was a quick one.

Finally, I had found an AMGP in Charles. I photographed the bird, albeit from afar to document the third county record. Using the weather and knowing the likely occurrence of species in our region can help you find rare species. I'm waiting for that next storm! Good Birding.



Photo of immature Black-bellied Plover, September 15, by George Jett.

IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS PROGRAM NEWS

by David Curson

During the spring and summer of 2006 Audubon Maryland-DC held dedication ceremonies for two Important Bird Areas. National Audubon Society is a partner with Birdlife International working to identify a network of sites designated Important Bird Areas that provide a critical network of habitats for birds. By working to identify those places that are essential to birds during some part of their life cycle (breeding, wintering, feeding, migrating) we hope to minimize the effects that loss and degradation of habitat have on bird populations. Audubon Maryland-DC organizes these efforts in Maryland.

Fort Smallwood Park Important Bird Area was dedicated on March 31 in honor of its statewide significance for the springtime migration of raptors. The ceremony was part of an event to celebrate the reopening of Fort Smallwood Park after ownership was transferred from Baltimore City to Anne Arundel County. David Curson, Director of Bird Conservation for Audubon Maryland-DC, made presentations to Mayor Martin O' Malley of Baltimore, Anne Arundel County Executive Janet Owens and Sue Ricciardi, coordinator of the Fort Smallwood hawk watch.

Fort Smallwood Park is one of the prime raptor migration sites in the mid-Atlantic region during the northward spring migration due to its location on a north-pointing promontory

on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay at the mouth of the Patapsco River. This geographical feature has the effect of funneling the migrating hawks into a "bottleneck" at Rock Point before they cross the river to Baltimore County. Most other Eastern hawk watch sites are situated on inland ridges and record relatively small numbers during spring. At Fort Smallwood the average total spring count is 11,000 raptors, consisting mostly of Turkey Vulture, Sharp-shinned Hawk, and Broad-winged Hawk. Seven other species, including Bald Eagle and Osprey pass by in numbers of between 100 and 1,000 each spring.

On June 10, a ceremony was held for Parkers Creek IBA in Calvert County, during the American Chestnut Land Trust's (ACLT) Family Day festivities. The ACLT has worked closely with Maryland DNR to protect and manage the forests of the Parkers Creek watershed, the last undeveloped watershed on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Parkers Creek supports an unusually diverse bird community of forest-interior species and significant populations of several declining migratory birds. Bird surveys conducted by Leslie Starr during the nesting season have found no less than 19 species of Forest-Interior Dwelling Species, a group of birds that require large blocks of forest habitat and are thus particularly at risk from the current wave of land development in the mid-Atlantic region. Three of these species, Kentucky Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler, and Wood Thrush, are on the Audubon Watch List, which highlights birds with nationally declining populations. Forest management by ACLT emphasizes control of deer numbers. The resulting lush undergrowth, combined with a network of well-maintained trails make Parkers Creek an excellent site for observing Kentucky and Hooded Warblers.

You can learn more about the Maryland-DC Important Bird Areas Program at website at http://www.audubonmddc.org/SciCon_IBAs.html or by contacting Audubon MD-DC's Director of Bird Conservation, David Curson, at: Audubon MD-DC, 2437 Eastern Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21224, Tel: (410) 558 2473, e-mail dcurson@audubon.org.



Photo caption: Sue Ricciardi receives an IBA plaque from Audubon Maryland-DC's David Curson on behalf of the Fort Smallwood hawkwatchers. Photo: George Jett.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Hard Bargain Farm/Piscataway Park, October 15, by Chris Ordiway

The trip to Hard Bargain Farm/Piscataway Park over the weekend went very well. We were a small group of new and familiar faces and had a nice time wandering the habitats the Farm offers. Other than a cool morning (especially in the shade!) we had a perfect fall day for 'Changing Seasons' birds. The best bird of the day was certainly the American Pipits found mingling with Killdeer in a recently turned field. We also ended up with Yellow-Rumped and Palm warblers as well as a good selection of early season waterfowl. Our official list for the day follows: (56 species)

Carolina Wren, Blue Jay, House Sparrow, Canada Goose, Pileated Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, Red-Bellied Woodpecker, Eastern Bluebird, Northern Mockingbird, Chipping Sparrow, European Starling, American Crow, Eastern Phoebe, Red-Shouldered Hawk, Mourning Dove, Rock Dove, Great Blue Heron, American Goldfinch, White-Breasted Nuthatch, White-Throated Sparrow, Tufted Titmouse, Red-Headed Woodpecker, Belted Kingfisher, Song Sparrow, Eastern Towhee, Cedar Waxwings, American Robin, Northern Cardinal, Carolina Chickadee, House Finch, Yellow-Rumped Warbler, Ruby-Crowned Kinglet, Palm Warbler, Killdeer, Tree Swallow, American Pipit, Pied-Billed Grebe, Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker, Ring-Billed Gull, Ring-Necked Duck, Bald Eagle (immature & adult), Turkey Vulture, Mallard, Double-Crested Cormorant, Royal Tern

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FOSTER PARENTS NEEDED



Southern Maryland Audubon Society sponsors the banding of nestling birds of prey, or raptors, with serially numbered aluminum bands in cooperation with the Bird Banding Laboratory of the U. S. Department of the Interior, as part of our bird research and conservation activities in Southern Maryland. Limited numbers of Osprey and Barn Owl nestlings become available each year for adoption. The gift of \$10 for an Osprey adoption, or of \$25 for a Barn Owl adoption, contributes to a special fund for the support of raptor research and raptor conservation projects. The foster parent receives:

- A certificate of adoption with the number of the U. S. Department of the Interior band, and the location and date of the banding.
- Information on the ecology and migration patterns of the species, photo of a fledgling, and any other information on whereabouts or fate of the bird that may be available.

Interested? Here's how to become a foster parent of an Osprey or a Barn Owl. Send \$10.00 for each Osprey, or \$25 for each Barn Owl to:

**Southern Maryland Audubon
Society**
ATTN: Adoption Program
11350 Budds Creek Rd.
Charlotte Hall, Maryland 20622



VOLUNTEERS NEEDED TO WRAP GIFTS AT WILD BIRD CENTER

Lee & Dee Duer, owners of the Wild Bird Center in Waldorf, again will host the SMAS gift wrapping fundraiser. The Duers are extremely generous to the SMAS Camp Scholarship Fund and donated \$500 at the annual meeting. All the wrapping material is bought by the Duers and SMAS volunteers wrap gifts.

We need volunteers to wrap gifts for these dates:

December 10 - 22 weekdays from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.
Sunday December 10 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Sunday December 17 from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.
Sunday December 24 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

To volunteer to help, contact Millie Kriemelmeyer, 301-372-8766, milliek@radix.net. Volunteers are especially needed for the evening hours.



ADOPT A RAPTOR

Name: _____

Address: _____

I wish to adopt (check one):

_____ (number of) Osprey, \$10.00 each

_____ (number of) Barn Owl, \$25.00 each

Amount Enclosed: _____

(Make checks payable to:
Southern Maryland Audubon Society)

(immature & adult), Ruddy Duck, American Coot, Gadwall, Blue-Winged Teal, Tern sp (Common or Forsters, we couldn't decide), Rough-Winged Swallow, American Wigeon, Red-Winged Blackbird, Laughing Gull, Great Egret.

**Myrtle Point Park: Part I, Saturday, October 21,
by Bob Boxwell**

The weather wasn't the best as I crossed the bridge heading towards Myrtle Point Park. No phone calls either so I was wondering about trip. The parking lot was empty when I arrived, but my group arrived quickly thereafter. We waited in the parking lot for a few minutes listening to a bird of prey being mobbed by crows and jays. High overhead a Sharp-shinned Hawk soared by, obviously not the object of the agitated corvids.

It was a small group (father and son) but I had the right audience (kid's trip) and they were prepared with binoculars and a field guide. This proved to be a good number as we were able to walk through the park much more quietly than a larger group (children or adults) of birders ever could. So we headed off down Mill Creek Lane kicking up White-throated Sparrows (a couple song sparrows as well), Brown Thrashers, and cardinals crossing from side to side in the brush. The open areas were busy with calling Eastern Towhees, Carolina Wrens, a Gray Catbird, Tufted Titmouse, and the occasional drum or call of a Downy Woodpecker. In the background we heard the mob muttering its alarms at the as yet unidentified predator.

Heading into the woods along Deep Woods trail we soon encountered the source of the corvids' outcry. A Red-shouldered Hawk sailed into a nearby tree, stopped briefly and then glided off. Another joined the first, flying directly over our heads before both took off deeper into the woods.

Continuing along the trail we spotted a Hermit Thrush hopping around a tangle of laurel, blueberry, and fallen trees. We got great looks at the head, tail, and breast of the bird. Some chickadees and goldfinches worked the pines high overhead. Along the creek we heard an Osprey cry as it headed up Mill Creek. Later near the river I heard the caterwauling of a Bald Eagle. Seconds later the bird soared about twenty feet overhead circling our position before winging off over the river.

It was getting colder and wetter so we headed back from the split for Deep Woods and Kingfisher Trail. Once out of the woods we began to find open sunny spots along the trails. This time it was a Ruby-crowned Kinglet that graced us with up close poses. A Golden-crowned Kinglet and Yellow-rumped Warblers also worked the vines and shrubs. These were the last of our 25 species.

Fall can be a nice time for some leisurely birding. Particularly when the group is small and the birds are cooperative. Thanks to both of my companions and the other visitors to the park for a good morning.

**Myrtle Point Park, Part II, Friday October 27,
by Bob Boxwell**

It was another overcast day for this ad hoc trip on the Friday after our last field trip. I wanted to get back because I had found some trash on the trail and we needed to do some maintenance as well (lots of trees and limbs). I hoped to be joined by some Friends of Myrtle Point Park as well as a couple of birders. Dudley arrived late and we missed her, which was probably just as well. We spent two hours in the woods and I know her spare time was limited.

Patty and Marty had joined me to find the heron rookery discovered in the park this summer by Mary Piotrowski. A question still exists over what species the white bird was that was found with the Great Blue Herons. Probably a Great Egret, but we needed evidence. Putting faith in my navigation skills we headed off in search of the rookery. After much wandering around I finally came across a section of pines that looked familiar. We found several of the nest trees and examined them with our optics. Patty decided one tree looked promising (smaller nest, lower down the tree) and we searched under it. We soon found several white feathers which seemed large enough to be the Great Egret. A little more searching and we found a skull with both mandibles intact. We bagged it all for later examination by experts.

Why go to all this trouble? Remember 2006 marks the end of the Breeding Bird Atlas. Either great or snowy egret would be a great bird to add to this block. Heron rookeries are usually found among tall pines close to the water. Usually isolated they can range from a dozen or so nests to hundreds. The Hellen Creek watershed with its towering pines, hemlocks, and deciduous trees had plenty of potential habitat. I plan on keeping my eyes and ears open next spring.

WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

William Armstrong, Lexington Park
The Arnolds, La Plata
Arthur Binger, La Plata
Barbara Bowman, Temple Hills
John Cusack, Owings
James Day, La Plata
Susan Eckley, Riverdale
Myra Fenner, Huntingtown
Lynne-Blake Hedges, Port Tobacco
Leah Jones, Waldorf
Robert-Sharon Laughery, Lusby
Pamela Lindley, Port Tobacco
Ellen Mack, Clinton
MCMS Media Center, Lusby
Judy Ng, Suitland
Louann Sites, Clinton
Hilda Skinner, North Beach
Chris Tanner, Ridge
Arlonia Thurmon, Lexington Park
Wilda Wildman, Benedict

DECEMBER AND JANUARY EVENTS

December 6—**Wednesday**—7:30 p.m. **Monthly Meeting**
La Plata United Methodist Church, Corner of Rte. 6 and
Rte. 301, La Plata, Charles County. **Local Photographers’
Night** by the members of SMAS. Every year we look forward
to the night when our members share their best images of
nature from near and far. Slides, videos, and electronic
images may be presented. Individuals wishing to show
should contact Ann Wearmouth (410-867-0347) by November
15 to coordinate presentations and plan for equipment needs.
We urge you to participate or come to enjoy the artistry of
fellow members.

December 9—**Saturday**—8 a.m. to 2 p.m. **Field Trip**
Calvert County. **Winter Waterfowl Trip**, Leader: Chris
Swarth (410-741-9330 W, cswarth@starpower.net). A two-
thirds day trip. Birding along the Patuxent River looking for
wintering waterfowl. Other stops along the way at the leader’s
discretion to look for wintering sparrows. Tufted Duck, Eared
Grebe, and other rarities have been found in past winters.
Bring spotting scopes if you have them, food, and drink.
Meet in the parking lot near Rte. 4 in front of Kmart in Prince
Frederick. Limited to 20 participants. Dress for the weather.
Facilities along the way, but no fees.

December 17-31. **Annual Christmas Birds Counts**
Participate with our Southern Maryland coordinators to help
cover any of the following count areas, each comprising a
15-mile diameter circle, to gather data on bird species and
their numbers as part of National Audubon Society’s 107th
annual Christmas Bird Count throughout North America.

December 17—**Sunday**—Port Tobacco Count.

Coordinator: Gwen Brewer (301-843-3524).

December 26—**Tuesday**—Point Lookout Count.

Coordinator: Bob Boxwell (410-394-1300).

December 31—**Sunday**—Fort Belvoir Count, Maryland
sector. Coordinator: Carol Gheblian (301-753-6754).

December 31—**Sunday**—Patuxent River Count. St.
Mary’s County Coordinator: Doug Lister (301-342-3670 W,
301-994-2582 H); Calvert County Coordinator: Andy Brown
(410-535-5327 W).

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The deadline for the Osprey is the fifth of each month.
Please send all short articles, reports, unique
sightings, conservation updates, calendar items, etc.
to the above address.

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