

The Osprey



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Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

TENS OF THOUSANDS OF CITIZEN SCIENTISTS TO COUNT BIRDS DURING CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS

AUDUBON EVENT PROVIDES ESSENTIAL DATA FOR CONSERVATION

Ivyland, PA, November 1, 2007 —Audubon's 108th Christmas Bird Count (CBC) will take place throughout North America from December 14, 2007 to January 5, 2008. The longest-running wildlife census in the world, the count has become an annual tradition for citizen science volunteers in communities throughout the Americas. The data they collect enables Audubon and other conservation partners to assess the status of birds and habitats vital to feathered flyers across the Western Hemisphere.

In 2006-07, CBC data helped reveal population declines among many beloved birds. Issued in June, Audubon's Common Birds in Decline analysis generated headlines throughout the US, and focused new attention on habitat loss, climate change and other threats facing familiar birds—and offered ways that people can help keep these common birds common. CBC data are also instrumental to development of the WatchList, a collaboration of Audubon and the American Bird Conservancy that identifies less common birds whose small and declining population sizes and limited ranges put them at imminent threat of extinction.

"Each of the citizen scientists who braves snow, ice, wind, or rain to take part in the Christmas Bird Count is making an enormous contribution to conservation," said Geoff LeBaron, National Audubon's Christmas Bird Count Director. "Counting is the first step in learning how environmental threats are affecting our birds – and in helping to protect them."

New analysis of Christmas Bird Count data will focus on how populations or ranges may be changing due to the effects of global climate change. The proverbial "canaries in the coal mine," birds provide an early warning indicator of the health of the global climate we all share.

The CBC began over a century ago when 27 conservationists in 25 localities, led by scientist and writer Frank Chapman, changed the course of ornithological history. On Christmas Day in 1900, the small group posed an alternative to the "side hunt," a Christmas day activity in which teams competed to see who could shoot the most birds and small mammals. Instead, Chapman proposed that they identify, count, and record all the birds they saw, founding what is now considered to be the world's most significant citizen-based conservation effort – and a more than century-old institution.

During last year's count, nearly 70 million birds were counted by nearly 58,000 volunteers, a record level of participation – with counts taking place in all 50 states, every Canadian province, parts of Central and South America, Bermuda, the West Indies, and Pacific Islands.

The CBC method requires that volunteers count birds within an established 15-mile diameter circle. However, anyone can participate. Beginning birders will be placed in a group, or field party, that includes at least one experienced birdwatcher. If your home is within the boundaries of a CBC circle, then you can stay home and report the birds that visit your feeder by sending your sightings to your local count organizer or compiler. New participants should sign up well in advance of December 14; they will then receive instructions from their compiler regarding where to meet, or how to report feeder data. See DECEMBER EVENTS on page 6 for the Southern Maryland count dates and compilers (coordinators) to contact.

CBC data are entered online by compilers through the Christmas Bird Count website www.audubon.org/bird/cbc. (In Canada, compilers enter data through CBC partner Bird Studies Canada's site, at www.bsc.eoc.org.) Site visitors can watch results build in their area and across the Americas, as well as learn how local bird populations have changed during the last 100 years.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

September 22 field trip at Pt. Lookout State Park by Tyler Bell.

Marty Cribb was the leader of our group of nine birders on the steamy morning of September 22. Probably the best bird was one of the first. Marty, and Patty Craig, had found a Whimbrel foraging near the lighthouse a couple of days prior to the trip and it was still there. Everyone was able to get exceptional views of this bird as it picked bugs out of the grass on the bayside of the little copse of trees near the restrooms. It spent time on the rip-rapping where it preened then regurgitated several pellets of gravel and bug carapaces. We checked the rump to make sure that it wasn't the European subspecies which has only been documented once in Maryland. It wasn't (see photo below).

Foraging in the trees was a female Blue Grosbeak, which popped in and out of some grapes, frustrating many observers. Three Brown Pelicans flying along the bayside were a bit easier to see since there's no cover out there!

We moved north along the edge of the ponds which were almost completely obscured by *Phragmites*. A couple of us ventured out into the dry area between the ponds to see if

there was anything noteworthy. There were a couple of Least and Semipalmated Sandpipers but nothing worth dragging the whole group out for. We all proceeded into the picnic area where I saw an adult male Hooded Warbler that promptly disappeared. At least the Sharp-shinned Hawk that soared overhead was clearly visible to all. Marty, Patty and I pointed out the field marks to distinguish this small accipiter from others of its genus as well as other raptors. Since there was a stalled high pressure system over the area, not much was migrating and the picnic area, which is often very productive for migrants, proved to be very dull.

Next we drove into the campground and parked at the museum. We walked south along the Periwinkle Trail. At the junction of the Periwinkle Trail and the spur from the parking lot, there was a family of Brown-headed Nuthatches, a Point Lookout specialty. Everyone got good looks at these petite nuthatches as they squeaked and flitted around the loblolly pines.

As we walked further along the trail, we began noticing a few raptors moving south. There was a cooperative Merlin, which dived at an American Kestrel that had landed in some dead pines to the west of the trail. A couple of distant birds, what I call Dot Hawks, turned out to be Bald Eagles. You had to use your imagination if you didn't have 10x binoculars. A couple of soaring Ospreys and a Red-tailed Hawk rounded out the raptors bringing the total raptor species to 6 unless you count vultures as raptors, making it 8.

By about noon, it was like a sauna so we bade farewell to Pt. Lookout with a total of 46 species. Thanks Marty!



Whimbrel (Numenius phaeopus) at Point Lookout, September 22. Note the dark rump indicating that this is a typical North America bird (photo by Tyler Bell).

Myrtle Grove Field Trip Oct. 7, 2007 by Fred Burggraf

Four birders joined me for a morning of birding at Myrtle Grove Wildlife Management Area near Ripley MD. The morning began with cool temperatures and light fog, but temperatures rose quickly with unseasonable warmth and a continuation of the long-term drought. The lake, however, was full of water and fish which accounted for a number of species observed.

The list of 27 species included many of the usual and expected. The top five birds were: 5. Gray Catbird - Very common, especially in the hedgerows lining the road near the lake. These birds were fattening up, no doubt in preparation to migrating. 4. Common Egret - Several individuals were working the waters of the lake. 3. Belted Kingfisher - Conspicuous and busy, both male and female were present. The male was observed swallowing a fish that was, by any standard, a sizeable gulp. 2. Chimney Swift - The air over the lake was full of swifts, oddly silent. This late in the season, these birds were likely staging for their migration soon.

The Bird du Jour was a Northern Harrier. Seen at the far side of the lake, this immature bird flew low and close, and floated gently and purposefully over the nearby marshes. Beautiful!

For more information, including a complete list, a discussion of a "mystery" bird and a few photos of the trip, go to: <http://www.fred-b.net/MyrtleGrove10-07-07.html>

Mobbed at Myrtle Point, October 21, by Bob Boxwell

Our Sunday morning field trip to Myrtle Point could not have been on a nicer day. It was slightly overcast with a warm gentle breeze and not nearly the humidity of earlier in the month. The small group that gathered included a family of four, and three adults.

The parking lot was fairly active to begin the day. White-throated Sparrows had obviously shown up during the week. Not everybody in their singing group had learned from the same master. The songs varied a bit in pitch and length, but all had that lovely sing song quality (campers in New England tell me their incessant summer song drives them crazy). The resident Northern Mockingbird had been replaced by a Brown Thrasher for this morning at least. Gray Catbirds were about as well, but not showing. All of these birds had good reason to be visiting; the vines were full of fruit.

A walk down Mill Creek lane revealed more local birds with Northern Cardinals, Carolina Chickadees, and Tufted Titmice joining in. We heard a Golden-crowned Kinglet, some Carolina Wrens, and Myrtle Warblers along the shrubby edges. Woodpeckers were restricted to some Red-bellied and a few Downy, but the Blue Jays suddenly took over the volume. Within a few minutes we ran into the first mob. American Crows joined the jays in rousting the first of several hawks using the park that morning. Our first pair was male and female Sharp-shinned hawks screaming in protest as they evaded the angry corvids.

Continuing down the trail we sampled the persimmons found by one of the children. This delectable orange fruit should only be eaten after it is extremely ripe. A wrinkled persimmon is a good persimmon. The animals like raccoon and fox agree as the flat seed of the fruit frequently appear in their scat this time of year.

Continued on page 3

The corvid mob followed us as we entered Deep Woods Trail, this time chasing a Red-shouldered Hawk. The open areas formed by tree fall had the most bird activity and seemed to attract the hawks as well. Not able to leave well enough alone, the mob continued its work, and another raptor left the park.

Periodically we heard additional gatherings of the mob as we continued through the woods. Mere murmurings compared to the earlier action. Our attention at this point was drawn to the water. Lots of boats occupied Mill Creek, anchoring for the weekend in the calm cove by the park. A single Belted Kingfisher rattled its presence. A solitary Common Loon floated offshore in the Patuxent River.

We have had some unusually warm weather this October. But I guess with the falling leaves, the departure of the Ospreys, and the arrival of our winter sparrows, fall has arrived. Keep your ears and eyes open. Maybe we will get one of those irruption years for winter finches. The appearance of Red-breasted Nuthatches in the area is encouraging. In the meanwhile keep our field trips in mind and join us soon. It's great practice for the upcoming Christmas Bird Counts.

SCRUB JAYS PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

By Ernest Willoughby

When I was in the eighth or ninth grade, about 1952-53, and interested in everything about animals, I read a book by a comparative psychologist about animal intelligence (the author's name and book title escape my memory) that said birds such as chickens and pigeons had mental abilities quite inferior to those of mammals such as rats and dogs. The author reported that even the mammals were quite limited in their abilities to think through and solve simple puzzles. One such puzzle requires the subject to go around the end of a barrier through which it sees food, in order to get the reward. While dogs and rats could find the solution pretty fast, chickens and pigeons seemed hopelessly dim-witted, bumbling about and solving the problem only by accident. So, I thought birds were pretty stupid until I had watched them for some time as they went about their daily lives. I have been amazed by the great complexity and seeming intelligence of their behaviors, even those of chickens and pigeons. Now, modern comparative psychologists are concluding that at least some birds act very brainy, indeed (see my article "Scientists Say Some Birds are as Smart as Apes" in the May, 2005 issue of *The Osprey*).

A report in the February, 2007 issue of *Nature*, on a study by comparative psychologists at the University of Cambridge about the behavior of Western Scrub Jays (*Aphelocoma californica*), adds to the impression that these birds are amazingly intelligent (C. R. Raby, D. M. Alexis, A. Dickinson, and N. S. Clayton, 2007. *Nature* vol. 445, pages 919-921). The results strongly suggest that Scrub Jays think ahead and plan out where best to cache food for future use.

Scrub Jays, like others of the crow family, carry excess food items to hiding places, called caches, and bury or conceal them for later retrieval and consumption. Birds remember such caches, and go back to them in times of food scarcity. The investigators took advantage of this behavior to see whether a bird would preferentially cache food where it knew it would be scarce at a time in the future.

The investigators trained eight birds individually in an enclosure divided into three rooms, through which a bird could move freely except at night, when it was confined to one or the other room on either end of the series of three. The bird always had food in a bowl in the middle room, and the end rooms had sand-filled trays in which the bird could cache food as it desired, but no food bowl. During training, the only food the bird received was powdered pine nuts, a food that the jays relished, but which they could not cache. On alternate days, the bird was confined at night either to a "breakfast room", where it received a breakfast of powdered pine nuts at 7:00 o'clock, or a "no-breakfast room", where it had to wait until 9:00 o'clock to be fed.

After three nights of training alternately in each sleeping room, the bird was provided a bowl of whole pine nuts before bedtime, when it was free to cache nuts in whichever room it wished until it was time for bed. On average, birds stored three times more pine nuts in the "no breakfast" room than in the "breakfast" room, as if making sure they would wake up to an early breakfast, no matter where they were.

Since the birds might simply have been storing food in the place they associated with hunger, the investigators tried a similar experiment with nine birds, only the birds always received early breakfast. The difference was that in one room they always got peanuts for breakfast, in the other dog kibbles. During the test, the birds were provided with whole peanuts and whole kibbles to cache before bedtime. They cached more kibbles than peanuts in the peanuts-for-breakfast room, and more peanuts than kibbles in the kibbles-for-breakfast room, as if planning for a future that provided them a choice of breakfast items, showing that they were not simply associating caches with hunger.

This surely looks to me like the birds were planning for future contingencies!

FT. BELVOIR CBC, MD SECTOR, DEC. 30

By Carol Gheblian

Join us on Sunday, Dec. 30, as we census the Maryland sector of the Virginia Ft. Belvoir Christmas Bird Count. Our territory covers Potomac waterfront, streams, woodlands, fields, and communities. It extends from Ft Washington National Park to the Indian Head area, principally on the west side of Route 210. Our sector of seven parties usually totals 88-90 species. Help is always needed! Contact me at 301-753-6754 or gheblian@comcast.net.

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



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)

GIFT WRAPPERS WANTED FOR FUNDRAISER

By Millie Kriemelmeyer

The Wild Bird Center in Waldorf will host the SMAS gift wrapping fundraiser again this year. We need many helpers to wrap gifts and make this a successful project. The proceeds will support a scholarship for a teacher, naturalist or environmental educator to attend Maine Audubon's Hog Island Camp next summer.

The fundraiser will begin on Saturday, Dec. 15, and end on Monday, Dec. 24. We need wrappers every day from 10 AM to 9 PM. You may choose any day or time to help.

Night-owl helpers, from 4 PM to 9 PM, are especially needed, because I don't drive at night. You may email or call me, 301-372-8766, milliek@radix.net, or just show up at the store.



CHRISTMAS PRESENTS!

Buy your Christmas presents now with a \$10.00 Osprey or \$25.00 Barn Owl adoption. The adoption certificate, information on the osprey or barn owl habits and photo of a fledgling can be sent directly to the person receiving the gift or to the purchaser of the gift - whichever you prefer! Just fill in the Adopt a Raptor coupon.

—Mary Sokol

SEPTEMBER 29 YARD SALE A SUCCESS

By Will Daniel

The weather on September 29th was beautiful, perfect for a yard sale. Thanks to the many donations by SMAS members, the yard sale was a huge success, grossing a bit more than \$1000. Thanks to the many helpers including Cora Fulton, Shirley Wood, Ted Daniel, George Jett, Gwen Brewer, Carol and Oscar Gheblian, Hayward Swisher and Dolores McLean.



Will Daniel (far left) assists patrons at the annual yard sale (Photo by George Jett).

DECEMBER AND JANUARY EVENTS

December 5—**Wednesday**—7:30 PM. **Monthly Meeting** Memorial Library, Charlotte Hall, St. Mary's County (Rte. 6 at Rte. 235). **Local Photographers' Night.** Come see what others have photographed on trips or in their own yards over the years. Bring your own photos to show. Slides, videos, and digital images may be presented. To contribute, call Ann Wearmouth (410-867-0347) by November 15, to coordinate presentations and plan for equipment needs. We urge you to participate, or come and enjoy the artistry of fellow members.

December 8—**Saturday**—8:00 AM to 2:00 PM. **Field Trip** Calvert County Winter Birding. **Early Winter Birding.** Leaders: Dr. David Curson and Sue Hamilton. Contact Sue at 410-586-1494, seal10n2002@yahoo.com. Visit winter land and water hotspots of Calvert County. Bring scopes if you have them, food, and drink. Car-pooling recommended. Dress for the weather. Meet at the parking lot in front of Kmart in Prince Frederick on Rte. 4. Facilities along the way, no fees.

December 16 through 30. **Audubon Christmas Bird Counts.** All day counts are conducted within designated areas as part of the National Audubon Society's 108th Annual Christmas Bird Count. We need help from everyone, including backyard birders, beginning birders, field team leaders, and cooperative property owners for each of the

following counts. The data collected will contribute to knowledge of long-term trends in survival of native birds throughout North America. Please contact the following coordinators for coverage assignments:

December 16—**Sunday**—Port Tobacco Count.
Coordinator: Gwen Brewer (301-843-3524).

December 23—**Sunday**—Point Lookout Count.
Coordinator: Bob Boxwell (410-394-1300).

December 30—**Sunday**—Patuxent River Count.
Coordinator: Andy Brown (410-535-5327).

December 30—**Sunday**—Fort Belvoir Count, Maryland
Area Coordinator: Carol Ghebelian (301-753-6754).

Continued on page 5

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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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In This Issue:

- 108th Christmas Bird Count
- Jays Plan for Breakfast
- Reports From the Field