

The Osprey

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Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

PROCRASTINATION PAYS

RARE HUMMINGBIRD APPEARS IN MECHANICSVILLE

by Laurie Mora

It was about 1 PM on December 28, 2007. It was cold and dreary--it was winter! It was not the sort of day you would expect to see a hummingbird outside your window. But as I looked out my sliding glass door on that day, that's exactly what I saw! At first I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. But there it was, buzzing around, finally settling down to sample what could only be the oldest, filthiest, hummingbird nectar in the state of Maryland!

For more than a month I had been meaning to take down and put away the feeder. My first thought was "Oh no! Don't drink that dirty water!" My second thought was "Wait a minute, what the heck is a humming bird doing here *now*?" I washed the feeder, put out some fresh nectar, and watched in amazement as the bird returned. Now let me state here that I like birds. I have 6 feeders. My friends even call me a bird nerd. But I believe I am what's known in the birding world as a Casual Birder: I know all my back yard birds, and I enjoy seeing birds at home and on vacation (and I keep a Life List), but that's it. I had no idea what I was in for when I picked up the phone and called the Wild Bird Center in Waldorf, MD. I simply said "I have a hummingbird, what should I do?" The quick answer from Lee Duer on the other end was "Where do you live? I'm coming over!" Lee called a few folks, and those folks called a few folks and by the next day our house became Hummingbird Central. The phone started ringing off the hook. I got 17 emails in three days! And I met lots of Fanatical Birders.

My birding friends, Tyler Bell and Jane Kostenko, stopped by to take photos. Tyler took me aside and explained that this bird could be one of two things: a Rufous, which some people would want to see; or it could be a Broad-tailed, which could cause pandemonium! In the ensuing days, many of Maryland's top birders dropped everything and came to my house with cameras, BIG lenses, tripods, audio recorders and huge grins. There were many hushed discussions involving gorget feathers, upper tail coverts, primaries, and R numbers. Oh, and let's not forget state records! I have to admit I was feeling quite famous for having this little lost traveler in my yard, and for having all of these obviously important Fanatical Birders in my house and on my deck. The probable cost of the camera equipment was enough to blow my mind. One man even quipped that he'd sold his kidney to buy the lens, which I believe they even referred to by name as "Big Lens"!

Over time, a couple of camps evolved: those who thought Rufous, and those who dreamed bigger—the State Record-

making Broad-tailed. The only way to solve the identification riddle, I was told, was to catch the bird, make some detailed measurements, and band it. So plans were made for a New Years Day, 2008 capture and the "Banders" were called in. They showed up with a techno-hummer catching cage (wire, twisty ties and fishing line!) and lots of equipment. The little bird was in the cage within two minutes and the examination began in my laundry room. Now anyone looking into my window during that time would have wondered what the heck was going on. Picture this scene: Two men measuring something in a tiny black sock and two other men and a woman taking pictures and video of the process. Me, in the corner, wearing a very "worried mother" look on my face, and my husband taking pictures of everyone and everything—all in my laundry room, and all very surreal. As the measuring wore on, the excitement level notched down a bit as everyone (except me) realized that this bird was turning out to be a Rufous. We let the bird go, and they broke the news to me that there would be no pandemonium at my house in the coming days. Apparently there are several sightings of Rufous Hummingbirds every year in Maryland. So I breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone packed up and left. The Fanatical Birders went out to find more birds, and I sat at home, dazed and amazed, but, maybe now, more than just a Casual Birder. I contemplated all the wonderfully polite and knowledgeable people I had met over the last few days. I thought of everything I had learned about hummingbirds and about the people that make birds such a big part of their lives—the Fanatical Birders. And just this once, I was pretty glad I had procrastinated cleaning that feeder.



Rare hummingbird identified as a Rufous Hummingbird, Mechanicsville, Maryland, December 31, 2007. Photo by George Jett. To see the photo in color go to this issue of *The Osprey* at www.geocities.com/smdaudubon.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Port Tobacco Christmas Count, December 16, 2007, by Gwen Brewer.

On December 16, 2007, 22 people ventured out on a day with just about every kind of weather, from fog to rain to partly cloudy to wind. Our number included 6 first-time participants in this count (Beth Clark, Jason Groth, Chris Milensky, Carla Dove, April Solitro, and Peter Blank), and it was great to have them in addition to our wonderful "regulars"! The 10 groups (1-4 people in a group) covered in total about 30 miles on foot and 250 miles by car. In addition, two groups spent time listening for owls in the early morning hours. The earliest group started at 6:30 AM and the last group ended at about 5 PM. Despite the at times challenging weather, this year we found a total of 86 species in the count circle and over 16,000 individual birds. Highlights were two species that I believe may be "firsts" for this count circle: a late Osprey near Windmill Point (found by George Jett) and two Tree Swallows at Allens Fresh (found by Bob Lukinic, Shirley Wood, and Cora Fulton). Other birds found rarely on this count were a Baltimore Oriole female (by Gwen Brewer and Peter Blank) and a Merlin (by Jean Artes, Maggie Tieger, and Joe Tieger). Waterfowl numbers were generally low, although large flocks of Ruddy Ducks, Lesser Scaup, and Red-breasted Mergansers appeared in the Potomac River. Hawks and eagles were in good numbers, with 39 Bald Eagles and a total of 9 raptor species counted. Relatively large numbers of Killdeer (148), Wild Turkey (29), Northern Flicker (115), Ruby-crowned Kinglet (50), American Robin (1345), Cedar Waxwing (1295), White-crowned Sparrow (4), and Chipping Sparrow (40) turned up. Four species that are noted by the Audubon Society as common birds in decline were seen on the count: Eastern Meadowlark, Field Sparrow, Common Grackle, and Horned Lark. One species on Audubon's 2007 Watchlist, Red-headed Woodpecker, was noted on the count. Species that we could expect to see but did not include Gadwall, Common Goldeneye, Canvasback, Wood Duck, Barred Owl, Great Horned Owl, and Eastern Phoebe.

Thanks again to all who participated.

Where're the Ducks? Part II —A Tale of the December 23, 2007, Point Lookout Christmas Bird Count, by Bob Boxwell.

I seem to recall last year at this time compiling the results from the Point Lookout count and asking the question, "Where are the ducks?" The answer remains somewhat elusive, but at least a partial response would be "Not here." Like 2006, this year's effort revealed flocks in the hundreds rather than thousands. The big rafts of scoters and scaup that use to pump up the numbers at the Point Lookout State Park have been reduced to under a hundred birds of each group. Waterfowl in general continue their downward trend, with reduced numbers of swans and geese.

Weather is always a factor in these enterprises and this year the morning fog and afternoon rain were not conducive to great birding. Nevertheless our teams from the Point

Lookout sector found a female King Eider and several good land birds. A shrike was spotted there, the first since 1978. An American Bittern at the Elms was another great find. Among the wrens this year were Carolina, House, Marsh, Winter, and Sedge. Would you believe we actually had a Bewick's Wren in the 70's for this count? We almost whiffed on hitting the nuthatch trifecta by finding only 2 White-breasteds (usually the Red-breasteds are harder to find).

We found four species of owls (Great-horned, Screech, Barred, and Barn) with the hardest to find being the Barred. This one was found on the way home from the tally rally off St. Jerome's Neck Road. Similarly our only Killdeer was heard calling at 8 p.m. when the last three of us were chatting by our cars as the tally rally was ending.

Birds weren't the only highlight on this December day. Usually I report some flowers in bloom or butterflies, this year it was much better. Seals! They don't show up often, but once in a great while you can find them. Probably Christmas Seals if the time of year is any indication.

Our final numbers were 106 species found for the day's effort. The tally rally drew a dozen people (20 total for the count) who enjoyed salad, garlic bread, and a homemade spaghetti dinner. It's interesting to look at the past results available on the Audubon website. Tundra Swan used to compete with Canada Goose for the largest flocks of waterfowl. Winter finches like the Purple Finch, Pine Siskin, and Evening Grosbeak, once staples of the count have vanished. The new guys on the block are the Northern Gannett and Brown Pelican.

Thank you to everyone who joined us this year. We hope you all can return in December of 2008. Bring your friends; there is always room for more.

Ft. Belvoir CBC, Maryland Sector, Dec. 30, 2007, by Carol Gheblian, Sector Coordinator.

Although it was a cloudy, drizzly day, we were surprised at the tally rally to find that we had our highest number of species yet for this sector--91. Birds missed by one team were filled in by another, and so on, and of course having two unusual feeder species helped. Three Baltimore Orioles appeared at Bob Lukinic's feeder; plus presumably the same Yellow-throated Warbler for the third winter has returned to the Gheblian feeder. Good concentrations of waterfowl were found by the Jett/Brewer and Ordiway teams at Piscataway Creek, and by Gheblian/Wagner at Mattawoman Creek. Red-headed Woodpeckers were spotted by four teams; 2 American Woodcock were flushed at Hard Bargain by Chris Ordiway and Melissa Boyle. At the Chapman Marsh, Jean Artes and Mike Callahan counted our only Rusty Blackbirds. Other birds of note were 1 Bonaparte's Gull, 2 Red-breasted Nuthatch, 6 Chipping Sparrow, and 1 Purple Finch. Northern Bobwhite remained notably missing. Our total individuals number (35297) was enhanced by the sighting of 15000 Common Grackle by Bob Lukinic and Carrie and John Staples. Thanks to all who helped out!

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Patuxent River Christmas Count, December 30, by Andy Brown.

This year's count occurred on Sunday, December 30. 19 observers tallied 98 species with 20440 individuals. This was an average year for the count. The weather was pleasant in the morning at 40 degrees with rain in the late afternoon. Several species posted all time high numbers. These include: Common Loon, Northern Gannet, Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, both vultures, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, American Goldfinch and all three nuthatches. Nearly every party reported Red-breasted Nuthatch with numbers that doubled the previous record. Red-tailed Hawk and Mute swan were the only two species to set all time low records. Some notable absentees included: Canvasback, all three scoters, Snow Bunting and Short-eared Owl. Bobwhites have not been seen since 1999. All in all, it was a very productive day, and we all had great fun.

All-time high numbers were as follows:

Common Loon-59, Northern Gannet-38, Black Vulture-250, Turkey Vulture-178, Ruby-crowned Kinglet-37, American Goldfinch-338, White-breasted Nuthatch-34, Red-breasted Nuthatch-39, Brown-headed Nuthatch-9,

There wasn't anything really unusual or surprising. Several parties were the only ones to report certain species. Bill and Sigrid Stiles on the west side of the Naval Air Station, were the only ones to see Red-throated Loon and Pine Warbler. Bill Hubick, Matt Tillett and John Hubbell on the east side of the Base got the only Gannets, Screech owl, and Horned Larks. Craig Jeschke at Calvert Cliffs State Park reported the only Peregrine Falcon and Winter Wrens. Dale Johnson at Broomes Island saw the only Pied-billed Grebe, while Bob Boxwell saw the only Fish Crows on Coster Rd. Lastly, Kyle Rambo reported the only Wild Turkey, Barred Owl, Fox Sparrows, and White-crowned Sparrows for the count.

Rare hummingbird and bunting visit Southern Maryland, by George Jett.

On December 28 I got a call from Millie Kriemelmeyer that Lee Duer, the manager of the Waldorf Wildbird Center, just photographed a Rufous Hummingbird, *Selasphorus rufus*, in Mechanicsville, Maryland. I stopped by the store later in the day and asked Lee how he knew the bird was a Rufous. Lee showed me his images and we discussed the options. Lee was not aware that winter *Selasphorus* hummingbirds were very hard to identify in the field unless the bird is captured, and certain measurements are taken. Lee agreed the bird could best be determined to genus *Selasphorus* only.

Lee gave me the property owner's (Laurie Mora) contact information, and I made arrangements to go visit the hummingbird the next day. One of the images I got on December 31 appears with Laurie's article above. Laurie was very generous and shared this bird with many of our local birders. Several observers, after seeing the bird, were not totally convinced the bird was a Rufous Hummingbird. Broad-tailed Hummingbird, *Selasphorus platycercus*, and the dreaded "hybrid" word surfaced during discussions.

I had arranged with Bruce Peterjohn and David Holmes, two local hummingbird banders, to attempt to capture the bird and determine its species. We set the date for January 1, 2008. Shortly after we set up, the bird went into the trap. This is a very safe process, Bruce and David are experienced handlers, and the little girl was fed and released unharmed.

Diagnosis involves many measurements: weight, wing length, bill length, tail feather width, etc. A number of these measurements are necessary to determine the species since *Selasphorus* hummingbirds are very similar in appearance. These measurements are the only sure way to distinguish many Rufous Hummingbirds from Broad-tailed or Allen's (*S. sasin*). All measurements were within expected limits for Rufous, and showed it to be a hatch-year female. Discussion continued about the "hybrid option" but no additional details have come forth.

Another recent rare bird in our region was less problematic. On December 29, I got an email message that a Painted Bunting, *Passerina ciris*, was coming to a feeder in Annapolis. The sender requested that this information be kept under wraps since the bird was on private property. The bird was reported to have gone by the time Gwen and I returned from our holiday trip to Michigan, so I dutifully kept mum. On January 2, I learned the bird had returned. On January 3, I sat in the Annapolis backyard for three and one-half hours in 20 degree F weather to get the attached image of a beautiful male. This is one of the prettiest birds that I have ever seen, and worth the hardship I endured.

As of this writing the bird is still in the area. If interested in seeing the Painted Bunting, look at the Maryland Ornithological Society Website, www.MDBirds.org, and link to the listserv MDOsprey Bird Discussion List. Search for Painted Buntings. Directions and many reports are at that site. Good luck!



Painted Bunting photographed by George Jett, January 3, 2008. You may view this photo in color in this issue at www.geocities.com/smdaudubon.

WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

Terrance W. Arbnot, Accokeek
Elmer S. Biles, Indian Head
Burt/Brenda Brooks, Lexington Park
Bill Keimig, Accokeek

RAPTOR CONSERVATION COMMITTEE UPDATE

by Mike Callahan

The Raptor Conservation Committee has had a busy year of projects and monitoring and is preparing for the new season. Our nest box/platform project for Barn Owl, American Kestrel, and Osprey called Project R.A.P.T.O.R. (Re-establishing Avian Predators To Our Region) was successful, with birds nesting in several structures and contributions of time and resources by many volunteers.

Volunteers who are both SMAS members and nonmembers do all of our raptor conservation work. The funding for projects comes as donations. Mary Sokol, our Adopt-A-Raptor Coordinator, has been busy making adoptions of the baby Barn Owls and Ospreys banded by Mike Callahan and Greg Kearns. Mike banded 20 Barn Owls in five nests, while Greg Kearns banded more than 30 Ospreys. SMAS members Melissa Boyle and George Jett monitored nesting boxes, and many other persons, both adults and students, joined us for the banding of the young owls. We thank Rick and Tom Wathen and Nancy Wolfe for letting us continue raptor conservation activities on their farms. We also thank Nanjemoy Creek Environmental Education Center for their participation.

Thomas Stone High School student Jonathan Tavares developed a new monitoring data sheet and database for us, and helped with monitoring, to earn his Student Service Learning credit. Eagle Scout candidate Jeff Fitch built American Kestrel and Barn Owl boxes, and candidate Ken Auckerman is about to start his project assembling nesting box kits. Several students joined us for banding. Home school student Kaylin Beach requested and received advice on owls for her SPCA youth club education project. Kaylin along with Mike Callahan will speak on "Owls of Southern Maryland" at the monthly meeting on April 2nd in Leonardtown. We send special thanks to member Mike Sullivan of Mt. Victoria for his donation of \$1000 for raptor conservation.

I have failed to name everyone who helped with our projects, but I thank all who helped the Raptor Conservation Committee with our mission over the past year. Raptors rule and you do too!

If you would like to be involved in raptor conservation projects in Southern Maryland, we need persons of all ages to help make a difference. You can help with publicity, nest box placement, nest box monitoring, property owner contact, adopting raptors, and more. Contact Mike Callahan at 301-259-2162 to volunteer and find out how you can help.

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)

MARCH EVENTS

March 2—**Sunday**—8 AM to noon. **Field Trip.** Jefferson Patterson Park, Calvert County. **Winter Waterfowl Trip.** NOTE CHANGE OF DATE FROM PREVIOUS ANNOUNCEMENTS. Leader: Tyler Bell, 301-862-4623, jtylerbell@yahoo.com Open fields and wooded areas can provide good land birding, and river frontage can give close views of waterfowl. From Rte. 2/4 take Rte. 264 to Rte. 265. Follow Rte. 265 to the park. Meet the leader in the visitor center parking lot. RSVP required, and spotting scopes useful. Facilities, no fee.

March 5—**Wednesday**—7:30 PM. **Monthly Meeting.** Battle Creek Cypress Swamp Nature Center, Gray's Road off Sixes Road, Prince Frederick, Calvert County. **Using Native Plants for Wildlife** by Judy Kay. Judy Kay is a Master Gardener from Calvert County, and will discuss native alternatives to non-native plants. Learn why non-natives are detrimental to wildlife and upset ecological balances. She will emphasize those native plants that are most beneficial to wildlife, especially birds, and how we can incorporate them into our yards and gardens.

March 15—**Saturday**—9 AM to noon. **Field Trip.** Jug Bay-Merkle WMA, Prince George's County. **Youth Field trip, late winter and resident birds.** Leader: Chris Swarth, 301-741-9330, cswarth@starpower.net. Take Rte. 301 to Rte. 382, Croom Road. Go east to St. Thomas Church Road, turn at the church and follow to Fenno Road, which leads to the entrance to Merkle. Follow the signs to the Visitor Center. A search for marsh birds, hawks, woodpeckers, and sparrows. Early Osprey is possible. Bring a young person with you. Facilities, possible fee.

March 26—**Wednesday**—7 PM. **Board of Directors Meeting.** La Plata Public Library, La Plata, Charles County. Directors meetings are open to any member.

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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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