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The usual winter birds have arrived in many locations in Southern Maryland. White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos started to appear in my yard in early October. Some irregular visitors are showing up as well. Purple Finches have invaded my sunflower feeders and I've heard a few Pine Siskins around Charles County. Enjoying birds this time of year can be difficult, however, when you can only view the feeders for a short time in the morning before leaving for work. A weekend day provides the only chance to view a large number of bird species. A fun way to enjoy a weekend day of bird watching is to join other bird lovers for the 115th Annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count, which will take place between December 14, 2014 and January 5, 2015.

Before 1900, people would participate in a holiday tradition known as the Christmas "side hunt": Teams, or sides, would go out to shoot as many birds as possible. As concern about declining bird populations grew, ornithologist Frank M. Chapman, an early officer in the fledgling Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition—a Christmas Bird Census (CBC)—that would count birds rather than hunt them. In 1900, 27 observers took part in the first count in 25 places in the United States and Canada and tallied around 90 species. The locations ranged from Toronto, Ontario to Pacific Grove, California with most counts in or near the population centers of northeastern North America.

The CBC is now the longest running citizen science survey in the world and provides critical data on population trends. When combined with other surveys, such as the Breeding Bird Survey, the data collected by observers has allowed researchers and conservation biologists to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America. As an example, these historical results have shown the Rusty Blackbird is one of North America's most rapidly declining species. The population has plunged an estimated 85-95% over the past forty years and scientists don't know the exact cause. Potential factors in this decline are loss of wetlands used by wintering birds in the Southeast, contaminants on breeding grounds, accidental poisoning on wintering grounds, and increasing disturbance of boreal wetlands where Rusty Blackbirds breed. The long term perspective made possible by the Christmas Bird Count provides vital information to help conservationists develop strategies to protect birds and their habitat.

During the upcoming count, tens of thousands of participants will report numbers of different bird species observed in more than 2,300 count circles in North America. All experience levels are welcome, so you don’t have to worry if this is your first year taking part in the tradition. Every count circle has at least one experienced bird watcher. If you’re interested in contributing to one of the counts in Southern Maryland, you can find more details in this issue of the Osprey. If your home is within the boundaries of a particular count circle, you can stay home and survey the birds that visit your feeders and report this information to your local compiler.

Any way you choose to participate can help to create a better future for birds. As we approach the holidays, I would like to wish everyone peace and joy as you spend the holidays with family, friends, and our feathered companions.

Michael Patterson
At the board of director’s meeting earlier this month in Asheville, I had the opportunity to meet with chapter leaders from across the network. That’s always energizing for me and for our executive team because it’s your heart and passion that drive Audubon.

All across the country our chapter leaders come from the sciences, they come from education, they come from business and from the arts. And every single one is passionate about birds and making the world a better place.

Let me tell you about a few chapter leaders we met in North Carolina.

Kim Brand told us how Forsyth Audubon in North Carolina is working with Audubon’s international program to support the Wood Thrush throughout its life cycle not just when it is in North Carolina. And they are getting really creative about it. This year they’re putting GPS trackers on the birds to gather the information they need to drive their conservation efforts.

Lena Gallitano of Wake Audubon is turning to GIS applications and data visualization to drive her efforts on Lights Out North Carolina. They will be able to analyze bird strike data and determine which specific areas of individual buildings are most dangerous to birds and recommend the appropriate fixes.

Highland Plateau Audubon Society is partnering with other regional conservation organizations and investing in science to drive protection efforts for Golden-winged Warblers. They’ve hired a grad student to study local breeding bird populations and that information will be combined with information being gathered farther north by Audubon North Carolina to fill in the big picture for conservation of this iconic species.

And at the meeting we got some great feedback about the launch of our climate initiative. Lots of you have been out there since September 9th sharing the science and having those climate conversations. You’ve gotten stories on TV and in the paper, and you’ve localized the study results to make it your own. That’s smart and that’s relevant.

Collaborative success is what Audubon is all about. That’s how we scale up to meet the threats that birds face across the flyways of the Americas.

Here are some documents that will give you a broader picture of recent accomplishments across the network: a timeline of recent achievements, the October 2014 President’s Report, a packet of media clips featuring Audubon in the news and media highlights from the climate launch.

Thanks to all of you for your energy and passion.

David Yarnold / President & CEO
National Audubon Society
World Big Day Record Broken in Peru!
3 November 2014

The LSU team poses during scouting in the mountains of Abra Patricia, a few days before the big day.

From the outset, it was very important to us to document carefully our big day effort using eBird checklists with associated notes, photographs, audio recordings, and video. Most big days are operated on an honor system – there is no witness or judge – and this seems to work overall. We decided, however, that if we carefully documented as many species as possible along the big day route, even if it was in the days leading up to the big day (we would be too busy on the day itself to take photos, recordings, or video), it would serve to bolster our claim to any record.

More important than documenting the big day, however, was documenting the poorly known avifauna of a very interesting corner of South America. We planned to do our big day in the mountains of Abra Patricia and the adjacent Mayo Valley. These little-known regions were some of the last major landscape features in northern South America to be explored by ornithologists and birders. The first exploration, primarily by collecting expeditions from the LSU Museum of Natural Science under the leadership of John O’Neill, occurred in the 1970s as a highway was built over the mountains around Abra Patricia. To this day, the area remains poorly known, as evidenced by the presence of species that still remain to be described and named. This lack of knowledge is particularly glaring given the high number of species and the complexity of bird distributions in the area. In eBird, for example, 735 bird species are known from the two Important Bird Areas comprising Abra Patricia and the Mayo Valley. A major goal of our big day effort was to help fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge of birds in the region, and to make that information publicly available.

For the rest of this story, please click on this link: http://ebird.org/content/ebird/news/lsubigday/

Please Report December Tundra Swans!

Each year during the month of December several Atlantic Flyway states including Maryland collect juvenile/adult ratio observations of Eastern Population tundra swans. This information is part of our long term monitoring of this swan population.

Only observations made in December are useful. Should you make observations the information needed for this project include: 1) date, 2) nearest town and county, 3) total number of swans in flock, 4) number of juveniles (gray) in flock, and 5) number of adults (white) in flock.

Please forward to Larry Hindman
Waterfowl Project Leader/ Maryland DNR
e-mail larry.hindman@maryland.gov

Thank you in advance for your cooperation and your support of our migratory bird resources. Good birding.

Larry

Birds and Berries
Written by Frances Wood

This is BirdNote!

Around this date in 1861, Henry David Thoreau wrote, “Our little mountain-ash is all alive with birds. A dozen robins on it at once, busily reaching after and plucking the berries, actually make the whole tree shake. A robin will swallow half a dozen berries, at least, in rapid succession before it goes off, and apparently it soon comes back for more.”

In fall, large numbers of American Robins and sleek, handsome Cedar Waxwings consume fruits and berries. They can strip a pyracantha bush of its fruit, consume holly berries, and peck away at apples. By consuming these fruits, they also contribute to the dispersal of the plants, voiding the seeds as they move about the countryside.

Some berry-eating birds may become intoxicated with ripened fruits that contain alcohol. When they do, they may flounder on the ground or even collide with windows.

If you, like Thoreau, enjoy watching birds eat berries, then consider planting trees and shrubs that produce berries, to attract such birds to your garden. You’ll find information on our website about native plants that are favored by birds in your area. Plant them now, and the birds will begin coming next year and the next, and the next – they don’t forget.

BirdNote thanks all donors who keep it aloft and on the air. Learn more at BirdNote.org.
http://birdnote.org/show/birds-and-berries
Southern Maryland Audubon Society

ADOPT-A-RAPTOR
Foster Parents Needed!!

The Southern Maryland Audubon Society supports raptor conservation and research projects in the Southern Maryland area through the “Adopt-A-Raptor” Program. The program currently includes four species: Osprey, Barn Owl, American Kestrel and Northern Saw-whet Owl. Each bird is banded by a licensed bird bander with a serially numbered metal band, in cooperation with the U.S. Bird Banding Laboratory. A limited number of birds are available for adoption each year!

NEW FOR 2013!! “Adopt-A-Nest” now available for Osprey, Barn Owl & Kestrels!

Adoptive “parents” will receive:

A certificate of adoption with the bird’s band number, and location and date of banding.

Information on the ecology and migration patterns of the species

Any other pertinent information that may become available

Your support helps provide:

• Barn Owl Nest Boxes
• Osprey Nesting Platforms
• Kestrel Nest Boxes
• Mist Nets or Banding Supplies

Complete the form below to “Adopt-A-Raptor” with the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

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Mail completed form to: Melissa Boyle, Adopt-a-Raptor, 10455 Point Lookout Rd. Scotland, MD 20687

Name:_______________________________________
Address:_____________________________________
____________________________________________
I wish to adopt:
_______(# of) Osprey, $10 each / $25 per nest
_______(# of) Barn Owl, $25 each / $50 per nest
_______(# of) Northern Saw-whet Owl, $30 each
_______(# of) American Kestrel, $35 each / $75 per nest

Amount Enclosed:______________________
as it should appear on Adoption Certificate

Make checks payable to: Southern Maryland Audubon Society

Ithaca, N.Y.—We know birds have feathers—but what are they made of, how do they work, and how many kinds are there? Birds sing songs—but how do they produce those sounds, what do they mean, and can you learn to identify birds by sound alone? If just knowing the name of a bird isn’t enough, then it’s time to make new discoveries at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s All About Bird Biology website. The new site is designed to appeal to anyone who’s even a little bit curious about what makes birds tick.

“All About Bird Biology is all about inspiring people to find out what’s really going on in the lives of birds,” says Cornell Lab eLearning specialist Mya Thompson, who says scientists, teachers, artists, designers, and programmers all played an important role in developing the site and making it so appealing. “The site contains a video library of eye-opening bird behaviors, along with self-paced interactive lessons, articles, and animations that make learning a blast!”

Chapters currently online go in-depth on feathers and bird song. Playing the “Bird Song Hero” game allows users to keep score as they gradually learn to recognize more than 50 bird species by sound. Educators and students surveyed after the website launch found that using birds to understand biology makes the learning go down easy.

“Awesome job! Your programs make teaching children FUN!” one teacher wrote.

“I thought this was first rate! Very engaging, not at all boring plus a lot of information was imparted. Great graphics too! You hit a home run here in my opinion!” said a bird enthusiast.

“We’re developing the next chapter right now,” Thompson explains. “It’s called ‘Fancy Males’ and will focus on the ways birds use bright colors, strange ornaments, and even a little song and dance to capture a female’s attention!”

Visit the All About Bird Biology website: biology.allaboutbirds.org

Contact:  Pat Leonard, pel27@cornell.edu, (607) 254-2137.
Cornell Lab of Ornithology - 159 Sapsucker Woods Rd
Ithaca, NY 14850

New Bird Biology Website
Awakens the Sense of Discovery
Enjoy interactive activities about bird song, feathers, & more
Wild Ginseng, Wood Thrushes, and Climate Change: A Survival Story

Some researchers at West Virginia University have discovered that wild ginseng—a native and valuable medicinal plant—could be using specific birds to catch a ride into climates for which it’s better suited.

Eberly Professor of Biology at WVU, Jim McGraw, has been studying ginseng from every angle for 18 years. A simple question lead McGraw and researchers Amy Hruska and Sara Souther to ask other questions, which is lead them to discover an ecological survival story.

STUDY 1: Fruit

Why does ginseng bear bright red berries? “When a plant evolves fleshy fruit like that, it usually means there’s some kind of animal interaction going on, but we had no idea what that was,” said McGraw.

So all around wild fruiting ginseng cameras were set, and for three years tripped by the occasional raccoon, opossum, mouse, or turkey. But there was one pretty regular visitor: the Wood Thrush, (a cousin of the Robin, actually, but with superior vocal abilities on account of a double-set of vocal chords!). McGraw says after analyzing some 900 photos, they discovered the thrushes were in fact seduced by the bright red ginseng berries.

STUDY 2: A Seed Study

How do seeds survive the thrushes, or do they?

McGraw and researcher Amy Hruska found out there were captive thrushes living at the Tennessee Aquarium in Chattanooga, and convinced the good folks there to let them feed ginseng berries to the birds. The researchers observed that the birds would eat the whole berry but 5 to 30 minutes later… “They would actually sit on a branch and start flipping their bills together and a seed would pop out,” McGraw said, “And they were completely viable seeds.” So the research team found ginseng’s wild seed dispensers!

STUDY 3: Thrush Tracking

Where and how far do the thrushes wander? …This study is underway…

Understanding thrush activity is the latest query commanding attention in the larger effort to study a threatened and valuable plant. Wild populations are increasingly rare. We know overharvesting, deer browsing, and loss of habitat are major reasons for declines. But McGraw thinks this thrush research might shed light on another threat to wild ginseng populations.

“Wood thrushes, as common as they are, have actually declined by 50 percent over the last fifty years,” McGraw said. “They’re one of the poster children for major songbird decline in the Eastern deciduous forest.” Losing so many birds is very troubling because ginseng populations may well rely on thrushes not only to help disperse their seeds, but also to help them adapt to a changing climate.

Wild ginseng’s range stretches from eastern Canada south through the eastern United States. But genetically, those ginseng populations vary and over ages have adapted to their specific regions. McGaw suspect thrushes will play an important role in helping ginseng survive by helping it migrate from their warming regions into cooler climates. If the birds themselves can survive.

West Virginia Public Broadcasting
600 Capitol Street - Charleston, WV 25301
1-888-596-9729
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Please enroll me as a member of the Audubon Family and the Southern Maryland Audubon Society. I will receive the chapter newsletter, The Osprey, and all my dues will support environmental efforts in Southern Maryland.

Please enroll me as a member of the National Audubon Society. My membership will also include membership in the Southern Maryland Audubon Society. I will receive National’s Audubon Magazine, the chapter newsletter, and support national and local environmental causes. A fraction of my dues will be returned to the local chapter.

Name_______________________________________ Address______________________________________________
City_______________________ State__________ Zip_______
I DO  do NOT  wish to receive The Osprey electronically. My e-mail address is:____________________________
(electronic delivery saves SMAS printing and mailing costs.)

Chapter-Only Dues (new/renewal)
Make check payable to Southern Maryland Audubon Society

- Individual/Family __1yr $20 __2yr $38 __3yr $56
- Senior/Student __1yr $15 __2yr $28 __3yr $42
- Individual Lifetime Membership ______$500
  Senior (over 62) ______$250

National Dues, Make check payable to National Audubon Society -- Chapter code #C9ZL000Z

- Introductory Offer - 1 year $20
- Senior/Student $15

Mail to: Southern Maryland Audubon Society, Attn: Membership P.O. Box 181 Bryans Road, MD 20616
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.