President’s Perch

As I write, winter chill and rain still grip us, but slightly longer days hint of spring. This is when many gardeners plan in earnest. For many years I relieved winter doldrums by growing plants indoors. More recently---mainly through my friends in SMAS---I have learned about the benefits of gardening with native species. Native perennials, shrubs, trees, vines, and grasses are the lifeblood of an ecosystem. They host insects and larvae that feed birds; they also produce seeds and berries and provide shelter. Sadly, we design most of our landscapes with nonnative flora, which have far fewer benefits. We also manicure all of the habitat, such as dead trees, fallen leaves, and spent blooms, that would typically support birds and other wildlife. To counter the bad news about declining bird and insect populations, we can take action. We can garden differently.

National Audubon Society has a powerful online tool, the Native Plants Database, to help choose flora suited to your zip code. For example, in La Plata I received 76 “best results” and a full list of 276 species. The bonus is that each plant shows a list of birds that are attracted to it. I would love to see more Cedar Waxwings and warblers, so I plan to check out Canadian Serviceberry, Common Winterberry, Redbud, and Possumhaw. For the monarchs, I will get Swamp Milkweed, and for the hummingbirds, Trumpet Creeper. You can find the Native Plants Database at https://www.audubon.org/native-plants. The nurseries have been slow to stock natives, but we do have a great source in Chesapeake Natives in Upper Marlboro. If you know of another local seller, please share it!

Finally, for a late winter escape, please join our meeting on March 4, when George Jett and Gwen Brewer will share their experiences in the Brazilian Pantanal. In more good news, our Bald Eagle family at Port Tobacco River Park now has three eggs! Tune in to the live nest cam at https://www.charlescountyparks.com/parks/eagle-cam to watch nature’s “reality TV,” then head out to our family-friendly field trip on March 15 to see the eagles in person.

For the birds!

Tiffany Farrell

President, SMAS
The weather gods smiled on us this day. A swath of rain, in some places quite heavy, moved across southern Maryland. But, they were well to the east by the time our group assembled in the parking lot by the park museum. We piled into a couple of cars and headed down to the mouth of St. Leonard’s Creek. The boardwalk at Peterson Point allows easy access and a stable place to set up a scope. However, due to the warm winter we’ve been having so far, there were virtually no waterfowl to be found other than a few Buffleheads. A couple of Swamp Sparrows flitted in and out of the marsh grasses but remained mostly elusive. We did note that there were dozens of mantis ootheca on the Marsh Elder (Iva frutescens). The globular masses belong to the invasive Chinese Mantis (Tenodera sinensis) but the elongated masses are less obvious and can belong to either the non-native Narrow-winged Mantis (Tenodera sinensis) or the native Carolina Mantis (Stagmomantis carolina).

We moved on to the end of the gravel drive across from the main archaeology complex where there is often a large raft of waterfowl. Again, very few but we did find some Common Goldeneyes and Horned Grebes as well as some more Buffleheads and some distant Ruddy Ducks.

Next stop was the end of the restricted access drive on the north end of the property. There is a large pond there that, when not ice covered, often has a nice assortment of dabbling ducks. This time, we scored. Along with the many Gadwall, there were some Hooded Mergansers and the best bird of the day, an American Wigeon. I’ve birded in Calvert County for 30 years and this was only the second time I’ve ever seen one!

While scoping the waterfowl in the pond, we watched an American Kestrel flying around further down the road, perching on the power lines. A dark blob in a tree by the river turned out to be a Peregrine Falcon! A Bald Eagle came shambling up the river and spooked it. We watched the falcon fly off to the north and off of the property.

We retreated to the parking lot at the museum and some of the group headed for home. A few of us ventured down to the end of Lloyd Bowen Road which is a couple mile detour as you are exiting toward Rt. 4. At the end of the road is a stand of large Loblolly Pines which is an almost guaranteed spot in Calvert for Brown-headed Nuthatches. Although we never saw any, we heard many. I estimated a dozen. Surprised that none ever came out to play. But, a large brown bird flew through the trees and I was able to see where it landed. I got the scope on it and it was a Great Horned Owl! They nested at this location during the last MD Breeding Bird Atlas so this bodes well for a repeat. Another large bird flew through the woods but kept going, presumably the mate of the first bird. Bald Eagles and Great Horned Owls are nesting at this time of year so it’s a good time to find them for the atlas.

And finally, a strange bird song drew us in near the owls and nuthatches. It was a Fox Sparrow, a bird that I’m not sure I’ve ever heard sing before. We never saw it but the song was strong and slightly reminiscent of a meadowlark. Lovely😊

All in all, a rewarding day with above average seasonal temps. What will next year bring? Come and find out!

Midwinter Waterfowl Survey Shows Rise in Bird Count
February 6, 2020
Annual Survey Estimates Number of Wintering Duck, Geese, and Swans

In early January, aerial survey teams of pilots and biologists from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources made visual estimates of the ducks, geese, and swans along most of the state’s Chesapeake Bay, Potomac River, and Atlantic coast shorelines. This year, the teams counted about 627,000 waterfowl, which was higher than the 566,300 birds observed during 2019, but lower than the five-year average of 738,440 birds.

“The abundance and distribution of wintering waterfowl is influenced not only by the annual changes in population size, but also the weather conditions during migration and throughout the winter,” said Wildlife and Heritage Director Paul Peditto. “Moderate winter weather up and down the east coast has allowed most waterfowl species to remain spread out across Maryland and our surrounding states.”

Overall, the number of dabbling ducks was higher (93,000) than last winter (64,400). However, fewer diving ducks (149,700) were observed than in the 2019 survey (182,000). Biologists also counted more Canada geese this year (327,200) than last year (250,200). Following 2018’s record low hatch, Atlantic Population Canada geese benefited from normal spring weather conditions on their nesting grounds in 2019, leading to average gosling production.

The Midwinter Waterfowl Survey has been conducted annually since the early 1950s and covers most of the tidal shoreline and near-shore waterfowl habitat in Maryland.
Virginia Announces Emergency Plans For Hampton Roads Waterbird Colony

More than 20,000 waterbirds, including Royal Terns, have bred annually at Hampton Roads’ South Island since the 1980s. Photo by M.E. Parker/Shutterstock

(Washington, D.C., February 14, 2020) The Commonwealth of Virginia has announced plans to help waterbirds displaced by construction on Hampton Roads’ South Island, which has been used by more than 20,000 birds as annual breeding habitat since the 1980s. American Bird Conservancy (ABC) applauds Governor Ralph Northam and the Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources for their emergency measures, which include the creation of alternative breeding habitats to help the Hampton Roads’ waterbird colony.

First, ABC is extremely grateful to the administration for proposing a set of measures designed to help migratory birds both in Hampton Roads and across Virginia. In particular, Virginia’s steps to create a new regulation to protect migratory birds from future industrial development will position the Commonwealth as a leader in bird conservation at a time when federal regulations to protect birds are being weakened.

Second, ABC welcomes the following package of specific measures designed to help Hampton Roads’ waterbird colony, which is the Commonwealth’s largest and includes many declining species:

The creation of breeding habitat at nearby Rip Raps Island (formerly known as Fort Wool) and potentially on artificial barges, which is equivalent to the area currently being utilized by terns (Common, Gull-billed, Sandwich, and Royal) on South Island; and a plan to attract the birds to the new habitat and to control predators.

The development of a plan to carefully discourage birds from attempting to nest on South Island this spring, since paving and construction activities will render the habitat unsuitable. Instead, the Commonwealth will encourage the birds to move to the newly created nesting habitat at Rip Raps Island.

A commitment to restore habitat on South Island post-construction to allow birds to return to nest there.

Plans to create an additional, alternate nesting island in the longer term, which taken together with the other alternative breeding habitats created will represent a net gain for overall bird habitat in the area.

“We’re optimistic that this plan will effectively provide immediate habitat for the birds to save the 2020 nesting season, as well as a net gain of habitat in the longer term,” said Mike Parr, President of American Bird Conservancy. “Many individuals and groups have participated in the effort to help the Hampton Roads bird colony. We’re grateful for their concern and support, and we look forward to continuing our work with the Commonwealth and other public and private partners to further benefit waterbirds nesting in Virginia and elsewhere.”

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Expert Contact: Mike Parr, President, 202-888-7486 | mparr@abcbirds.org

More than 20,000 waterbirds, including Royal Terns, have bred annually at Hampton Roads’ South Island since the 1980s. Photo by M.E. Parker/Shutterstock
New Rule Severely Weakens Migratory Bird Treaty Act
Protection Law Needs Strengthening to Reverse Bird Declines

(Washington, D.C., January 30, 2020) The Administration today proposed a new federal regulation that will further weaken the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA), a landmark law that for decades has protected and helped to restore and maintain populations of many bird species, from the Great Egret and Wood Duck to myriad songbirds. The proposed rulemaking by the Department of the Interior seeks to codify a legal opinion (Solicitor's Opinion M-37050, or the “M Opinion”) that has ended all enforcement against the predictable and preventable killing of migratory birds from commercial activities. The changes fundamentally weaken the 101-year-old MBTA.

“This rulemaking is another setback for birds cherished by millions of Americans at a time when many migratory birds are undergoing precipitous declines,” said Steve Holmer, American Bird Conservancy (ABC) Vice President of Policy. “We urge all citizens to speak out against this harmful policy change and ask that the law be strengthened to reverse the decline of migratory bird populations.”

“Decline of the North American Avifauna,” a new study published in September 2019 in the journal Science, reveals that since 1970, bird populations in the United States and Canada have declined by 29 percent, or almost 3 billion birds, signaling a widespread ecological crisis. The results show tremendous losses across diverse groups of birds and habitats — from iconic songbirds such as meadowlarks to long-distance migrants such as swallows and backyard birds including sparrows.

“To respond to the bird crisis, we need to strengthen protections for birds. This rule is a major step in the wrong direction,” said Holmer.

The Act's prohibition on the killing or "taking" of migratory birds has long been understood to extend to “incidental take” — meaning unintentional but predictable killing of birds from threats such as open oil pits that lure and trap birds and tall towers and powerlines responsible for many bird collisions. By issuing the M Opinion in December 2017, the Administration abruptly reversed decades of government policy and practice — by both Democratic and Republican administrations — on the implementation and enforcement of the MBTA.

The risk of liability under the MBTA has long provided the oil and gas industry, wind energy development companies, and power transmission line operators with an incentive to work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to minimize bird deaths. For example, in an effort to protect migratory birds and bats, and to avoid potential MBTA liability, the communications tower and powerline industries have developed effective best management practices. The Administration's new policy eliminates this incentive to minimize and mitigate impacts of industries' activities on migratory birds.

“The MBTA, in its previous form, was responsible for steady progress in reducing sources of bird mortality. Best management practices, like covering oil pits with screens, put little burden on industry but prevented many needless bird deaths,” said Holmer. “In practice, enforcement of the MBTA has only occurred in a few instances when companies failed to adopt accepted industry best practices — and ignored government cautions and requests for mitigation.”

Conservationists have proposed to resolve this problem by creating a migratory bird incidental take permitting system. Agreed-upon best management practices would be the basis for a permit and would provide industry with greater certainty and a level playing field where all players would be required to meet the same conservation standards. The Migratory Bird Protection Act (H.R. 5552), or MBPA, introduced on January 8 by Rep. Alan Lowenthal and 18 bipartisan original co-sponsors, would meet this need.

“The MBPA provides an excellent framework to start preventing bird mortality by applying best management practices and steps to mitigate inevitable impacts,” said Holmer. “The bill establishes a process to develop general incidental take permits for industrial sectors that cause significant mortality, and where best management practices have already been developed and proven effective.

“Given today's rule to further weaken the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the need for this new legislation becomes even more critical.” Concerned citizens can support this legislation by signing ABC's action alert.

ABC, with other conservation groups, is engaged in legal action to oppose these efforts to compromise the MBTA.

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Expert Contact: Steve Holmer, ABC Vice President of Policy, 202-888-7490 | sholmer@abcbirds.org

Sketch by Carrie Staples
Continued on page 6

2020 Field Trips and Programs

February 23 – SUNDAY – 8 a.m. – 12 noon
FIELD TRIP
Patuxent River Naval Air Station, St. Mary’s County
“WINTER BIRDS AND TUNDRA SPECIALISTS AT PAX RIVER AIRFIELD”
Leader: Kyle Rambo
We are fortunate to have access to airfields that provide tundra like habitat. This trip will feature typical winter airfield birds such as Snow Buntings, Lapland Longspurs, Short-eared Owls, Horned Larks, Savannah Sparrows, and possible Wilson’s Snipe and Peregrine Falcon. Preregistration is required and open to U.S. citizens only. Trip is limited to 10 people. Must bring a photo I.D. Meet at Gate #1 Visitor Parking Lot. RSVP to kyle.rambo@navy.mil or 301-757-0005.

March 4, 2020 – Wednesday – 7:30 p.m. - 9:00 pm
MONTHLY MEETING PROGRAM
Kings Landing Park, Calvert County
3255 Kings Landing Rd., Huntingtown, MD 20639
“BRAZILIAN PANTANAL: BIRDS, MAMMALS, AND MORE”
Gwen Brewer and George Jett
From macaws, woodcreepers, and storks to jaguars, giant anteaters, and giant river otters, the extensive wetlands and grasslands of the Pantanal and nearby cerrado host an amazing diversity of life. Come and enjoy a presentation about the fauna inhabiting this unique and remarkable area in Brazil. Light refreshments and mingling starts at 7 p.m. Public invited. Free event. Inquiries to Tom Seaton at tjsaccokeek@gmail.com or 301-710-3994.

March 15 – SUNDAY – 10:00 a.m. – 12 noon
FAMILY FIELD TRIP – YOUTH WELCOME
Port Tobacco River Park, Charles County
7685 Chapel Point Road, Port Tobacco, MD 20677
“EAGLE NEST AND SIGNS OF SPRING”
Leader: Lynne Wheeler
Join us for an update about our Port Tobacco River Park eagle nest and learn about the Maryland Bird Conservation Partnership citizen-science monitoring program. Volunteers document the nesting success and productivity of Maryland’s Bald Eagle population to help us to identify what conservation actions may be needed in the future. Maintaining an active monitoring program is vital to knowing when and where changes to breeding eagles are taking place. We will also walk the Wetlands Trail and look for signs of spring! RSVP to Lynne Wheeler at somdaudubon@yahoo.com or 301-751-8097 (prefer text).
April 1 – WEDNESDAY – 7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.
MONTHLY MEETING PROGRAM
La Plata Volunteer Fire Department
911 Washington Ave, La Plata, MD 20646

“AWESOME POSSUMZ”
KAREN BRACE, Licensed Wildlife Rehabilitator
Come learn about the natural history of the Virginia opossum, North America’s only marsupial. Karen Brace will introduce you to “Stuart” and address the misconceptions and misinformation that surround North America’s only native marsupial. Come learn about the opossum’s “super powers,” where they live, what they eat, and how they help the environment. Light refreshments and mingling starts at 7 p.m. Public is invited. Free event. Inquiries to Tom Seaton at tjsaccokeek@gmail.com or 301-710-3994.

April 11 – SATURDAY – 8 a.m. – 12 noon
FIELD TRIP
Marbury, Charles County
2750 Sweden Point Road, Marbury, MD 20658

“SMALLWOOD STATE PARK – RED-HEADED WOODPECKERS AND MIGRANTS”
Leader: Lynne Wheeler
Smallwood State Park has become one of the best locations for Red-headed Woodpeckers in the state. We will also look for early migrants and Louisiana Waterthrush is highly likely to be seen. Meet at 8 a.m. at Pavilion 1 parking area, past the campground entrance. This is a joint trip with the Audubon Naturalist Society. RSVP to Lynne at somdaudubon@yahoo.com or 301-751-8097 (prefer text).

April 18 – SATURDAY – 9:00 a.m. – 12 noon
FIELD TRIP
Elms Environmental Education Center, St. Mary’s County
49300 St. James Road, Dameron, MD 20628

“BIRDING 101”
Leader(s): Bob Boxwell
Calling on all wannabe birders!! Youths Welcome!! Are you tired of wondering and saying “What bird is that?” Do you want to get better at knowing what birds you are seeing? Birding 101 is the field trip for you! The more you walk the walk, the better you become! The Elms Environmental Education Center offers great habitat for birds. Your leaders will share helpful identification pointers such as: bird bill and facial markings, plumage details, field marks, flight patterns, sound, behavior, and habitat and seasonal expectation. Learn about birding apps too. The address is 49300 St. James Road, Dameron, MD 20628. Take Rt 235 south, left onto St. James Church Road (opposite Mattapany Road). You will see the sign for the Elms Environmental Education Center. We will meet in the hunter’s dirt parking lot on the right 100 yards before the gate. Do not drive past the gate. RSVP to Bob at Bobboxwell@hotmail.com or 410-610-5124

April 19 – SUNDAY – 1:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.
BIRD CELEBRATION – BIRD CITY MD
La Plata, Charles County
La Plata Train Station Museum, 101 Kent Avenue, La Plata, MD 20646

“TOWN OF LA PLATA - PURPLE MARTINS, BIRD CITY MD AND ARBOR DAY”
Leader: S Maryland Audubon Society, Port Tobacco River Conservancy and Conservancy for Charles County
For the last few years our Town of La Plata official bird, the Purple Martin, has returned from its southern migratory journey by April 17. Come celebrate their return, meet our passionate Purple Martin “housekeepers”, and learn about this fascinating flyer. We will also celebrate the Town of La Plata becoming the first member of Bird City Maryland and provide information about National Arbor Day. “Our world without native trees - no insects, no birds - where humans cannot thrive”

May 3 – SUNDAY – 8:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.
FIELD TRIP
Sotterley Plantation, St. Mary’s County
44300 Sotterley Plantation, Hollywood, MD 20636

“What’s Soaring at Sotterley”
Leader(s): David Moulton
Celebrate Earth Day week with a birdwalk at this scenic and historic Patuxent River property as the annual surge of migrating birds begins throughout St. Mary’s County. Nesting Bald Eagles, migrating warblers, meadowlarks, woodpeckers and waterfowl can all be found via Sotterley’s extensive new trail system. From Rt. 235, go north on Sotterley Road, turn right through the gates to the gravel parking lot on the Sotterley historic property. RSVP at moulton.davidh@gmail.com or 240-278-4473.

WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!
Virginia Benedict, Newburg
Elaine Brown, Hughesville
Milburn Butler, Waldorf
Mike Cecil, Brandywine
Robert Crum, Port Republic
Geraldine Dreer, Charlotte Hall
Mary B. Hollinger, Huntingtown
Jose Icaza, Lusby
Marc Imlay, Bryans Road
David Jenkins, La Plata
JoAnn Kohut, Waldorf
Michele Lemise, Lexington Park
Terri Littlejohn, Waldorf
Elmer Mattox, California
Regina McKeever, Marbury
Marilyn Morris, Brandywine
Emily Nastase, Prince Frederick
Christina Pheley, North Beach
Joyce Reimherr, Takoma Park
Aaron Rouland, Saratoga
Julian Sabongan, White Plains
Mary Sandifer, Indian Head
Nancy Sisson, White Plains
Ronald Weinberger, California
Linda Wilson, Lexington Park
Carl Wood, Lusby
Southern Maryland Audubon Society
Adopt-a-Raptor

Foster Parents Needed!

Southern Maryland Audubon Society sponsors the banding of nesting 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. Limited numbers of Osprey, Barn Owl, Northern Saw-whet Owl and American Kestrels become available each year for adoption. Your donation will be specifically utilized for raptor research and raptor conservation projects such as:

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

Please indicate which raptor you wish to adopt. You may adopt more than one:
- Osprey, $10 each
- Barn Owl, $25 each
- Northern Saw-whet Owl, $30 each
- American Kestrel, $35 each

Please make your check payable to Southern Maryland Audubon Society or National Audubon Society.

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

GREAT NEWS!! You can now go online and join SMAS via PayPal. Go to our website at somdaudubon.org for this new option.

EDITOR: Tyler Bell   E-mail: jtylerbell@yahoo.com

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.

2019-2020 Officers
President, Tiffany Farrell - somdaudubon.president@gmail.com
Vice-President, Margarita Rochow - margarita@usa.net
Treasurer, Julie Daniel - julemdaniel@hotmail.com
Secretary, Julie Simpson - jsimps@runbox.com

Southern Maryland Audubon Society
3595 Silk Tree Court, Waldorf, MD 20602