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PSO Pileated



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The Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology

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From the President's Desk... Birding Connections

The past few years have elevated the importance of social connections. The necessity of maintaining a "social distance" to avoid the spread of a virus has drawn attention, at least to me, to how important social interactions are for us. I mean, human social interactions! We are a very social species; we need to be in a community. The old line that you "don't know what you've got till it's gone" seems to ring true here.



This year PSO may be able to schedule outings like this 2018 Crawford County PSO field trip.

Don't misunderstand me. And I'm not debating the merits of maintaining physical separation from each other to reduce viral spread. But the reality is that there are dark consequences to extreme forms of social isolation. Yes, there's a humorous trope circulating that we introverts are just fine with the emphasis on keeping a distance from each other! But we know that our social connections are essential to our well-being, and our common interest puts us into communities that foster healthy lives.

I've been reflecting a lot recently on the social connections provided by birding. A lot changed in my world in 2021. I retired from full-time employment with the Pennsylvania Game Commission, with all of the interpersonal support that provided (even when I worked remotely). Taking advantage of my newfound free time, I've been able to reconnect with old friends and make new ones locally for birding and other activities. What a privilege it is to have more control over my use of time!

So, I've been reflecting on the importance of the interconnections that happen through an appreciation for birds. Some of my longest (non-family) relationships come from this network! The PSO has been in existence for 35 years, and it is a privilege to count as friends many of those early members.

It is true that many of the connections provided by this society are carried out remotely, through digital media and print. That's been the case for a long time

since we are a small group scattered statewide. PSO members enjoy email bird reports, Facebook pages, the newsletter, and our journal that feed us with bird information from across the state straight to our computer. And we, the members of PSO, are working to expand this. Our active Education Committee has added video to the digital tricks PSO delivers. This fits right into many of our modern lives since "Zoom" became a household word just two years ago and changed not only the workplace but most organizations' way of doing business. Video conferencing (as well as just family calls) has become a routine part of life for many of us as I discussed here last fall. I think that in part due to our strong history of remote communications, PSO has not been seriously impacted as an organization by the pandemic.

But as much as we appreciate the remote world of virtual networking, it just isn't sufficient, to really satisfy our social needs. Birds do connect us to others, causing us to

grow in our understanding of the natural world, and ultimately we attain a greater appreciation of this amazing creation as we share that with others. We do that through the sharing of information, but we learn best from each other when interacting in person. And with birds, that is best done outdoors in their own environment. I enjoy a private bird walk often, but sharing those birds with someone else enriches the experience and helps me grow.

That leads me to think about how PSO can expand our connection of members. The interest among bird enthusiasts has grown tremendously in the past two years, but that enthusiasm will grow best with greater knowledge of birdlife. The Board is considering moving ahead with an in-person meeting in September. Picking up where our planning stopped in 2020, we are considering Lancaster County as the hub of activities. Of course, we'll embrace technology and incorporate virtual features to include even more people. But for those who want to

participate, we hope this fall that the Society can add to this grand tradition of annual meetings with field trips, speakers, and good times together. I saw a social media post in 2020 by someone fairly new to birding, who wondered, "Wouldn't it be great if we could get together and share our love for birds?" It would indeed, and we know how to do that. More information will follow soon.

As we plan for that, note the recent edition of *Pennsylvania Birds* with its seasonal focus on breeding birds. Nesting season is actually underway for some species, and we all look forward to the return of migrants. The story on the incursion of Swainson's Warblers last spring makes me think that this species is definitely on a short list of potential first-time nesters in the state! Let's confirm this species in 2022!!!

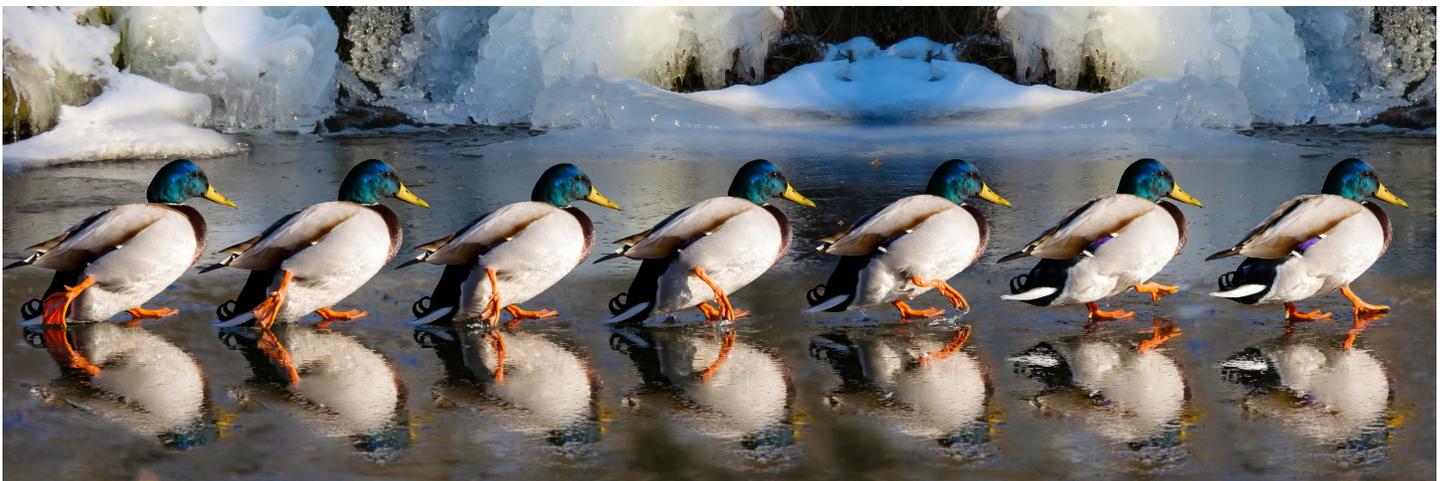
Dan Brauning, President
Lycoming County

Hold the Date

September 16-18, 2022

Hold the date: An in-person PSO members' meeting is being planned for September 16-18 in Lancaster. Middle Creek WMA will be the hub of our operations with field trips organized around the area. No, Snow Geese will not be the center of attention, as they are right now as I write. But the diversity of habitats around Lancaster County make for incredible birding any time of year, and we will be looking for late-summer herons (Little Blue), shorebirds, various migrants, field birds (Blue Grosbeak), and many more! More details will follow, but we are excited to plan another annual meeting. Hope to see you there.

Some adjustments to our typical meeting schedule will be made to reduce Covid exposure. For example, there may possibly be no banquet.



PSO is busy getting our ducks in a row for a hybrid (in person and virtual) 2022 annual meeting in Lancaster County.

THE SECOND ANNUAL BREEDING BIRD BLITZ FOR CONSERVATION



Mark your calendars now! PSO will host the 2nd Annual Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation from June 17-20, 2022. Birders are invited to join the Blitz by forming teams, raising funds, and completing one or more “Big Days” to document birds during the nesting season.

In 2021, the Inaugural Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation engaged 22 teams across the state and raised \$10,645 in support of bird conservation projects. Funds were evenly split among three conservation partners: Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, Manada Conservancy, and Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, and were used to fund land acquisition and habitat improvement projects. Birders also documented 152 species during the four-day event and contributed to the 4,500 complete eBird checklists submitted in Pennsylvania during the third week of June, a 9% increase over the same

period the previous year.

The goals of the 2022 Blitz are to include even more teams of birders and raise \$15,000 to support the following bird conservation organizations and projects:

- ❁ **Erie Bird Observatory**, Erie County: Conservation-focused monitoring of bird migration in the Lake Erie Coastal Zone
- ❁ **Ned Smith Center for Nature and Art**, Dauphin County: habitat restoration to support forest birds, including Cerulean and Golden-winged Warblers
- ❁ **Willistown Conservation Trust**, Chester County: scrub-shrub habitat restoration at Rushton Woods Preserve to improve nesting and migrant stopover habitat

So how does the Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation work and how can you participate? Beginning March 1, 2022, teams of two or more birders can register through the website – www.breedingbirdblitz.org – and decide to cover a single county or a region of the state. While drawing up the plans for their “Big Day,” the team members will reach out to friends to tell them what they are doing and ask for their support with a donation. All donations are made through the website. After the event, teams will submit their results, primarily through the eBird website. The teams that raise the most funds and document the most species will receive special recognition from PSO. There are also dedicated categories for teams with youth birders and “green” birding teams who use only non-motorized transportation.

Tips for PSO members looking to make the most impact:

1. Organize your team as soon as possible. Once you register your team at the website, you can begin to solicit donations from friends.
2. Invite someone who is not a PSO member to join your team. This is a great opportunity to introduce them to the organization and the great work that we do.
3. Use email and your social media accounts to let friends know about your effort and ask for their support with a donation toward these great conservation projects. Each team will receive a personalized fundraising page to which they can direct potential donors.
4. If you cannot participate as part of a team, support your friends and/or a team in your region with a donation.

Visit www.breedingbirdblitz.org for updates on the event and all the details and stories from last year’s Blitz. Let’s make this year’s Blitz a great victory for birders and bird conservation.



– PSO Conservation Committee

Field Trip and Education Committees

Educational Webinars

We are hosting free webinars every other month that will cover various topics about the world of birds. These webinars are free and open to everyone, but pre-registration is required. We will email all members the registration link as each date approaches. Registration details will also be posted on our Facebook pages.

Upcoming webinars include:

Breeding Bird Blitz 4 Conservation (B4C)

Monday, March 28 @ 7:00 pm

PSO is hosting its 2nd Annual Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation in June. Join us as we discuss why PSO created the Blitz, how it works, and most importantly how you can participate! Brian Byrnes of the PSO Board of Directors and Conservation Committee will share the details on this year's event and his experience as a participant last year.

Stopover Ecology of Landbird Migrants: Why It's Good to Be Fat and Other Migratory Tails

Monday, May 23 @ 7:00 pm

Come join Dr. Meg Hatch (PSU - Scranton) and Dr. Rob Smith (University of Scranton) as they discuss their long-term studies of migratory birds in and near Lackawanna State Park. We will talk about focal species such as Gray Catbirds and Northern Saw-whet Owls and our research exploring questions about mass gain, arrival timing, body condition, and habitat use. Hear answers to questions such as whether males precede females, whether migrants are influenced by temperature and precipitation, and whether the *Viburnum* Leaf Beetle affected migrant diversity.

Bird of Ricketts Glen State Park

Monday, July 25 @ 7:00 pm

Doug Gross (PA Game Commission wildlife biologist, retired) will review the reasons that Ricketts Glen State Park and North Mountain are a Pennsylvania Important Bird Area. In addition to reviewing the common birds found in the diverse habitats of the park, a history of ornithological studies in the region will be discussed, including the recent PA Boreal Forest Bird Study results.

County Spotlights

The PSO is highlighting counties across the state to explore its hotspots and find as many birds as we can. As a group, we want to document as many birds as possible during these extended weekends. Birders are invited to tag along with trip leaders or explore that county's hotspots on their own terms.

Birders of all skill levels are invited to join in and contribute! If you just want to learn more about birds or you can help others and our challenge, we want you to be involved! We look forward to seeing you in Cambria in March and/or Adams in April!

This spring, join us by birding the following counties:

Cambria County Birding Spotlight

March 4-7

We plan to gather at the Prince Gallitzin Marina on Gibbons Road at 8:00 a.m. on Saturday, March 5.

Adams County Birding Spotlight

April 22-25

Details will be announced closer to the date.

Our County Spotlight will hopefully get us to the far reaches of the state and visit some under-birded counties in the future. We will have GroupMe text groups set up to get out the word for rarities and group information, and an eBird Trip Report to document the four-day bird count.

For anyone who is going to bird during the four-day birding spotlight, we ask you to share your eBird checklists with PSO Birding Data so we can keep track more easily.

Field Trip – Hawk Mountain

November 12-13

Tag along to enjoy raptor watching at this famous landmark! Golden Eagles will be the target species, but we expect other hawks, falcons, and Bald Eagles. This is a great way to study these birds. More details will be announced soon.

If you are interested in joining either of these committees (Education or Field Trips), leading a trip, or presenting a topic, we encourage you to reach out to us. Please email Tony DeSantis (tgedsantis@yahoo.com) or Chad Kauffman (chadkauffman@earthlink.net).

All future events will be posted on the PSO website and on the PSO Facebook pages.

Recap of PSO Board of Directors' Meeting

The Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology Board of Directors met on January 25, 2022, with 16 directors present for the teleconference meeting.

The minutes of the November 17, 2021, board meeting were approved.

The treasurer's report was given and it was noted that PSO is in good shape financially.

The Earl Poole and Conservation Awards and Student Research Grants will be awarded annually whether or not there is an annual meeting. Applications to apply for the grants must be in by March 31.

A list of proposed ways to encourage the public to participate in citizen science projects was presented. It was announced that there will be a third Breeding Bird Atlas that will probably start in 2024.

It was announced that the annual Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation will be held June 17 through 20. Letters were sent to appropriate governmental agencies

expressing PSO's concern for the potential environmental impacts with regard to the Anthracite Ridge Wind Project and the Tongass National Forest.

Webinars on various subjects will be given every other month. They will be free to everyone. "County Spotlight" will encourage everyone to bird in a particular under-birded county on a specific weekend. Professional tour-guide-developed out-of-state trips for PSO members only are being pursued.

Site guides written by anyone with a favorite area that they regularly bird will be encouraged. They will be published in PA Birds.

A face-to-face annual meeting will be held this fall in Lancaster. It will also be virtual to accommodate anyone not wanting to come to a face-to-face meeting. A committee was formed to work out the details.

A complete transcript of the meeting minutes may be found on the PSO website.

– Roger Higbee, Secretary

Falcon Summer

By Maddi Dunlap

If I were writing my memoir, the summer of 2013 would most certainly be entitled “The Falcon Summer.” Now, I am not ordinarily in the habit of naming periods of my life or my experiences; nor do I have the slightest intention to write a memoir. But in my mind, this has been “the falcon summer” because I know that I will never forget the experience of watching Peregrines nest and raise their young in the “wilds” of the Market Street Bridge in Williamsport.

From the beginning it was a magical experience for me, maybe in part because I never dreamed it would happen. Though I had seen the adults a few times and I had heard about the nest, I never *really* thought that I’d be fortunate enough to be there at the right time to see the fledglings. (After all, I am notorious for missing eagle sightings; and all through spring the Pileated Woodpeckers cackled at my feeble attempts to catch a glimpse of them in the Vallamont hills.) So my first sighting of the young Peregrine, still in downy feathers, left me nearly breathless. It truly felt like a blessing to be witnessing these magnificent creatures, nearly eradicated in my lifetime, raising young in their newly claimed “native” habitat, right before my eyes. I felt only gratitude for the privilege of the experience.

In the ensuing weeks, day after day I was drawn to the bridge. I shared in their triumphs and their tragedies; and in those long hours of quiet observation, I had time to reflect upon the many lessons I learned, not only about falcons, but also *from* them.

The first lesson I learned was patience. I marveled at the ability of the adults to just sit patiently hour after hour as the fledglings practiced flapping their wings and hopped around, preparing for their first flights. While I doubt that I can ever learn to be quite as still for so long a period, I learned to be more patient as I waited for them to return to the bridge each night at dusk.

It appears to me that falcons (the adults anyway) waste very little energy until it’s time to hunt or do something important. They can sit in a spot for long periods until they take off on a “mission.” Maybe that energy conservation helps them to fly faster, a resource to call upon when they need a burst of speed. I don’t know if that is the reason that they don’t fly around more, but I know that I would do well to be more mindful before I let life pull me in too many directions and therefore waste my own precious energy.

And yet, when they are sitting still on a limb or pier, the falcons are always aware of what is happening around them. They are always watching, always paying attention to what is flying by, or floating down the river. And in watching them, I found that I, too, paid more attention. I saw so many things that I had missed before when I walked along the river. Always intent only on completing my three-mile loop, I must have missed many sightings of birds and other creatures that I never knew were out there. The falcons taught me to slow down and take it all in. They taught me mindfulness, to be fully aware of my surroundings – all that “living in the moment” stuff we hear about but don’t always practice. The falcons and the river reminded me again and again. The beauty of every day became almost like a prayer.

“Early to bed and early to rise” – obviously the falcons never heard of Ben Franklin’s old adage. Yet like clockwork, each night they would return to the pier and as darkness fell, disappear underneath to bed down for the night. Though I couldn’t be there at dawn, I suspect that like most birds, when the sun rises, so do they. If I were to admit it, I feel best when I stay on a regular schedule, sleeping at home in my own bed.

Even the young ones know enough to rest when they are tired. Before they learned to fly I would see them being very active on the pier, flapping their wings and hopping around. Then suddenly, one would flop face down on the pier for a “power nap,” looking like little more than a pile of feathers for about 20 -30 minutes. In the early days at least, it was nothing to see them disappear under the pier for the night well before sunset as if they knew they needed extra rest for the day ahead.

Peregrines are remarkably good parents and yet they practice a falcon form of “tough love.” No helicopter parenting here, the adults would try to be there for the youngsters but sometimes they just had to be content to let them learn on their own. I know it wasn’t always easy. I saw the parents on more than one occasion try to coax one of the young out of danger when they found themselves on top of a sign or an electrical pole. The adult would stay nearby, giving advice (at least I assume it was advice, I don’t really speak Peregrinese), or sometimes trying to coax the young out of danger with food. But in the end, they would fly off and hope for the best. Sometimes there is only so much you can do.

At times bad things happen, but after taking the time to acknowledge and perhaps grieve, at some point life must

go on. After the young female was lost, her mother showed signs of distress. But eventually the needs of the remaining male took over as his survival depended upon her. Life is for the living, like it or not.

As the young male got older and was ready to hunt on his own, the parents had to cut back on the feeding in order to force him to become independent of them. It couldn't have been easy to deal with his constant squawking at them, begging for food. And yet it was in his best interest to teach him to take care of himself. Not a bad lesson for any of us to remember. Maybe more of us should learn to not give our kids everything they ask for, too. Just a thought.

I feel gratitude to these birds for so much more than just the opportunity to observe and learn about them. The presence of the Peregrines at the bridge was a gift in many unexpected ways and on many levels. For one thing, I made some new friends of other folks who were also drawn there because of the falcons. Over the summer, we formed a little community of falcon watchers. We'd compare notes on sightings as we would greet each other on the Riverwalk. In this way, we checked on the falcons and perhaps on each other as well. What began as a solitary pursuit for me became part of a wonderful group effort. I am grateful for the opportunity to be part of a community of such nice people who also care about the birds and their survival.

I soon learned that while Peregrines are not blessed with the colorful plumage of other bird species, these amazing creatures have a powerful and streamlined beauty of their own. They may not warble in beautiful song either, but their shrill cries became like music to my ears. When I heard their loud and somewhat harsh call, my heart lifted because it meant they were nearby and I was blessed with the chance to see them again.

I learned that the Market Street Bridge is a pretty special place to enjoy a sunset. As I watched the progress of our young male, I was drawn to the bridge each evening to

make sure he came back to spend the night. It was a comfort to know he had survived another day. But then as I watched the sun dip below the horizon, I could pause and realize that I, too, had made it through whatever Life had thrown at me that particular day. Each day is a blessing for all creatures.

What a gift those evenings became. How long had it been since I had witnessed so many sunsets in a row? Strung together like multicolored pearls on a string, each was different and yet beautiful in its own way. When did I stop noticing that? Why did I let Life get in the way of such a simple truth? Had the falcons not been there, I would have had no reason to spend so many evenings on the banks of the Susquehanna River. How glad I am that they drew me there. It became almost a meditation practice of sorts – the time to pause and reflect, to live in the moment as the sun dropped in the western sky and the lights of my beloved city and the moon took its place.

Sometimes taking pictures, sometimes just committing them to memory, I tried to “bankroll” those halcyon days to sustain me in the long winter nights ahead. When it's getting dark by 5 p.m. and the wind is howling, and it seems as if spring will never get here, I will think back to those summer nights at the bridge and remember those sunsets. Maybe I will look at the pictures, but I probably won't need to very often because those nights are imprinted on my heart. I will remember the breeze that lifted my hair and chased away the heat and humidity of the day. I'll picture the river at my feet sparkling in the rays of the waning sun as the sky was painted in brilliant red and orange or in the more pastel shades of pink, yellow, and even lavender. I'll remember the herons, the cormorants, and the ducks in silhouette as they passed by on their way up or down stream. And in my mind I'll hear the cries of the Peregrines on the night air, and my heart will once again lift as I remember the falcons.

The falcons. Always the falcons.

A Cedar Waxwing Observation

Years ago when the caterpillars made their web nests in our young black walnut tree, my husband would try to remove them as he was afraid they would kill the tree. But one summer day a flock of Cedar Waxwings arrived and each one took pieces of the webbing and flew away with it in their bills. We do not know if they were going to use the webbing in their nests or have a picnic caterpillar lunch, but after that we decided to leave the tree alone and let nature take care of itself.

Rhetta Martin
Franklin County



An American Coot Changed My Life

by Bob Reiter

Even as a child, I was always interested in the backyard birds because my mom would tell me about them. When my wife and I built a home in Seven Valleys in 2001, we made landscaping choices based on native species to attract local wildlife. We put up bird feeders and bird baths, and we watched the birds that came through our yard. I never ventured outside the yard to see what other birds were in the local area. Once I was excited to see a Rose-breasted Grosbeak on our feeder and was able to take a picture to share, pre-Facebook.

I got a point-and-shoot camera for Christmas in 2016 and took it with me when I walked our dog at the local park. I saw a few ducks that weren't Mallards, but I did not know that other species of ducks existed. I looked them up and identified them as Ring-necked Ducks! Now that was something different.

My wife told Tiffany Willow, a friend at work, about my interest in birds because she was an avid birder. Tiffany added me to the PA Birders Photography page on Facebook, and I was amazed at the variety of birds in Pennsylvania. I got a Birdcam Pro and set it up on our deck railings near the birdbath to see what birds might be visiting our yard, especially when we were at work. I saw the usual Northern Cardinals, Blue Jays, Mourning Doves, etc. One day there were Cedar Waxwings on the birdbath – I had never seen those before. Then I realized they were the birds that were eating the crabapples on our tree in the winter!



A chance encounter with American Coots was life-changing for Bob Reiter.

Tiffany invited my wife and me to go to Middle Creek to see the Snow Geese in March 2018. I brought my little point-and-shoot camera to document what we observed that day. Middle Creek was amazing! I saw birders with giant cameras and birds that I had no idea existed. Our first stop was near a creek where we parked along the side of the road and looked at the birds swimming in the creek, diving and chasing one another. They looked like funny black chickens. That was the first time that I had ever seen an

American Coot! That encounter changed my whole outlook on birding – I was hooked. I could not believe there were birds like that an hour away from our house. We saw odd looking Northern Shovelers, Hooded Mergansers, and thousands of Snow Geese.

After that trip, I started doing eBird checklists regularly and ventured out of my backyard. I have updated my camera and practice photography every day. I have seen more than 220 species of birds in PA, and I've gone on stakeouts, standing in backyards and freezing to see a Painted Bunting. I retired last year, and now I go birding every day.

This past winter I was at Lake Marburg in York County and saw an American Coot. Whenever I see a coot, it brings my thoughts back to that trip to Middle Creek that changed my life. To think that a funny-looking, black, swimming, chicken-like bird can change your whole life is amazing!

Did you know...

Although American Coots are common in Pennsylvania during migration, during the Second Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania, they were confirmed nesting in only two blocks – near Custards in Crawford County and at Morgan Lake in Berks County.

The Raven Reporter

Tales of
Discovery about
Pennsylvania
Birds



This column celebrates two of my favorite women in Pennsylvania who have contributed immensely to our knowledge and understanding of Pennsylvania wildlife. They are not only outstanding professionals but the very best people you would ever want to meet or associate with in any way. Both have recently retired from professional activities. These are the outdoor writer Marcia Bonta and ornithologist Margaret Brittingham. There are several common denominators between these two women besides their excellent and prodigious contributions. Both are humble, hard-working, curiosity-driven women who have had the support of husbands and family in the pursuit of their profession. Both also have earned the respect of their colleagues and peers for the kinds of pursuits they each endeavor. No matter what the future brings, neither one will ever be bored or boring. They have too much to learn and to give for that. I wish the best for both and hope to see them often.

Marcia Bonta, the Indefatigable Outdoor Writer

Marcia Bonta is quite simply one of the most important outdoor and wildlife writers in the history of Pennsylvania. She has been writing high-quality articles and books for so long that people have taken her considerable contributions for granted. Marcia is an old-fashioned “get the facts straight and check your sources” writer who has experienced many of her subjects personally and who has kept very high standards for several decades. She is the author of nine books and more than 300 magazine articles. This kind of productivity and longevity are simply staggering. In the process of gathering material, she has walked with a sense of wonder and curiosity for hundreds of miles through Penn’s Woods to explore the natural world and asked dozens of researchers and other experts hundreds of questions to get her stories right. Her nature column, “the Naturalist’s Eye” graced the pages of the *Pennsylvania Game News* a total of 348 times. There are very few wildlife columns that have lasted as many as 29 years with such a very high quality. If you ask me, it was the best part of the state wildlife agency’s magazine for each edition, a welcome break from “me and Joe” hunting

stories. Her column was in the tradition of Ned Smith’s *Gone for the Day* that steered so many of us toward watching the natural world.

I was going to write that I felt that Marcia was a naturalist first and a writer second, but that is not an original thought. She had already said that about herself in interviews. Her curiosity and her love of nature have been driving forces in her writing. I have been interviewed by her a few times and enjoyed it very much because she immersed herself in each subject and was well-prepared with thoughtful and appreciative questions. This came with a healthy dose of humility and lots of hard work. She met her husband Bruce at Bucknell University, not far from me, so we held a special geographical bond. That Bruce grew up near Ricketts Glen State Park gave us a good starting point in conversations and a shared appreciation for the big woods and everything in it. Marcia’s first column in *Game News* was about the Carolina Wren, aptly named “A Bird for All Seasons.” She is herself a naturalist and a writer “for all seasons” who has never seemed to tire of the exploration. My shelves include almost all of Marcia’s books, and they have all been read. She won an award from the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writers Association for her *Outbound Journeys in Pennsylvania* – a book that has informed us of many places for our own adventures in wild Pennsylvania. She also has provided us a series of seasonal nature books in the *Appalachian Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall* published by University of Pittsburgh Press. One of my own favorite two books were the *Women in the Field: America's Pioneering Women Naturalists* (1991) and *American Women Afield: Writings by Pioneering Women Naturalists* (1995). These two volumes include biographies of many women of science – and I include naturalists in that group. They opened my eyes even more widely to the contributions of women I did not yet know beyond some like Rachel Carson and Margaret Nice who had already inspired me. I advise anyone to read all her books but especially these.

Retirement will give Marcia more free time to enjoy and explore her Plummer's Hollow Private Nature Reserve, a 648-acre property near Tyrone. It is bittersweet due to the recent passing of her husband Bruce with whom she was very happily married for 59 years. Anyone who was around this couple knew that there was a lot of love and respect in their relationship. Their three sons – Steve, Dave, and Mark – all have pursued careers of which their parents have been proud and are all naturalists, traveling in their minds and bodies through the natural world. To keep in touch with Marcia’s writings please check out her naturalist writer blog at [Marcia Bonta | naturalist writer](#)

In Appreciation of Dr. Margaret Brittingham

When it comes to the challenges facing birds, we consider issues like forest health and fragmentation, energy development, pollution like atmospheric acid deposition, and forest and grassland management. Who has looked at these critically important issues in Pennsylvania? That would be Margaret Brittingham.

My first memories of Margaret were listening attentively to her presentations at ornithological meetings about Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism and how it may be a factor in songbird populations and about Blue Jay populations at a feeding station in Wisconsin. She certainly benefited from her mentorship by Stanley Temple. Hers were very interesting presentations on challenging subjects. We were very impressed by the high quality of her research and the importance of these studies. I even remember talking to her as a young student scientist at the meetings. I really enjoyed how engaging and humble she was about her work, always asking the next good research question. Since I also had studied Blue Jays, her research was of particular interest to me, so I appreciated how well her project was accomplished. Pennsylvanians got to know her better when she came to Penn State and began teaching in the College of Agricultural Sciences in the Department of Ecosystem Science and Management. She became a Professor of Wildlife Resources and an Extension Wildlife Specialist who generated many publications for both the scientific community and members of the general public interested in wildlife. Simply put, her contributions have been enormous, not only because of their excellence but also because of their relevance to practical management and conservation of birds. She always had important and challenging subjects and the public's interest in mind. She always knew how much the public cares about wildlife and engages with it. There have been lots of hot topics and big questions in Pennsylvania land and resource management, and Margaret tried to find answers to many of them. These challenges were not easy, and the answers are usually not clear-cut and predictable.

The list of projects that Margaret and her students tackled over the years at Penn State is very long. There are too many for them all to be mentioned in a short column. Much of what we know about the human effects on birds came from her laboratory in Penn State's Forest Science building. With students and partners, she studied subjects like the effects of shale gas development on birds, bird migration stopover habitat quality, characteristics effects of forest fragmentation on Wood Thrush nesting populations, the effectiveness of the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program on birds, calcium availability in soil as a factor in Ovenbird productivity (addressing atmospheric acid deposition), liming as a mitigation technique for forest herbivores, the effects of hemlock woolly adelgid on bird populations, Blackpoll Warbler habitat in Pennsylvania, the status of Northern Goshawk in the state, and bat maternity colonies.

There is an equally long list of students who successfully completed complex and challenging projects. Many call themselves partners who worked with her on important research in the state. The PA Game Commission often turned to her as a research partner. Everyone who was some part of her projects will tell you that Margaret is a very talented, resourceful, and hard-working researcher -- and an even better person. We owe her a great debt of gratitude for her contributions to what we know about birds and their management in the state and the intensity, yet graciousness, with which she completed these projects and worked with others. I am grateful to know her and benefited from her professionally and personally. She is simply the best!

To keep up with Margaret's contributions, see her page on the Penn State website: [Margaret C. Brittingham, Ph.D. Department of Ecosystem Science and Management \(psu.edu\)](https://www.psu.edu/~mcbritting)

Good birding!

Doug Gross
Pennsylvania Boreal Bird Project
Ricketts Glen State Park Bird Project
Dagross144@verizon.net

Photos Needed for *Pennsylvania Birds*

Don't forget to sort through your winter photos, taken in Pennsylvania between December 1, 2021, and February 28, 2022, and submit them for possible publication in PSO's journal, *Pennsylvania Birds*. Images submitted must be high-res, and horizontal shots are preferred. Submitted images must be able to be cropped to 1050px x 700px with a resolution of 300 px/in for horizontal images. If space allows high-quality vertical portrait shots may be used, but they take up the space of 2 photos in the layout used by the journal. Vertical photos submitted must be able to be cropped to 1050px x 1313px at 300 px/in. Email photos to Rob Dickerson (radickerson@gmail.com) or contact him for more information.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Research

Lauren M. Chronister and Tessa A. Rhinehart at the University of Pittsburgh, Aidan Place at Carnegie Mellon University, and Justin Kitzes at Pitt have recorded, compiled, and published a historic data set of bird sound recordings available free to ornithologists and ecologists throughout the world.

Their compilation is explained in a 2021 paper in the journal *Ecology* titled “An annotated set of audio recordings of Eastern North American birds containing frequency, time, and species information.” It is available at <https://tinyurl.com/kvuxj48h>.

The data were obtained from autonomous acoustic recordings made from April through July 2018 at Powdermill Nature Reserve in Westmoreland County.

The recordings contain 385 minutes of “dawn chorus” vocalizations collected by autonomous acoustic recorders. They were collected in continuous bouts on four days in the study period and contain 48 species and 16,052 annotations.

The authors describe their recordings as examples of “soundscapes” useful for answering many ecological questions.

In an interview with Kara Holsopple on *The Allegheny Front* website, Lauren explained how well-trained birders traditionally use “point counts,” listening at predetermined

locations and times, and noting the species and numbers they hear. In contrast, the autonomous recorders listen continuously.

The researchers can then “train” computers using a machine-learning method to identify the vocalizing species and numbers with no need for humans to walk hours in woodlands and fields.

In a Three Rivers Birding Club of Southwestern Pennsylvania Zoom meeting in August 2020, Tessa Rhinehart explained how a Pitt research team developed and now use the method that eventually made this immense database available to everyone. Her program “Eavesdropping on Birds” is posted on the 3RBC website at 3rbc.org/zoom_meetings.html.

Tessa also described the research extensively in an article in the April 2020 issue of American Birding Association’s *Birding* magazine. It is available online at tinyurl.com/9vfd48xb. The magazine’s subtitle to “Eavesdropping on Birds” is “Bird conservation powered by breakthroughs in machine learning.”

So, this is how computers and their expert users can help to save our birds.

Paul Hess, phess@salsgiver.com
Natrona Heights

PSO Bird Quiz

How well do you know our Pennsylvania birds?

1. A rare petrel, seldom seen anywhere off the U.S. Atlantic Coast, breeds on a tiny archipelago far off the coast of Brazil. Its only PA record was in Blair County in 2012. Which species?
2. In their 2005 book *Birds of Pennsylvania*, Frank Haas and Roger Burrows say this about a warbler species: “You may find yourself with a ‘pain in the neck’ as you strain your head back for a glimpse of these warblers as they forage and sing at the very tops of tall trees.” Which species?
3. A Rocky Mountain junco subspecies, or perhaps an intergrade between two other subspecies, was recently photographed and widely discussed in PA. What was this junco?
4. In our second Breeding Bird Atlas, which warbler species was confirmed breeding at only one location in northeastern PA?
5. It is fall migration, and you are looking at either a Horned Grebe or an Eared Grebe. It has a somewhat peaked crown at the front. Which species?

Conservation Chat Room



Erie Bird Observatory (EBO) has created an impressive number of exciting programs to help birds and to inspire people to connect to birds. I asked Mary Birdsong to share an in-depth summary of their work. I encourage you to consider joining EBO.

EBO has an office at the Tom Ridge Environmental Center at the entrance to Presque Isle State Park, though employees are most often out on the park.

EBO's mailing address is:

Erie Bird Observatory
301 Peninsula Drive, Suite 14
Erie, PA 16505

Places to Find EBO

At our website, eriebirdobservatory.org, you can:

- ✿ Read more about our programs, staff, news, and current events
- ✿ Find birding resources
- ✿ Become a member, or support EBO in other ways such as by buying coffee, adopting a mist net, volunteering, or donating.

Facebook: Erie Bird Observatory & Presque Isle Bird Banding

Instagram: [bird_erie](https://www.instagram.com/bird_erie)

Twitter: [@bird_erie](https://twitter.com/bird_erie)

Erie Bird Observatory

by Mary Birdsong

A New Bird Observatory Hatches

Founded in 2018, Erie Bird Observatory picked up the torch of ongoing bird work following the closing of the northwest office of Audubon PA. The organization, a 501(c)3, was established by Sarah Sargent, Laura-Marie Koitsch, and Mary Birdsong who were already conducting bird monitoring at Presque Isle. Sargent is now the Executive Director, Koitsch is an Assistant Director as well as the Lead Bander, and Birdsong is an Assistant Director and Lead Shorebird Monitor. When not actively engaged in field work, they all contribute to the administrative needs of a fledgling organization.

The mission is straightforward: EBO is dedicated to fostering enthusiasm for birds and conservation through ornithological research and public engagement.

Banding of Migratory Land Birds

Foremost, the founders wanted to ensure the continuance of the historic banding program that had begun at Presque Isle State Park in 1960. It was carried out for decades by the Leberman family (Mary, Bob, and Ron), and Jean and

Jim Stull, until it was adopted by Sarah Sargent in 2007 under the auspices of Audubon PA.

From that first Wood Thrush banded on May 20, 1960, the program continues as a core program of EBO during both the spring and fall migration seasons. Throughout, the public is always welcome to stop by the station and, happily, many usually do. The current banding station at Fry's Landing on the park now sees nearly 600 visitors in the spring season alone. If you stop by, pull in by the large brush pile and look for the black trailer with the EBO logo on it at the back side of the lot.

Since 2016, Sargent has been conducting research into movements of several species of birds by placing small radio transmitters called nanotags on them. This work continues under EBO. These transmitters allow EBO staff to track tagged birds to document their use of habitat at Presque Isle and the larger lakeshore, contributing to our knowledge of the significance of the area as a stopover site for migratory birds.

EBO operates two local receiver stations tuned to the frequency of the nanotags, one on the park and one across the channel near South Pier, which will detect any tagged

birds crossing back to the mainland. The tags can also be detected throughout the much larger Motus Network, allowing Sargent to track the tagged birds as they migrate beyond the immediate area. (See <https://motus.org/> for more information.)

EBO also uses nanotags to collaborate with an international team investigating the long-term effects of window collisions on birds. In this project, spearheaded by Powdermill Avian Research Center, EBO acts as a control site, tagging unimpaired birds.

One of the greatest thrills and a perfect example of the importance of banding is when a bird EBO has banded is recorded elsewhere. An American Redstart that was banded on May 22, 2017, was photographed later that year on its wintering grounds in Boa Vista, Brazil, which is roughly 2,950 miles from the EBO banding station (as the redstart flies).



Gray Catbird with nanotag

Photo by Sarah Sargent

Marsh Bird Monitoring

The first marsh bird monitoring was conducted in the summer of 2011, a year before Presque Isle State Park initiated an aggressive phragmites control effort. In 2017, a yearly monitoring effort of the emergent marshes at Presque Isle began and has been continued by EBO since. It focuses on eight species of secretive marsh birds: Least Bittern, American Bittern, Pied-billed Grebe, Common Gallinule, American Coot, Virginia Rail, King Rail, and Sora.

A data comparison between 2011 and current records shows that many more marsh birds are now present, indicating restoration efforts are working. In particular, our surveys have shown there are roughly three times as many Least Bitterns, an endangered species in Pennsylvania, than there were in 2011.

Shorebird Monitoring

Presque Isle, especially Gull Point, is well-known as a premier stopover for migrating shorebirds, including the federally endangered Piping Plover, which historically nested on the park, and EBO is continuing to record shorebirds at Presque Isle.

Shorebird monitoring has occurred at Gull Point since the 1970s when volunteers began recording for the International Shorebird Survey. Formal monitoring began in 2005 following the publication of the Recovery Plan for Great Lakes Piping Plovers and designation of Presque Isle as one of the Critical Habitat Areas for them. EBO now conducts daily monitoring of nesting efforts by Piping Plovers as part of a multi-agency collaboration including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, US Fish & Wildlife Service, PA Game Commission, and PA DCNR.

EBO also monitors the State-endangered Common Terns that have also attempted to nest at Gull Point after many years of absence. In 2015, a small colony of eight nests fell to predation or high water, and since then several nesting attempts have occurred but none have been successful.

Besides monitoring of endangered species, EBO tracks all shorebirds throughout the season, and that data is shared with cooperating agencies.



Least Bittern at Presque Isle

Photo by Scott Gorring

Marsh bird monitoring has expanded to include 50 different monitoring points throughout Presque Isle, each visited twice throughout the season. It is supported through the Sustain Our Great Lakes (SOGL) Program of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF).

Waterbird Monitoring

Although Jerry McWilliams has been doing a fall and winter waterbird count from Sunset Point on the lakeside of Presque Isle for many years, EBO began bayside and interior waterbird monitoring in spring of 2019.

Monitoring occurs at 20 survey units around Presque Isle State Park to document waterbird species, including gulls, at each of the locations. Monitoring is conducted in the spring and fall during migration, early March through April and early October through the end of December. EBO engaged local birders and waterfowl hunters by asking them to do counts. EBO offers a public waterbird identification workshop in the spring for volunteers to brush up on ID skills or learn in preparation for the count. This program has also been supported through SOGL and NFWF.

This monitoring has given us a better picture of where and when different species are found within the park. Although we do not have comparison numbers from before marsh restoration began, we believe opening up areas previously dominated by tall Phragmites (common reed) stands has improved the diversity and abundance of waterbirds using these marshes.

Osprey Platforms

EBO has formed a partnership with several power companies to install nesting platforms for Ospreys that had been nesting on utility poles with active lines. The nest structures threaten the birds and people by being potential fire hazards and causing power outages.

Through funding from First Energy Foundation, EBO provides wooden platforms and perches, and the power company's linemen install them. Platforms have been installed near Shenango Reservoir in Mercer County, Pymatuning Reservoir in Crawford County, and in downtown Meadville.

Outreach and Engagement

EBO wanted to enhance the birding experience in this region and developed a project called "Bird-based Ecotourism: Building a better birder experience in northwestern Pennsylvania." EBO conducted surveys of visiting birders (If you participated, thank you!) and is building our outreach efforts via social media, the website, and more. It also has allowed us to lay the groundwork for a potential birding center at Presque Isle. Although more work needs to be done, the studies of birding activities at Presque Isle will begin to give us a look at how birding impacts the local economy. This project is funded through the PA DCNR's Community Conservation Partnerships Program.



Banding Station at Fry's Landing

One of EBO's goals is to increase our education and public outreach. As many of you know, our banding station at Fry's Landing at Presque Isle is the focal point for that, but we have expanded offerings to include field trip opportunities for members, both along the trails at Presque Isle and in the inland waterways via kayak. Plans for more of these activities in 2022 and beyond are in the works.

EBO is often in need of volunteers, whether it's at the banding station for all or part of a season, making bird bags to use at the station, or helping to erect or tear down the poles and roping that mark the trail through the closed area of Gull Point each spring and fall.

As of March 2022, EBO is looking forward to new seasons, maybe meeting some of you when out in the field and finding new ways to help our community learn about and love birds and their habitats as much as we do.

Newsflash: On February 9, 2022, Gov. Wolf announced that the Erie Bird Observatory received a grant for \$45,886 that supports the banding station and the research described in the article on radio tracking migratory land birds as they move around locally along the lakeshore as well as after they depart to continue migration.

Laura Jackson, Conservation Chair
Bedford County
mljackson2@embarqmail.com

In Praise of Grasses

By Ed Donley

On our Todd Bird Club outing to Yellow Creek State Park in Indiana County on January 29, Trent Millum spotted two sparrows in the open area next to the Yellow Creek inlet to the lake. Court Harding captured some nice photos of one of them, an American Tree Sparrow, feeding on a seed stalk of Broomsedge. I love to watch winter sparrows feeding on grasses poking up through the snow. Their rhythm is soothing to me. They alight on a grass stem and walk up the stem toward the seed heads. Their weight pushes the stems horizontally, sometimes pinning them to the snow surface. The sparrows stand comfortably on the stems while they pick off the seeds. They cannot reach the entire seed head from one spot, so they do a little sideways shuffle along the stems to reach the rest of the seeds. When they are done with one seed head, they fly to another grass stem and start the process all over again.



Court Harding photographed this American Tree Sparrow on Broomsedge at Yellow Creek State Park, Indiana County.



Indian Grass stays erect during most of the winter in the Donley meadow.

Photo by Ed Donley

A few winters ago, I was entertained by a flock of about 30 Dark-eyed Juncos in my meadow. They were feeding on Indian Grass seed heads. Many of the wildflower stalks had been smashed down by previous snowstorms or had already dispersed their seeds. But my Indian Grass is about six feet tall, and it was standing erect with intact seed heads. About eight to twelve inches of snow covered the ground, so the juncos had no access to food on the ground. Each bird flew almost vertically into the air and came down on an Indian Grass stem. After walking up the stem and eating the seeds, the bird flew up again to go to another nearby stem. It was like watching a flock of jack-in-the-boxes. I'm not even sure how many juncos there were. They kept popping up from random locations in the meadow.

So, why are birds focused on grass seeds in the winter? As best as I could determine from some background reading, it is for three reasons. If I am wrong, please let me know.

1) Most grass and sedge seeds don't need cold stratification, so, unlike most wildflower seeds, they don't have to be on the moist ground all winter to germinate. If they fall to the ground when they ripen in the fall, they will sprout immediately and the tender seedlings may die during the winter.

2) Grass seeds may not be a preferred food for many seed-eating animals because their outer covering has a high concentration of silica phytoliths. Phytoliths are microscopic stones created by many plants and stored between living cells. The phytoliths give the leaves and seeds of grasses a grainy roughness that discourages animals from eating them.

Consequently, the seeds are not consumed immediately in the fall, and they are available to birds in the winter.

3) Warm season grasses, such as Indian Grass, Big Bluestem, and Switchgrass grow during the warm months of summer. Cool season grasses, such as lawn grasses, grow mostly in the spring and fall. Warm season grass stems stay erect during most of the winter because their cellulose concentration increases throughout the growing season and because the stems are hollow. These characteristics keep the stems rigid, so that they stay above the snow cover. The high cellulose content also makes the grasses less palatable to plant-eating animals, such as deer and rabbits. Consequently, the seeds are available to birds during the winter.

Answers to Bird Quiz

(page 11)

1. Trindade Petrel
2. Cape May Warbler
3. Either a true *cismontanus* subspecies, or an intergrade of two other subspecies: northwestern *oreganus* and our familiar eastern *hyemalis*. Take your pick: true subspecies or an intergrade?
4. Blackpoll Warbler
5. Eared Grebe (but look carefully at the crown shape of less distinct first-fall birds)



Steve Gosser photographed this striking Redhead at North Park, Allegheny County, on February 20.

PSO Newsletter

This newsletter is published four times a year by the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology. To renew your membership, either pay on line or send your check made payable to "PSO" to:

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PSO Officers and Directors

Dan Brauning – President dan@thebraunings.com
Deb Grove – Vice President dsg4@psu.edu
Evan Mann – Past President 7evanmann@gmail.com
Roger Higbee – Secretary rvhigbee@windstream.net
Frank Haas – Treasurer fchaas@PAbirds.org
Greg Grove – *PA Birds* Editor gwg2@psu.edu
Margaret Higbee – Newsletter Editor bcoriole@windstream.net

Brian Byrnes – brianjbyrnes79@gmail.com
Eli DePaulis – elidepaulis1@gmail.com
Tony DeSantis – tgdesantis@yahoo.com
Doug Gross - dagross144@verizon.net
Laura Jackson – jacksonlaura73@gmail.com
Chad Kauffman – chadkauffman@earthlink.net
Wayne Laubscher – wnlaubscher@comcast.net
Sean Murphy – semurphy@pa.gov
Julia Plummer – julia@juliaplummer.com
Emily Thomas – eht5002@hotmail.com
Linda Wagner – lwagner342@msn.com
Carole Winslow – cjwinslow94@gmail.com
David Yeany – DYeany@paconserve.org

Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology

c/o R. V. Higbee
3119 Creekside Road
Indiana, PA 15701-7934

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