

The Osprey



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Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

CHASING AN OWL IRRUPTION IN MINNESOTA

by Dean Newman

The exceptional owl irruption this year drew me out of the comparatively sunny, temperate climate of southern Maryland in February to frozen northern Minnesota. While you were enjoying balmy temperatures in the mid-40s F., I was fighting single digits with daytime highs in the low 20s. While you were experiencing three to four inches of snow, I was plowing through fields and woods waist-deep in the white stuff; drifts were higher than my head.

Was it worth it? I came home with eleven lifers, lots of memories, two rental-car wrecks (no injuries, only bent metal), and several new friends including the highway patrolman who responded to one of my accidents. I call that an exceptional trip by anyone's measure.

The highlight of the trip was two Boreal Owls (*Aegolius funereus*) spotted by a new birding friend going down the highway at fifty miles per hour on the last day. Great Gray Owls (*Strix nebulosa*), and Northern Hawk Owls (*Surnia ulula*) were everywhere and very approachable. Owing to the same friend's excellent birding knowledge, we were able to pick out several northern specialties, including a single female Hoary Redpoll from a group of fifty plus Commons (not a lifer) at a resident feeder. Also we had Three-toed and Black-backed Woodpeckers in so close I had to shoo them away in order to focus on them with my camera. We found Boreal Chickadees by driving the back roads with our windows down (note single digit temps cited in first paragraph) listening for their unique calls. Although striking out on Spruce Grouse, I did find several Sharp-tailed Grouse sitting in low trees eating buds. If you were counting, the other three lifers were Trumpeter Swan, Bohemian Waxwing and Pine Grosbeak.

However, my point here is not to give you a play by play of how/where I scored each bird, but to help you plan a successful trip if you decide to go. More than likely, the irruption of 2005 will be history by the time you read this, but there's always next year. While irruptions are not predictable and don't occur every year, birders are such optimists.

First, and not to overstate the obvious, Minnesota winters are COLD. There is ice on the roads and the snow covers deep ditches (see second paragraph). Treat ice with respect (hard lesson learned) and never pull off the road without checking to see what the snow is covering (ditto lesson

learned at 35 mph trying to stop for a suspected Spruce Grouse). The other aspect of cold weather is that you can die from hypothermia if not prepared. Dress warmly, in layers, and have plenty of clothes in the trunk in case of breakdowns. I recommend an outer garment of wind-proof material such as Wind-Stopper® or Gore-Tex® plus hats and gloves. Now is not the time to be fashion conscious. You know, dress like a birder. After all, not all birds are along major, well-traveled roads and it could be a long walk out.

Second, Kim Eckert's, "A Birder's Guide to Minnesota, 4th Edition", (ABA Sales Code 290, \$19.95) is an excellent resource if you have two or more days to find your own birds. The spiral format and detailed maps make this the best birder's guide I've seen anywhere including the "Lane" guides from ABA. I strongly recommend getting it early and spending lots of time planning your trip. For example, Sax-Zim Bog isn't on any gazetteer but that's where you'll spend the majority of your time. Eckert lays the bog out very descriptively.

If your time is limited, hire a guide. Guides charge around a hundred dollars per day plus expenses (gas if you use their vehicle and lunch). I could have easily cut my time in Duluth in half by hiring one exclusively *versus* hybridizing—going partly on my own, and partly with a hired guide. When you consider hotel rates (\$55-\$60 per night) and rental car rates (\$25-\$30 per day) a guide makes you money.

I spent a total of six days on my trip; two of them travel days. If I had to do it all over again, I'd fly into Duluth, catch a cab from the airport to a hotel (about \$10) and have a guide take me out two days and fly home the third day. I wouldn't book a rental car (see second paragraph). There are plenty of dining options—even all-night breakfasts—within easy walking distance of a hotel.

For a guide, I can recommend Mike Hendrickson out of Duluth ((218) 348-5124). If he's unavailable, ask him to recommend someone. Be careful, since major irruptions draw lots of birders, and some "guides" with *limited* qualifications are looking for business. You really don't want them learning on your dollar.

While on the subject of guides, most of us have never hired one so there might be some apprehension in guide/client etiquette. The best advice I can give is treat the guide as you would want to be treated if you're leading a group. Although they are doing it for the money, there are other secondary benefits they glean from their job. Most get real pleasure out of seeing the bird they've seen a thousand

times through your eyes. Give them some feedback. Act excited about seeing a life bird. You can kill a guide's enthusiasm fast if you simply check off the bird and ask, "What's next?"

While not as obligatory as in restaurants, tipping is always appreciated IF you think the guide went "above and beyond" expectations. Usually I set an arbitrary amount of five dollars per life bird and deviate from there.

Gratuities aren't always financial. What better way to spawn a long-term relationship than to leave an admired book or field-guide with a personal note on the inside cover? My experience is I never get all the birds I target in one visit so I'll be back. By leaving a personal memento, I have a friend instead of a business contact to aid me on subsequent trips.

As to Duluth, all businesses were cognizant of the owl irruption and the positive effect it was having on their off-season economy. Everyone I met was extremely helpful and had lots of great advice; particularly about hidden restaurants, out of the way scenic drives, etc. My best advice, aside from hiring a guide, is to use the locals for non-birding adventure advice. Minnesota has more than its share of "local color". If I can be of any assistance helping you plan your trip to Duluth, please email me at Dean.Newman@verizon.net.

VOLUNTEERS CLEAR A TRAIL AT DOUGLAS POINT TRAIL NOW OPEN FOR VISITORS

On Saturday and Sunday, Feb. 26 and 27, volunteers worked with staff from the Federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) to clear a trail into the BLM property at Douglas Point in Nanjemoy. The trail goes along the old road west from Rt. 224 to the historic Chiles house. There were many fallen trees across the old road, most of them blown down by Hurricane Isabel. The BLM workers used chain saws to cut the trunks of the fallen trees into sections about five feet long. The volunteers then cut the branches off these sections with hand saws, cut down the small young trees and bushes on the road with clippers and then carried or pushed all cut up tree trunks, branches, small trees and bushes off the road. The effort each day was from 11 a.m. to about 4:30 p.m. with a break for lunch provided by BLM. Most of the volunteers were members of Nanjemoy Vision, the group that was successful in 1998 in getting almost all of this property previously owned by PEPCO purchased by BLM and the State of Maryland.

PEPCO had planned to build a power plant on this property but then decided not, and put the property up for sale. A company wanted to buy all the property, about 2300 acres, for sand and gravel mining. But then BLM and Maryland

DNR bought almost all the property except about 200 acres on the east side of Rt. 224. BLM owns most of the property west of Rt. 224 along the Potomac River. The state owns a section on the west side adjacent to Purse State Park and all the property on the east side of Rt. 224 except for the 200 acre piece that the sand and gravel company owns.

The trail is now open for hikers. The trail entrance on Rt. 224 is about 1.1 miles south of the intersection of Liverpool Point Road and Rt. 224. The distance on the trail from Rt. 224 to the remains of the Chiles house is about 1600 ft. Hikers can also continue their walk west past the house and then turn north on an old forest road that returns to Rt. 224 near Liverpool Point Road. There is a branch off this old road that goes down to the shore of the Potomac River.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Charles County Chase, January 15, 2005 by Gwen Brewer

On a cool day in January, a group of 8 people set out to see what they could find in Charles County. We started at the Port Tobacco Court House, which can be good for sparrows at this time of year. Although bird diversity was lower than we had hoped, we did have a few female Hooded Mergansers at this spot, in addition to Eastern Towhee, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco, Hermit Thrush, Song Sparrow, and Cedar Waxwing. Next, we stopped in a pine area that is part of Chapel Point State Park and attracted in a few Golden-crowned Kinglets and other songbirds with the chickadee-screech owl tape. Our journey then took us to Allens Fresh, where the highlights were Northern Harrier, Bald Eagle, and White-crowned Sparrow.

We continued our journey south to see what was on the Potomac River at Morgantown (including from Bob and Carol Eppley's backyard!), Southern Park, and Cobb Island, and checked out the Wicomico River and surrounding fields at Hatton Creek and near Windmill Point. Both species of scaup, Common Merganser (thanks to John Staples), Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, Double-crested Cormorant, three species of gulls, and a number of decoys were seen at Morgantown. Common Loon, Long-tailed Duck, more Buffleheads, scaup, Ruddy Duck, and Goldeneye were present at Cobb Island. Tundra Swan, Gadwall, Great Blue Heron, American Wigeon, Red-breasted Merganser, and Belted Kingfisher were at Southern Park; and the Wicomico River sites brought us good looks at Canvasback, more ruddies, and Common Goldeneye. Notable in fields and forests along the way were Red-tailed Hawk, American Kestrel, and five species of woodpecker (Red-bellied, Downy, Hairy, Pileated, and Northern Flicker). The final total was 57 species, with 15 species of waterfowl. It was an enjoyable trip, despite the cold, and one of the highlights of the trip for me was receiving a nice thank-you note from our youngest participant- thank you Eliana!

Jefferson Patterson Park, February 12

by Tyler Bell

Three intrepid birders, George Harrington, Cynthia Brown and Dean Newman, showed up for the JeffPat field trip. Dean graciously chauffeured around the park. We started off the day with a pair of Red-shouldered Hawks in preambles of mating. They were chasing each other around in the top of a sycamore, then one took off and began its incessant crying as it circled.

We walked the Woodland Trail behind the museum, a waste of time, as the woods were shady and cold with very little bird activity. The few birds that we encountered were found later in the day elsewhere.

Next stop was the old Academy of Natural Sciences pier. As we walked down the pier toward the river, the wind became more blustery out on the exposure of the water. The large raft of scaup that I had seen the previous week during the Patuxent River Waterfowl Survey was scattered and distant. They became even more scattered when an immature Bald Eagle swooped overhead. Eventually we managed to see both Lesser and Greater Scaup as well as Common Loon, Common Goldeneye, Bufflehead, Ruddy Duck, and a Horned Grebe that kept diving as soon as we got a scope on it. The lighting was such that you could actually see the purple head on the Lessers and the green on the Greaters. George spotted a bird that got away, a small crow flying away from us with several other larger crows. It did not vocalize to tell us whether it was a Fish Crow.

We drove down the farm road on the north side of the park stopping at the large pond. There were many Ring-necked Ducks there as well as Gadwall, Mallard, Black Duck and a female Hooded Merganser. Walking down to the river, we tallied Eastern Bluebird, Savannah Sparrows, and Yellow-rumped Warblers foraging along the edge of muddy fields. We also picked up Long-tailed Duck (Oldsquaw for those who prefer the old name).

Walking along the edge of the pond toward the marsh, we found evidence of both Beaver and River Otter. The otter had created an "otter roll," which is an area of regurgitated fish scales that they apparently roll in. It was quite pungent! There was also a trail between the pond, the road and the hill down to the marsh where beaver, the otter, or both had worn away the grass leaving a muddy slide. The beaver had somehow blocked the overflow from the lake so water was spilling out the side of the pond and across the road. We spooked up a Wilson's Snipe there, then watched a Swamp Sparrow foraging around the edge of the overflow. The lighting was perfect on the sparrow giving all a new appreciation for how colorful a swampie really is.

Continued on page 4

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR BLUEBIRD TRAIL

The Bluebird Trail at Greenwell State Park is in need of a volunteer to maintain and monitor the bluebirds' nesting progress. If you can do this, please call Donny Hammett at 301-373-2320.

WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

Travis Mattingly, Leonardtown
Johanna Rambo, Hollywood
Clara Moran, Accokeek
Franklin Ampy, Suitland
Suzanne Cassidy, Hughesville
Carol Churi, Owings
Justin Cooke, Mechanicsville
Dianna Denton, Temple Hills
Winston Dillard, California
Hsus Donor, Accokeek
Elizabeth Fick, Lusby
Pat Friel, Chesapeake Beach
Sue Gillett, Dunkirk
Ruth Gilmore, Lexington Park
Judy Gresham, Solomons
Sherry Hession, La Plata
Alan Hunter, Mechanicsville
Leah Kargbo, Ft Washington
James B. Law, Suitland
Andrea Ledgerwood, Huntingtown
Robert Martin, Hughesville
James McComas, Solomons
Tony Moore, Mechanicsville
J. Neat, Chaptico
William Oglesby, Leonardtown
John Peace, Accokeek
Robert Poling, La Plata
Barbara Rice, Leonardtown
William Richardson, California
Kathy Sears, Prince Frederick
Warren Shultzaberger, Hollywood
Mr-Mrs William Standish, California
Joseph Strickland, Charlotte Hall
Phillip Tabbita, Waldorf
Sharon Weber, Clinton
Mr-Mrs Jack Edwards, Leonardtown
Central Library, Patuxent River
Sandra Klein, Huntingtown
Henry Wyatt, Piney Point



Our final stop was at an area I call the earth dam. It's an elevated area across a marshy depression near the King's Reach archaeological site. Recently they installed heavy wooden railings on both sides of the road. These were perfect for resting on while scoping the depression. A bird was singing in the brambles, which at first I dismissed as a Ruby-crowned Kinglet. Then it finally dawned on me that it was a Winter Wren. We never saw it but it sang it's warbling song for a few minutes before departing. We added to our mammal list with a pair of muskrats that were feeding along the drainage oblivious to our presence. Dean saw a bird that he wanted us all to look at. It was a chickadee with a tremendous amount of white on the wings. None of us got a good look at the bib. Unfortunately, it flitted around in the brush then disappeared before we could come up with a consensus on it being a Black-capped Chickadee.

As we were returning to Dean's truck, we stopped at the edge of King's Reach where the woods meet the field. There were many sparrows flying from the trees down to the road edge. Among them were several Chipping Sparrows!

Adding a few more species before leaving the park yielded a cumulative tally for the trip of 56 species confirmed. Not bad for a few hours in early February!

**Beauvue Ponds, February 26
by Gwen Brewer**

Dean Newman graciously co-led this trip with me, and Tyler Bell got us started off in the right direction before he had to leave for a meeting. We had four other participants, who appreciated Dean's waterfowl identification sessions during the trip. At the ponds, we had 13 species of waterfowl: Mallard, Green-winged Teal, American Wigeon, Gadwall, Hooded Merganser, Tundra and Mute Swan, Canada Goose, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, and nice looks at Redheads in the sunshine. We also saw Red-shouldered Hawk but not Northern Harrier, and Killdeer, American Kestrel, Northern Flicker, Eastern Meadowlark, Brown Thrasher, Common Grackle, and Red-winged Blackbird. The Short-eared Owls have not been seen recently at this location, and we did not find them either. As we looked over the farthest pond, our first Osprey of the year passed overhead! A sure sign that spring is on the way.

Our next stop was at the end of Abells Wharf Rd., where we picked up Red-tailed Hawk; Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed Gull; Great Blue Heron, Carolina Chickadee, and Swamp, Song, and White-throated Sparrow. We also had very close looks at Yellow-rumped

Continued on page 5

FOSTER PARENTS NEEDED

The gift of an osprey adoption becomes part of a special fund for the support of osprey research and raptor conservation projects in Southern Maryland. The foster parent receives:

- 1) A certificate of adoption of an osprey fledgling banded with a numbered U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service leg band. The certificate gives the location and date the osprey was banded.
- 2) Information on osprey ecology and migration patterns, a 5"x7" photo of a fledgling and information that Steve receives on the whereabouts or fate of the bird.

Interested? Here's how to become an Osprey parent. Send \$10.00, with the form, for each fledgling to be adopted to:

**Southern Maryland Audubon Society
P.O. Box 181
Bryans Road, Maryland 20616**

ADOPT AN OSPREY

Name: _____

Address: _____

Amount Enclosed: _____



Warblers on the ground, apparently feeding on insects associated with small puddles. On a tip from Tyler, we spent the rest of the half-day trip at St. Francis Xavier Church, down route 243 to the southwest of Leonardtown. The open fields yielded Northern Harrier, Eastern Bluebird, American Robin, American Pipit, Horned Lark, Dark-eyed Junco, and several hundred Tundra Swans. A surprise at this location was a single Wilson's (formerly Common) Snipe probing in the wet farm field. The total tally for the trip was 50 species. Thanks to all who attended!

**A Merlin in Bryans Road
by Paul Nistico.**

I had a good observation Saturday, Feb 26. Pat and I weren't birding. We just pulled into the driveway at home and a dark gray raptor shot across the front yard ahead of us. We both called "Sharpie" but as the bird wheeled toward our back yard we clearly saw the silhouette of a smallish falcon. The bird was a Merlin! This is the second Merlin sighting we've had at our house in the last 3 years. Starting about 5 or 6 years ago, I've noticed a dramatic increase in Merlins overall and in western Charles County in particular.

April 30—Saturday—8 a.m. Field Trip
Nanjemoy Environmental Education Center/Nanjemoy Marsh Sanctuary, Charles County.

Spring Migrants. Leader: Mike Callahan (301-246-4091, raptorsrule@juno.com). Half-day trip. Visit a migrant hotspot to search for early warblers, woodpeckers, waterfowl, and sparrows. Meet in strip mall parking lot in La Plata opposite the Methodist Church on the corner of Rt. 6 and Rt. 301 near KFC fast food store. Carpooling is encouraged, or contact leader if you want to meet at the site.

May 4—Wednesday—7:30 p.m. Monthly Meeting
St. Mary's Memorial Library, Leonardtown, St. Mary's County.

Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS): A Study of the Over winter Survival of Neotropical Migratory Birds, by Jim Swift, NAS Patuxent River natural Resources Office. The MAPS program was established in the early 1990s to study the winter survivorship of neotropical migratory birds. The Institute for Bird Population in Point Reyes Station, California, collects and analyzes the data from bird banding returns at selected banding stations. NAS Patuxent River has participated in the program since 1992, collecting twelve consecutive years of banding data. Mr. Swift will tell about the results of this important project, which he has coordinated at Pax River since 1997.

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NEW OR RENEWAL 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 and the local chapter, the Southern Maryland Audubon Society, at the Introductory Offer. I will receive the *Audubon* magazine, the chapter newsletter, *The Osprey*, and support National and local environmental causes. A fraction of my dues will be returned to the local chapter.
- Please **renew** my membership in the National Audubon Society and the local chapter, the Southern Maryland Audubon Society. A fraction of my dues will be returned to the local chapter.

Name _____
 Address _____
 City _____ State _____ Zip _____

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

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
- Optional Donation \$ _____

National Dues, Make check payable to
National Audubon Society

- Introductory Offer - 1 year \$20
- Introductory Offer – 2 year \$30
- Senior/Student \$15
- Renewal Rate \$35

APRIL EVENTS

April 2—Saturday—9 a.m. Volunteer Activity

Marshall Hall Park, Charles County.

Potomac River Cleanup. Leader: Bob Iukinic (301-283-6317). Join other volunteers, rain or shine, to clean up the shore of the Potomac River at Marshall Hall Park. The site is located at the western end of Maryland Rt. 227, approximately five mi. from Rt. 210 at Bryans Road.

April 6—Wednesday—7:30 p.m. Monthly Meeting

Battle Creek Cypress Swamp Nature Center, Calvert County.

Birds and Bats in the Brazilian Amazon, by Gwen Brewer and George Jett, Southern Maryland Audubon Society. Explore the biodiversity of western Brazil through photographs from a 12-day, 400-mile journey by boat down the Amazon River and its tributaries. Over 200 species of birds and 28 species of bats were identified in the flooded forests. The natural history of this rich bird and bat fauna will be presented, together with a sampling of tropical plants, insects, reptiles, fish, and other mammals

April 9—Saturday—8 a.m. Field Trip

Izaak Walton League/Zekiah Swamp, Charles County.

Early Spring Grassland and Wetland Birds. Leader: Julie Daniel (301-274-5756, juliemdaniel@hotmail.com). Half-day trip. From Rt. 5, take Poplar Hill Road about 1.5 miles east, then right onto Gardiner Road. Go to the Izaak Walton Center at the end of Gardiner Road. This trip will include walks on

the Jordan-Zekiah Swamp boardwalk, along forest edges, and the adjacent fields to look for Barred owl, yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Brown Creeper, Kinglets, and numerous sparrow species.

April 16—Saturday—7 a.m. Field Trip

Flag Ponds Nature Park, Calvert County.

Spring Migrants and Wildflowers. Leaders: Sue Noble and Jack Leighty (410-535-5870, jleighty@chesapeake.net). Half-day trip. Greet spring by visiting one of the best wildflower displays in Southern Maryland. The varied habitat here also yields a nice variety of birds. From Rt. 2/4 about 10 mi. south of Prince Frederick, take Flag Pond Parkway to the entrance gate promptly at 7 a.m. Entrance fee applies.

Continued on page 5

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The deadline for the Osprey is the fifth of each month. Please send all short articles, reports, unique sightings, conservation updates, calendar items, etc. to the above address.

Southern Maryland Audubon Society
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In This Issue:

- Chasing an Owl Irruption
- Douglas Point Trail Open
- Reports From the Field