

The Osprey



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Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

WINTER BIRDING NEAR THE SOUTHWESTERN BORDER

by Dean Newman

[*Editor's note: This is first part of a two part account in which Dean describes a whirlwind birding trip to New Mexico and Arizona this past January with old friend Roger and new friend Kevin.*]

Three friends, four mutual life birds, a rental car and 1600 miles of open road; does it get any better than that? That's the proposition Roger Clark, Kevin Calhoon, and I confronted as we rendezvoused in Albuquerque, NM, late Saturday night, this recent January 14.

Roger, from Jacksonville, FL, and I had been birding together for years as had he and Kevin, from Chattanooga, TN. Kevin and I had never met until this trip but I liked him instantly. It was immediately obvious that he, like Roger, was a "scratch" birder. I, on the other hand, was the weak link in the chain. Maybe I could earn my spot by furnishing the entertainment.

The trip had its genesis in a conversation Roger and I had had a year or so ago about all three species of rosy-finches congregating at a feeder at Sandia Crest, NM. This mountain top tourist trap is 20 miles east of Albuquerque and is an easy drive year round. Appearance in Phoenix of a Streak-backed Oriole, endemic to northern Mexico, provided the impetus that tipped us from talk to implementation. One day, without as much as a warning phone call, Roger's flight itinerary was on my email with a terse note implying, "Fish or cut bait". I scrambled to find an airline ticket.

If you remember my article on SE Arizona in the October and November, 2004 issues of *The Osprey*, you met Roger then. His motto, "You can sleep after you get home" hasn't changed. We were in the local Carl's Junior restaurant (the West's equivalent to Hardee's—Roger's feelings about eating mirror that of his feelings about sleeping) long before first light. With three sacks full of breakfast burritos and the smiling send off of a large toothless woman casting admiring eyes on Kevin, we were out the door.

Sandia Crest is one of the highest peaks in the Sandia Mountains with a restaurant and souvenir shop at the very top, reached by following NM 536 to its very end. [See also Tyler Bell's account in the April 2004 issue.—Ed.] From the airport, it takes 45 minutes to reach the peak. Forget all the stuff you hear about ski resorts, ski lifts and trams. Just drive until the road ends, get out of the car, walk inside, order a hot chocolate and wait for the finches to show. The owners maintain feeders outside the restaurant's windows and the finches mob them in the winter months. Within minutes of arriving at Sandia Crest we had all three species of rosy-finches plus a prominent subspecies, the Hepburn's Rosy-Finch. Excellent directions and ID tips along with a

recent sightings log can be found at <http://www.rosyfinch.com>".

Three quarters of the trip's mission accomplished and I wasn't bleeding nor had I wrecked a rental car—piece of cake! (See my article "Chasing an owl irruption in Minnesota" in the April 2005 issue to understand that last sentence.) We were off to Phoenix, AZ and the oriole.

We can say from experience that Phoenix is a hard eight hours drive from Albuquerque. Everyone told us it was six and a half, but we took interstate routes and drove "speed limit plus", only stopping for necessities, and that's how long it took us to get there. Upon arrival it was too late to chase the oriole and, much to Roger's chagrin, we had no choice but to bed down early.

The pre-dawn light found us in the parking lot of Phoenix's Riparian Institute, better know as Gilbert Water Ranch (<http://www.riparianinstitute.org/about.html>). Like Tucson's Sweetwater Wetland, Phoenix has taken their waste water treatment facility and landscaped it into a series of natural ponds, which are bird magnets. The fact that there are so many birds and they are so acclimated to humans makes this place a photographer's paradise.

The park has constructed burrows for Burrowing Owls and they were everywhere. Roger found a Least Bittern right away. After another two hours of amazing bird photography, Kevin spotted the Streak-backed Oriole in a low bush 15 feet from where we were standing. For the next 20 minutes we were treated to excellent looks as the bird fed, apparently undisturbed by our presence. After all the effort we had made to get there, we almost wished that the bird had played a little harder to get.

Flush with success and noting our close proximity (30-40 miles) to the western terminus of Baseline Rd., a known LeContes Thrasher hot spot, I persuaded Roger and Kevin to help me fill this persistent hole in my life list. This bird has been my nemesis for years; costing me untold (at least to my wife) amounts of money and time as I chased it through four states.

Roger had read a post from Maricopa Audubon that said the thrashers were on territory and singing. He kept bringing up quotes about how they (Maricopa) said the thrashers were trash birds. Every time he mentioned that, our speed—I was driving—jumped five mph. Kevin kept countering that, of the many LeContes Thrashers he'd seen, he'd never seen one after 7:00 a.m. It was now 10:30. By the time we approached the fabled spot we were barely under warp speed. To say I was frantic was an understatement.

I shouldn't have worried. The thrashers were running around the place like quail. Within a hundred yards of the car, we'd seen four. (OK, that doesn't sound like "quail" but for LeContes Thrasher, that's a pretty dense concentration.)

They'd stop in the open spots between creosote bushes, showing their deeply curved bill, then, lifting their tail, show off their bright rufous crissals (nice word for under-tail coverts). I felt ridiculous, in the midst of such a plethora, explaining to the two of them how hard I'd tried to find this bird. (*To be continued*)

MARYLAND/DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA BREEDING BIRD ATLAS PROJECT NEEDS VOLUNTEERS

by George M. Jett

The Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS), in cooperation with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and other conservation groups like the Southern Maryland Audubon Society (SMAS), is in the last year of the five-year breeding bird atlas field season. The study began in 2002 and runs through the 2006 bird breeding season. The project using volunteer help maps in detail the distribution of all birds that breed in Maryland and DC .

The SMAS region comprises Calvert, Charles, southern Prince George's, and St. Mary's counties. Each county has volunteer coordinators (see below). Although much valuable information was collected during the first four years, there is still a great need for assistance during the final year. The project needs data on all species, but especially on nocturnal (active during the night) birds like Whip-poor-wills, owls, bitterns, and rails.

Data are collected by volunteers in one of 1200 blocks which overlay the map of Maryland and DC. A block is an area of several miles square. The volunteer goes into the block and collects data for possible, probable, and confirmed breeders. Most birds in our region breed from March through September. Many blocks in the SMAS region have had good coverage, but others have had no coverage. Most blocks currently contain some documented species. Your house is within one of the blocks, and you could collect data at home, at a friend's, or further afield. Much more information is needed, and this means more volunteers like you. Bird around your house or around your region. Either way you will be helping the birds.

Breeding bird atlas data collection is really neat, and is my favorite kind of birding. You are studying the life cycle of the bird, and may be contributing to future survival of the species. The data may tell us how healthy the particular bird species is, and can be useful to planners in preserving habitat.

If you want to volunteer, have volunteered in the past, or are just interested, please contact your county atlas coordinator(s). They are:

Calvert: Arlene Ripley (301-855-2828) arleneripley@comcast.net

Charles: George Jett (301-843-3524) gmjett@comcast.net
George Wilmot (301-375-8552) gwilmot@radix.net

Prince George's: Fred Fallon (301-249-1518) fwfallon@earthlink.net

St. Mary's: Patty Craig (301-872-5670) eyrie@direcway.com
Kyle Rambo (301-757-0005) kyle.rambo@navy.mil

You can find more information on the Breeding Bird Atlas project at www.mdbirds.org. Many thanks to those who have volunteered, but we can use everyone's help in this last year of data collection to improve accuracy of our atlas database.

MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

Spring is here, and so is a great opportunity to take advantage of SMAS outdoor activities! Thanks to the many talented birders and field trip leaders in our group, there are many chances in April and May for you to get out and enjoy the birds (and even plants). Field trips are a great way to learn about new places or enjoy revisiting familiar ones while enjoying the company of folks who share your interest in nature. It is also an opportunity to improve your field identification skills, both sight and sound. There is no better way to learn these skills than to be out in the field with knowledgeable folks that can help point out what to look for and what to listen for to identify birds. Interesting aspects of animal behavior often come to light as well, especially as it gets closer to the breeding season. Picture bald eagles grappling in mid-air, a wood duck female escorting her brood of downy young, a belted kingfisher plummeting into the water to catch a small fish, or a brilliantly-colored scarlet tanager singing its heart out from a high branch. You never know what interesting things you might see- maybe even a bird species that you have never seen before. And on some trips, someone even brings treats! Birders of all levels are welcome on all trips. Feel free to bring along a friend or a young person who might enjoy this kind of outing.

Other field activities that you can take advantage of include participating in county-wide May counts, helping with trail maintenance at the SMAS sanctuary property in Nanjemoy, working on the Potomac River clean-up or other outdoor conservation activities, and assisting with the Breeding Bird Atlas, which is in its last year (see preceding article).

Many people join SMAS because of their love of nature. Take the time for something that you love- go on field trips, collect information on birds, or help with a service project. Get out there and enjoy the great outdoors of Southern Maryland with SMAS!

Gwen Brewer, gjbrewer@comcast.net, 301-843-3524

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

A white Black Vulture in Calvert County by Andy Brown

The sighting of an albino Black Vulture at the Calvert County Landfill in the fall by Tom Harten was exciting news, but, it had been frequenting the Gateway restaurant on Broomes Island Rd for the previous several months. Apparently local deer hunters dispose of their carcasses in the restaurant's dumpster which attracts as many as 70 vultures at a time in the morning hours. This bird could often be seen perched on the roof of the restaurant. The establishment owner was

quite taken by the bird to the point that he left food out for the mob. A conversation with one of the county maintenance workers revealed that this bird had been around for at least two years.

**Indian Creek NRMA, Charles County, Sunday, Oct. 2
by Julie Daniel**

Five birders came along for the field trip to the Indian Creek NRMA. It was a beautiful fall morning to be outside enjoying nature. It was nice to see a large number of goldfinches feeding on a field of dried up sunflowers. We also saw all three of the mimics in the area, Northern Mockingbird, Gray Catbird, and Brown Thrasher. We saw a couple of interesting birds that we weren't sure about, possibly a female or immature tanager and an immature Blue Grosbeak. Also, one birder saw a Palm Warbler near the parking lot but he wasn't with the group at that point, so no one else got a look at it. We saw both Black and Turkey Vultures but only one raptor, a Red-Shouldered Hawk. Two types of gulls were flying over the soybean fields, Ring-billed and Laughing. The lack of rain probably accounted for not seeing any shorebirds, but we did see one Great Blue Heron fly by. Three sparrows sighted were Field Sparrow, Eastern Towhee, and a Song Sparrow. The only woodpecker was a Downy. The trip ended with a count of 24 species. Thanks to those birders who joined me for the walk, as I said it was a wonderful way to spend a lovely morning.

Aquasco Farm and Milltown Landing, Prince George's County, October 22, by Fred Shaffer.

A small group of birders from Patuxent MOS, PG Audubon, and Southern MD Audubon Society birded several locations along the Patuxent River. We stopped at Mount Calvert, Merkle, and Milltown Landing. Highlights from each stop included:

Mt. Calvert—Bald Eagle (3rd year), Northern Harrier (female), Accipiter sp. (large), Wilson's Snipe, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Palm Warbler, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Swamp Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrows, Wood Ducks, Blue-winged Teal, Great Egret, and many Forster's Terns.

Merkle—31 Green-winged Teal, more Wilson's Snipe, Greater Yellowlegs, and an American Kestrel

Milltown Landing—Eastern Towhee, Song Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, Slate-colored Junco, Savannah Sparrow, and Field Sparrow. Also several Eastern Bluebirds and an adult Bald Eagle. We also saw a very dark sparrow, with a gray face, and a bright, buffy sub-moustachial stripe, but did not see it well enough to be sure, but decided it was probably Lincoln's Sparrow. We saw good numbers of White-crowned Sparrows at both Mount Calvert and Milltown Landing, and got good looks at both adults and immatures.

Hard Bargain Farm Field Trip, November 5, by Chris Ordiway

The trip to Hard Bargain Farm had 10-12 folks show up (I forgot to count) including George Wilmot and several other

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**VOLUNTEERS NEEDED TO HELP MANAGE
BLM'S PROPERTY AT DOUGLAS POINT**

by George Wilmot

At the Nanjemoy Vision meeting on March 4 at the Nanjemoy Community Center, officials of the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) presented the Land Unit Implementation Plan prepared by these agencies for their properties in the Douglas Point area. The BLM property (548 acres) is on the west side of Rt. 224 along the Potomac River. DNR properties in this plan include Purse State Park (149 acres), 715 acres in the Douglas Point area east and west of Rt. 4, and the Wilson Farm property at Mallows Bay (509 acres). The goal of the plan is to maintain these properties in their present natural state, but to provide better public access by improving existing foot trails and providing more parking space along Rt. 224.

Jeff McCuster of BLM said that BLM is seeking volunteers to help with the development and maintenance of the trails on the Douglas Point property. Anyone interested in volunteering for BLM, or wanting more information, can telephone Jeff at 703-339-3463 or write to him at Bureau of Land Management, Lower Potomac Field Station, 10406 Gunston Road, Lorton, VA 22079.

WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

Joseph Bow, California
Wilmeta Chance, La Plata
Jenifer Holt, California
Margaret Jenkins, Mechanicsville
Aniachi Belu John, Prince Frederick
Veronica Johnson, Great Mills
Rita Leggett, Temple Hills
Mr-Ms Emerson Markham, Temple Hills
Christiaan Meerman, Dunkirk
Aubrey Mumford, Lusby
Ruth Peterson, Lusby
Elizabeth Purple, Hollywood
Paul Reid, Prince Frederick
Diane Reyno, Owings
Donald Roe, Ft Washington
Michael P. Smith, Dunkirk
Mr-Ms W.L. Sorrells, Callaway
John Spinicchia, Ridge
Donna Syring, California
Elena Whipple, Lusby
Gerald Wigger, Mechanicsville
Joshua Wilbanks, St Leonard

regulars. We had a beautiful sunny day with temperatures increasing from about 55 up to 75 degrees at lunchtime. We birded Hard Bargain Farm, the hay fields, the boardwalk of Piscataway Park and back up through the swamp along Accokeek Creek. Best finds of the day would have to be a Hermit Thrush calling quietly from the lower branches of a tree, a Great Crested Flycatcher that stumped us all for a few minutes (it's late for him) and then some of the waterfowl on the River. Some of them were recent arrivals who hadn't been on the river the weekend before. Besides the Hermit Thrush and Great Crested Flycatcher, notable finds included Pileated, Red-bellied, Hairy, and Downy Woodpeckers, Northern Flicker, Mallard, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Northern Shoveler, Ruddy Duck, Greater Scaup, Lesser Scaup, Ring-necked Duck, and American Coot. We had a total of 42 species for the trip, I usually only have 30-35 on the same walk so I think we did rather well.

Calvert County Chase Trip, January 21, by Tyler Bell

For the third week of January, the temperature when we met in Prince Frederick was relatively balmy. Over the course of the day, the temp climbed to 65 degrees! The tradeoff for being comfortable was that it was extremely windy.

The ten of us watched a voracious group of Cedar Waxwings feeding on crabapples and holly berries in the parking lot. Then we piled into 4 cars and headed for North Beach. There we scoped out most of the expected waterfowl from the pier behind the Rod and Reel restaurant. The surprise here was that all of the swans were Tundra Swans. A stop at North Beach yielded more ducks including a flock of about 20 Black Scoters and a couple of Surf Scoters. We did not find a White-winged Scoter all day.

We stopped at the bridge on Rt. 231 to look for ducks. There were some mutant mallards there but the large flocks that are usually easy to spot were nowhere. The wind surely had something to do with that!

Heading south, we stopped on Lloyd Bowen Rd. where the usual canvasbacks were absent. We did manage to find several Brown-headed Nuthatches twittering in some loblolly pines near the end of the road. We never got a visual on them as the trees were swaying too much. This is the same location where I had found one several years ago while counting waterfowl.

Finally we found some ducks in the large pond on the west side of Jefferson Patterson Park. There were about 20 Ring-necked Ducks, mostly males. Everyone got excellent looks at these handsome birds.

We got a bit of rain while driving to Turner Rd. to look for geese. Last year, Dean Newman and I had gone down there and talked to a landowner who was feeding the geese. There were thousands. This year there were none. But we did manage to get decent looks at some Horned Larks that were feeding in the plowed stubble.

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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
ATTN: Adoption Program
P.O. Box 181
Bryans Road, Maryland 20616**

ADOPT AN OSPREY

Name: _____

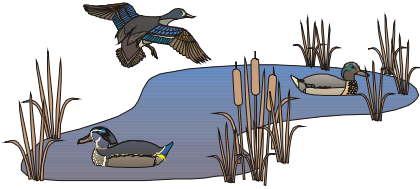
Address: _____

Amount Enclosed: _____



Our final stop was in Solomons by Our Lady Star of the Sea church. We didn't add anything new but got amazingly close to a Long-tailed Duck (formerly Oldsquaw) that was swimming near the little bridge. The wind was blowing his tail plumes up over his head!

In spite of the wind, we managed to tally 58 species. Not bad for a 2/3 day field trip where we spent no time in woodlands where we could have easily picked up many more species. Still, a very comfortable January day!



Events continued from page 6

April 29—Saturday—8:00 a.m. **Field Trip**
Douglas Point, Charles County. **Residents and Migrants.**
Leader: Gwen Brewer (301-843-3524, glbrewer@comcast.net). Half-day trip. Looking for early warblers, woodpeckers, waterfowl, and sparrows. Excellent way to meet the returning neotropical migrants and get some early practice on identifying bird songs. Meet in strip mall parking lot in La Plata opposite the Methodist Church on the corner of Rte. 6 and Rte. 301. No facilities and no fee.

BOOK REVIEWS

Identify Yourself: the 50 most common birding identification challenges, by Bill Thompson, illustrated by Julie Zickefoose, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York (2005). \$19.95.

If you're a beginning or intermediate birder, I recommend Bill Thompson's book to help you pick out distinguishing field marks on the 50 most common bird ID challenges. A reviewer in *Birding Magazine* recently panned it, but I suspect some birding snobs would look down their noses at Roger Tory Peterson if he were to come back and write a new book. They may feel obligated to find some fly in every ointment. Unlike that reviewer, however, I found the book very informative and readable. The language isn't ornithological. It is not going to take on the real hard stuff, but then it's not written for those with life lists over 500, either. If you're under 400 species I can't think of a better book to add to your library.

You can probably find a lower price than listed by searching on the internet. I routinely save 50 to 70% off cover price including shipping.—*Dean Newman* California, MD

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 at the Introductory Offer. My membership will also include membership in the Southern Maryland Audubon Society. I will receive National's *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 5—Wednesday—7:30 p.m. **Monthly Meeting**
Clearwater Nature Center, Cosca Regional Park, Clinton, Prince George's County. **Shade-grown Coffee: The migratory Bird Connection** by Russ Greenberg, Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. Shade-grown coffee plantations play a key role in the conservation of migratory birds that have found a sanctuary in these forest-like environments. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center has been at the forefront of research into shade-grown coffee conservation issues, and encourages the production of shade-grown coffee through its Bird Friendly coffee program. Dr. Greenberg, Director of the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, has published extensively on this topic. He will discuss his efforts and those of the —Center to conserve migratory birds in coffee plantations. You can even do your part by purchasing shade-grown coffee from the SMAS bookstore!

April 8—Saturday—9:00 a.m. **Special Event**
Potomac River, at west end of Rte. 227, Charles County. **Potomac River Cleanup**. Leader: Bob Lukinic (301-283-6317, rlukinic@peoplepc.com). SMAS sponsors a site for the annual Potomac River Cleanup. Volunteers sign up in the parking lot at the west end of Rte. 227, Marshall Hall Road. Drinks, snacks, gloves, and trash bags are provided to volunteers. Help clean and restore the Potomac shoreline.

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

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April 15—Saturday—8:00 a.m. **Field Trip**
Flag Ponds Nature Park, Calvert County. **Spring Migrants and Wildflowers**. Leader: Sue Noble, Jack Leighty (410-535-5870, jleighty@chesapeake.net), and Sue Hamilton. 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 Rte. 2/4 about 10 miles south of Prince Frederick, take Flag Pond Parkway to the entrance gate by 8 a.m. sharp. Facilities and an entrance fee.

April 26—Wednesday—7:00 p.m. **Board of Directors Meeting** St. Mary's County Library, Charlotte Hall. Directors meetings are open to any member.

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

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