

The Osprey

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Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

MOCKINGBIRDS SOLVE A COUNTING PROBLEM

By Ernie Willoughby

The longer I study birds, the more highly I regard their mental abilities. I recently found an article describing experiments with wild, free-living Northern Mockingbirds (*Mimus polyglottos*) that demonstrated their ability to discriminate between numbers of objects in order to obtain food from a feeder. The article, "Numerical discrimination by wild Northern Mockingbirds" by George L. Farnsworth and Jennifer L. Smolinski of Xavier University, Cincinnati, Ohio, published in *The Condor*, volume 108, p 953-957 (2006), describes a simple experiment with five free-living mockingbirds on the campus of Xavier University.

The authors noted that previous studies had shown that some birds have remarkable abilities to discriminate between numbers of objects. They also noted that there is survival advantage for individuals who can obtain food with minimal expenditure of time and effort. Therefore, they asked whether wild Northern Mockingbirds occupying winter territories could discriminate between numbers of objects so as to minimize their effort and time to secure food from a puzzle box feeder.

The feeder of transparent Lucite had a platform inside that was held up by a number of bamboo sticks inserted through holes in the walls of the box at each end of the platform. Any number of sticks from one to six on each end would support the platform. The platform held a small glass dish with three succulent mealworm larvae (*Tenebrio molitor*) that mockingbirds readily accept at feeding stations. When all the sticks at one end were pulled out, the platform tipped, spilling the mealworms out of the box.

To teach the five experimental subjects how to operate the feeding apparatus, Farnsworth and Smolinski first set up an apparatus in each territory with the platform held up by one stick at each end. Besides the mealworms in the dish on the platform, visible through the Lucite walls of the box, there were mealworms on the outside of the box, and in a clear plastic bag attached to the end of one of the support sticks. When the bird pulled at the bag to get the worms, the stick would come out, and the platform would tip to release its mealworms. After about five trials, the investigators put six sticks at one end, and one at the other end. Now mealworms were only in the dish on the platform. Within about a month, all the mockingbirds consistently and immediately pulled out the one supporting stick to tip the worms out of the box. Finally, the trials could begin.

Each experiment was a series of trials with different numbers of sticks at each end, to see whether the birds could

consistently choose to pull first at the smaller number of sticks to get their rewards. When confronted with one stick versus six, or two versus five, birds in more than 72% of trials chose to pull first at the smaller number of sticks than the larger number, and quickly received their reward. When presented with three versus four sticks, however, the birds chose ends entirely at random, taking much longer to receive their rewards, as they frequently pulled some sticks from both ends before achieving success. They seemed not to realize the difference in number.

The authors caution, however, that this does not necessarily demonstrate that the birds cannot perceive a difference between three and four sticks, but only that the choice may not have been worth enough to the birds to induce them to discriminate. The authors speculate that if intervals between trials were lengthened so as to increase the penalty for choosing wrongly by increasing the difference in long-term profitability to the birds, they would be less tolerant of errors, and perhaps would then show a tendency to discriminate.

So we see that our familiar Northern Mockingbird is pretty smart, and we can find out some interesting things about "yard birds" with quite simple methods. Experiment, anyone?

CALLING VOLUNTEERS FOR ANNUAL POTOMAC RIVER CLEANUP

It is again time for the Potomac River Cleanup. This year's cleanup will be on Saturday, March 31 from 9:00 AM to 12:00 noon, rain or shine. The site at Marshall Hall Park is again being sponsored by our Southern Maryland Audubon Society. SMAS will furnish drinks and snacks. Representatives will be at the sign-in table and through the park to help with what ever is needed.

Gloves and trash bags are furnished through the Alice Ferguson Foundation and Charles County Public Works.

In previous years, many volunteers participated in the cleanup including students working on their community service requirements, scout troops, church groups, and businesses, as well as residents of all ages interested in the environment in which we live. Every year after the volunteers are done there is such a great difference in the appearance, safety, and usefulness of the shoreline. SMAS hopes that concerned residents will again show up to help heal the Potomac.

If you want further information please contact Site Coordinator, Bob Lukinic Telephone: 301-283-6317, E-mail: rlukinic@peoplepc.com

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

Point Lookout Christmas Bird Count, 26 December 2006, by Bob Boxwell

Where's the ducks!?! Rain had threatened the night before and the day ended up being mild, a bit breezy, and overcast. Although winter had officially arrived four days earlier, no one apparently mentioned this to the "wintering waterfowl". The mild fall all along the eastern seaboard made for some very low species counts and numbers. Diving duck species like the scaup, scoters, Goldeneye, Long-tailed Duck, and one lonely Ring-necked Duck showed up, but numbering in the tens and hundreds, rather than the hundreds and thousands. If you forget about our residential Black Ducks and Mallards, we were completely skunked on the puddle ducks!

We still ended up with 96 species (some results still out). We did well with owls finding all four residential species (the barn owls nesting in the Ridge area were found). The bird of the count was a white pelican found off Point Lookout by Kyle Rambo. This was probably from the flock hanging out at Assateague. Maybe it was checking out the brown pelican's invasion of St. Mary's County. Doug Lister and I found a dozen on a nesting platform off Webster Field. Anne Bishop and Jim Boxwell blew that number out with an amazing 57 birds loafing on the piers at the end of Wynn Road.

I would like to thank all the other participants for their time and effort. Christmas Counts are always better with company. After being ill for last year's count, it was nice to be out in the field. It would have been nicer with more birds, but those are the breaks. Wonder when winter's going to show up?

Fort Belvoir Christmas Bird Count, Maryland Side, 31 December 2006, by Carol Ghebelian

We participated in the Ft. Belvoir, VA Christmas Bird Count by surveying the Maryland Side of the count circle on Sunday, Dec. 31, 2006. We had eight teams of 24 birders afield, along with 4 feeder counters. Despite the warm weather of the season, we were still able to find our average count of 87 species and add 1 new species to our cumulative list. Gwen Brewer and George Jett found a Surf Scoter on the Potomac near National Colonial Farm, bringing our total species for this sector (begun in 1981) to 128. Other birds of note were 3 Tree Sparrows and 3 Greater Yellowlegs found by David Wilmot and John and Carrie Staples in Fenwick, and a Bonaparte's Gull again frequenting the Piscataway Wastewater Treatment Plant. Unusual feeder birds were a pair of Baltimore Orioles at Dave Brenneman's in Ft. Washington, and a Yellow-throated Warbler at the Ghebelian's in Indian Head. Both species have frequented the feeders since mid-November. The total individuals, 17,152, was lower than usual due to the fewer waterfowl numbers this season. Chris Ordiway's team at Hard Bargain's Piscataway Creek found the only Gadwall (440), American Wigeon (245), and the large raft of American

Coot (2000). It is interesting that Black Vultures outnumbered Turkey Vultures. Northern Bobwhite remain missing, as were Red-headed Woodpecker and Rusty Blackbird, all species of concern. Anecdote *du jour* went to the Ft. Washington team's sighting of a Cooper's Hawk taking a small bird in flight. We were pleased to have 5 volunteers from neighboring states who enjoy helping out in Southern Maryland.

12th Annual Patuxent River Christmas Bird Count (2006-2007) 31 December 2006, by Doug Lister

We completed year 12 this count and had some great contributions to our overall species total. Fourteen souls braved pleasant weather conditions to spend the day in pursuit of humankind's most frustrating obsessive compulsive disorder. Our numbers were good, solid, middle of the road tallies for the past 12 years with 97 species and 19,784. Most expected species showed up in some form or another with count high numbers for Pied-billed Grebe (tied with 4), a whopping 85 Black Vultures, and 171 Turkey Vultures. Waterfowl were notably light in numbers, but our great Ruddy Duck competition had a good mid-range showing for the 12 year count with slightly over 5,000 individuals. We also tallied 10 Wild Turkey, 1 Palm Warbler, and 107 American Pipits to round out circle high counts. A Baltimore Oriole, our second record in 12 years, was at a feeder in Town Creek.

We had some pretty big misses this trip, not through lack of trying, but we did miss Great-horned Owl, Red-breasted Nuthatch and Golden-crowned Kinglet for the first time in 12 years. Also, I'm curious how we only came up with 61 Long-tailed Ducks. I remember counting Oldsquaws by the thousands in years past. Perhaps the name change offended them? And the horror of all horrors, we had more Mute Swans (22) than Tundra Swans (19). Somebody really ought to do something about that.

The neatest additions to the count were three new species, Brown-headed Nuthatch, Nelson's Sharp-tailed Sparrow and Marsh Wrens. If we throw in both Domestic Goose and Muscovy Duck we come up with a pretty darn impressive 12 year species total.

Allen's Fresh and Cobb Island, 20 January 2006 by George Jett

On January 20 twelve hardy souls braved the cold winds to search for winter waterfowl, woodpeckers, and sparrows from Allen's Fresh to Cobb Island. We had a fair to poor day with the wind keeping many of the songbirds out of sight and sound. The total tally for the day was 53 species and included twelve species of waterfowl, five species of woodpeckers, and seven species of sparrows.

Waterfowl highlights were Greater and Lesser Scaup, Oldsquaw, Black and Surf Scoter, American Goldeneye, and one Red-breasted Merganser. Highlights for the woodpeckers were Yellow-bellied Sapsucker and Pileated. Sparrows of note were Eastern Towhee, Field, Savannah, and Swamp Sparrows.

Other than the common Bald Eagles, raptors were very hard to come by. Others included Northern Harrier, a largish accipiter, and a Kestrel along the way. We found both Black and Turkey Vultures.

The water level at Allen's Fresh was very low from the hard and steady north winds, but we found only two species of shorebirds, three Wilson's Snipe, and the expected Killdeer. We found only Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed Gulls. Blackbirds were well represented (four species) with Eastern Meadowlark being our highlight.

Amazingly we did not locate a number of common resident and expected wintering species. They included most of the dabbling ducks (e.g. American Wigeon, Pintail), Red-shouldered & Red-tailed Hawks, Belted Kingfisher, Hairy Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Fox Sparrow, and Purple Finch. Where oh where have all the birdies gone?

Thanks to those who came along. All had a good time.

THE LUTHER GOLDMAN BIRDING TRAIL A PROGRESS REPORT

*By Rich Dolesh and Maureen Blades,
Luther Goldman Birding Trail Committee,
Prince Georges Audubon Society*

A few months ago, a group of friends and former colleagues of the late Luther Goldman proposed plans for a birding trail on public lands as a memorial tribute to this renowned wildlife biologist, photographer, nature tour leader, and beloved longtime member of the Prince Georges Audubon Society. We are pleased to report that on September 21, 2006, the Prince George's County Planning Board unanimously approved designating a portion of existing trails of the Anacostia Tributary Trail System at Lake Artemesia near College Park, MD, as the Luther Goldman Birding Trail. This 2-mile trail, which is on parklands of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC), will start at the entrance to Lake Artemesia, loop around the lake and its wetlands, and extend up Indian Creek, returning to the parking lot at the entrance to the park.

Lake Artemesia is an unusual and interesting site. Historic goldfish ponds once present on the site were reconstructed into a large lake with shallow water wetlands as part of the excavation of track bed material for construction of Metro. Lake Artemesia is situated near the floodplain of the upper Anacostia River, and this beautifully landscaped and environmentally diverse site is excellent bird habitat and draws a diverse range of species on a year round basis. Luther Goldman lived in nearby Berwyn Heights and loved to bird this area regularly. He contributed many records to the bird checklist for this site.

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FOSTER PARENTS NEEDED



Southern Maryland Audubon Society sponsors the banding of nestling birds of prey, or raptors, with serially numbered aluminum bands in cooperation with the Bird Banding Laboratory of the U. S. Department of the Interior, as part of our bird research and conservation activities in Southern Maryland. Limited numbers of Osprey and Barn Owl nestlings become available each year for adoption. The gift of \$10 for an Osprey adoption, or of \$25 for a Barn Owl adoption, contributes to a special fund for the support of raptor research and raptor conservation projects. The foster parent receives:

- A certificate of adoption with the number of the U. S. Department of the Interior band, and the location and date of the banding.
- Information on the ecology and migration patterns of the species, photo of a fledgling, and any other information on whereabouts or fate of the bird that may be available.

Interested? Here's how to become a foster parent of an Osprey or a Barn Owl. Send \$10.00 for each Osprey, or \$25 for each Barn Owl to:

**Southern Maryland Audubon
Society
ATTN: Adoption Program
11350 Budds Creek Rd.
Charlotte Hall, Maryland 20622**



ADOPT A RAPTOR

Name: _____

Address: _____

I wish to adopt (check one):

_____ (number of) Osprey, \$10.00 each

_____ (number of) Barn Owl, \$25.00 each

Amount Enclosed: _____

(Make checks payable to:

Southern Maryland Audubon Society)

A number of volunteers from local birding clubs and conservation organizations are donating their time and talents to making the project a reality. The Luther Goldman Birding Trail committee is working with Park and Planning staff on design of signs, a trail map, a brochure and a comprehensive bird checklist. A dedication ceremony is planned for the late spring or early summer. Dave Mozurkewich with support from other knowledgeable birders will write a detailed birding site guide. Don Messersmith is researching a history of birding in Prince George's County, which will go into the guide and other educational materials for the trail. Rich Dolesh and Maureen Blades are working with Park and Planning on text for interpretive and entrance signs.

The birding trail will have an entrance sign commemorating Luther's life and work. It will include a map of the 2.2 mile trail, and have brochures and bird checklists at the entrance. In support of this project, the MNCPPC will install nine interpretive signs along the trail on songbirds, waterfowl, mammals, fish and other natural history topics of interest. This first-of-its-kind birding trail in the Anacostia watershed could serve as a catalyst for a larger Anacostia River Birding Trail. Many birders in the metropolitan DC area have expressed interest in an Anacostia Birding Trail. If you are interested in this concept, please contact Rich Dolesh at dolesh@erols.com

Now, that the Luther Goldman Birding Trail has been officially approved and a tax-exempt charitable organization has agreed to accept donations for the project, your donations are welcome. Contributions are needed to complete this project. No contribution is too small. Want to help? Individuals and groups may mail a check to: Prince George's Audubon Society, P.O. Box 2598, Laurel, MD 20709-2598. Please mark your memo line: Luther Goldman Birding Trail or LGBT. For more information, contact Maureen Blades at 301-262-5148 (mblades@comcast.net), or Rich Dolesh at 202-887-0290 (w) (dolesh@erols.com).

TEACHERS, NATURALISTS, ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATORS: APPLY NOW FOR A SCHOLARSHIP TO A MAINE AUDUBON SUMMER WORKSHOP

Southern Maryland Audubon Society is accepting scholarship applications for the Workshop for Educators, or other workshops, offered at Maine Audubon's Hog Island camp. Week long summer workshops begin on June 19 and end on September 15.

Go to <http://maineaudubon.org> for information on the workshops.

Teachers, naturalists and environmental educators working in Calvert, Charles, southern Prince George's and St. Mary's Counties are eligible to apply for the scholarship.

Your one page application should state your name, home and work address, phone numbers, and email address. You should tell how the camp experience will increase your knowledge and enhance your teaching.

Your supervisor or principal must write a letter of recommendation.

March 27 is the deadline for Southern Maryland Audubon Society to receive your application and letter of recommendation.

The scholarship recipient will be selected by Board of Directors of Southern Maryland Audubon Society at their meeting on March 28.

The recipient will arrange for travel to the camp.

Send your application and letter of recommendation to:

Millie Kriemelmeyer
SMAS Education Chair
16900 Mattawoman Lane
Waldorf MD 20601-32801
Fax: 301-782-7615
milliek@radix.net



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Your name: _____ Amount donated \$ _____

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

MARCH EVENTS

March 3—**Saturday**—8:00 AM - noon. **Field Trip** Patuxent River Naval Air Station (NAS), St. Mary's County. **Late Winter Land Birds, Waterfowl.** Leader: Dean Newman (240-895-7321, dean.newman@verizon.net). Meet at the Park & Ride lot across the street from the Lexington Park Post Office on Tulagi Place. Past trips have produced Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting, Short-eared Owl, and waterfowl. **Call the leader for reservations and security details before February 28.** You must sign up for this trip in advance and provide your Social Security number. Facilities and no fee.

March 7—**Wednesday**—7:30 PM. **Monthly Meeting** Battle Creek Cypress Swamp Nature Center, Gray's Road off Sixes Road, Prince Frederick, Calvert County. **The Patuxent River** by Fred Tutman, Patuxent Riverkeeper. Explore the Patuxent River with Riverkeeper Fred Tutman and get insights on the science, the folklore, the history, and the ecology of the river. See Riverkeeper volunteers at work in the watershed with examples of some of the specific policies and issues he takes on. Learn about other Riverkeeper organizations in the region and around the world.

March 10—**Saturday**—8:00 AM - noon. **Field Trip** Jefferson Patterson Park, Calvert County. **Late Winter Birding.** Leader: Tyler Bell (301-862-4623, belljt@si.edu). Open fields and wooded areas can provide good land birding, and Patuxent River frontage provide close views of waterfowl. Tufted Duck and Eared Grebe have been found at this

location in the past. From Rte. 2/4 take Rte. 264 to Rte. 265. Follow Rte. 265 to the park. Meet leader at the parking lot across from the Visitor's Center. No facilities, no fee.

March 24—**Saturday**—7:30 AM –11:30 AM. **Field Trip** Merkle W.M.A., Prince George's County. **Ducks, Sparrows, and Early Migrants.** Leader: Fred Shaffer (301-952-3661, 1glaucousgull@aol.com). Merkle is a major staging area for waterfowl, riparian forest and wetland species, plus sparrows galore in the extensive fields. Meet leader at the MVA Mattawoman Beantown Park & Ride lot on Rte. 205. From Rte. 301, take Rte. 382 (Croom Road) east to St. Thomas Church Rd., turn at the church, and follow to Fenno Rd., which leads to the entrance to Merkle. Follow the signs to the visitors center. Facilities and no fee.

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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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