

# The Osprey

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*Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society*

## WHY I BIRD

by Dean Newman

I am a bird watcher—er, more accurately, a birder. Birders hate to be called “bird watchers”. They don’t want to be associated with Jane Hathaway, the eccentric, khaki-clad, pith-helmet-wearing spinster secretary to the bank president of the TV series, “Beverly Hillbillies”.

Admitting publicly that I watch birds is a sort of catharsis; like coming out of the closet. No more when accidentally meeting non-birding friends mid-excursion will I hastily cover mountains of optics and field guides and pretend that I’m doing something manly like four-wheeling or deer hunting. No more do I live in mortal fear of Baptist friends discovering there’s a card-carrying liberal environmentalist among them. I can now reach confidently into my mail box and boldly parade *Audubon Magazine* up the driveway, instead of sneaking it past neighbors stuffed between issues of *Field and Stream* and *American Hunter*. Take it from one who has lived a lie too long, there is freedom in the first five words of this essay.

Admitting that I watch birds is one thing, explaining why is another. I’m not sure an acceptable or understandable answer exists even though I’ve pursued this obsession most of my life. As I sit here and tick off things that I enjoy about birding they come off sounding rather masochistic.

For example, my wife and I live in uninterrupted marital bliss only during the months of July and February; the months that nothing happens of avian significance. From March through May we have migratory activity, June brings in the nesting season, shorebirding begins in early August, ducks arrive in November, Christmas bird counts in December and transient raptors arrive in January. At any time except during the two “safe months” the phone could ring, I could get an email or text message or fax stating there’s a rare bird in Kalamazoo, MI, and I’m off frantically scurrying for plane tickets. Birthdays, anniversaries and holidays are no exception.

Even without rare bird activity, I can’t remember the last leisure day that I slept through the sunrise. Our home life suffers from friends knocking on the door at all hours of the night as I depart for trips to West Virginia, Tennessee, Florida, even Texas once. Driving six pre-sunup hours to catch the dawn chorus hundreds of miles away is no obstacle. A quick peck on the cheek (to my wife, not friend) and a note stating, “Be back around midnight”, and I’m off.

At the heart of this lunacy is the “list”, more precisely the life list. The life list is the record each birder keeps of the different species seen in his or her birding life. My ABA

(American Birding Association) List currently stands at 578 species. There are 939 species in the ABA area which only includes the U.S. (excluding Hawaii) and Canada but not Mexico; go figure.

The overriding obsession for every birder is adding one more species to the life list. To this end, we charter helicopters at \$500 per hour to take us to the highest peaks of the Rocky Mountains for a glimpse of a Himalayan Snowcock; the only place in North America they reside. We charter three-day trips to inhospitable places like the Pribilof Islands in the Bering Sea, or Attu in the Aleutians for thousands of dollars, suffer through wind, cold, sleet, and rain to see Red-faced Cormorants or Horned Puffins. Birders endure endless hours of sea-sickness on sadistic pelagic excursions, lifting their heads from endless retching only long enough to tic off Pomarine Jaeger or Great Skua. Even more ludicrous, after the misery is over; we speak of “What a great trip!” in an effort to entice friends to join our suffering. Amazingly, we eventually believe our own lies and schedule future sea trips to garner species missed on the first brush with insanity. Birding has a lot in common with child-birth.

There’s nothing relaxing about birding. It’s an eternal struggle to list more species than your friends. The Biblical phrases “toil” and “strife” come to mind. If you don’t believe this, whisper to a birder that his closest birding companion added additional species to his list, making sure the number you whispered is one greater than the birders’ number. You will certainly whisper paroxysms of agony. Stand by when you utter those inciting words. Heaven and Hell are about to be moved to rectify an untenable situation. No amount of money, effort or sacrifice is too great to achieve this end.

Speaking of money, there’s nothing inexpensive about birding. Novices in complete naiveté would say, “Birds are all around us for everyone to enjoy.” They haven’t priced optics which birders consider a necessity for “enjoying birds.” Acceptable binoculars begin at \$300 and range upward of \$1500. Spotting scopes for checking out subjects at extreme distances are more expensive yet. The prevailing attitude among birders is that the more money you pay for optics the more life birds you’re likely to get; sort of like sacrificial offerings to a birding god. Also, birders believe they’ll never be taken seriously with cheap optics. They’re a badge of credibility regardless of the knowledge and skill behind them. At least these were arguments I used when convincing my non-birding spouse why I should upgrade my optics. I never said birders were intellectually or emotionally deep.

Adding to the expense are the clothes. What the average person doesn’t realize is that there’s a whole industry built around clothing for birders—think Christian Dior does

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camouflage. The next time you're outdoors look at the people you meet. I'll give you odds you can spot the birders; baggy clothes, zip-off pants, large floppy hats, boots and, if we're in deep grass, pants legs tucked into socks. The astounding thing to most non-birders is that each one of those "non-fashion" statements is wearing at a minimum \$200 worth of cloth, canvas and leather. That's without the pith helmet.

There's nothing healthy about birding. Think about it—long hours of sitting in the car transiting to bird's location, long hours of waiting statically and quietly for the bird's appearance, and a long sedentary trip home. The most work your heart gets is the anxiety created when your buddy sees the bird "plain as day" and you can't.

Complicating the health issue is the food birders eat. As I sit here and contemplate the favorite restaurants visited while pursuing this hobby, the hands-down choice is the Carl's Junior in Nogales, Arizona. Close behind is the Arby's in Socorro, New Mexico. I could list third through tenth choices but, for the sake of brevity, you get the idea. Birders love junk food and, combined with the sedentary activities described above, our waist lines reflect it. You'll never see serious birders looking like Lance Armstrong.

There are physical dangers if you bird. In twenty plus years of pursuing this neurosis I've been bitten, pecked, stabbed, raked with talons, flogged by a turkey, kicked by an ostrich, and coated by every type excrement a bird can expel. I've fallen off cliffs in the dark, wrecked nine rental cars, endured poison ivy, ticks, sunburn, sea-sickness and scorpion stings. I've been cussed out in eight languages, shot at in Alaska and chased out of a bar by right-wingers in Texas. Now just remind me again; what are the "benefits" of the great outdoors?

Why do I bird? Sigmund Freud would have a field day with that answer. He'd say I was potty trained too early (certainly not the case—ask my exasperated mother), had attractions to my sister (I don't have one), or am gender confused (don't tell my wife). Whatever the reason, it satisfies a need for self punishment, debasement and persecution that's innate within me. Obviously, subconsciously, I'm not happy unless I'm suffering. Come to think of it, maybe those "manly" sports of four-wheeling or deer hunting don't sound so bad.

## REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

### **Smallwood State Park, April 20, by Jean Artes**

This morning I went scouting for the following day's field trip, and in less than two hours found 42 species. Next day I hoped some better ears and eyes would find even more, since I was missing such expected things as Bald Eagle, Red-headed and Pileated Woodpeckers. Even so, I got close (10-15 feet away) looks at a Common Yellowthroat and a Louisiana Waterthrush. I saw several Ruby-crowned Kinglets and heard Northern Parula Warbler, White-eyed Vireo, and Ovenbird. Oddly I found no gulls or terns, grackles

or robins. But found Double-crested Cormorant and Northern Rough-winged, Tree and Barn Swallows. There was a small group of Lesser Scaup still lingering. I got a good view of a Swamp Sparrow and copulating Downy Woodpeckers. There were spring beauties just opening, waning bluets, jack-in-the-pulpits about 5 inches high, star chickweed, May apple with no flowers yet, and lovely little dark purple violets, which I love in the woods and hate in my flower beds. Ah, spring! Achool! Besides fishermen (there was a bass tournament) we'd see what tomorrow brought. There was promise of good weather. After being rained out three years in a row, this was good news.

### **Smallwood State Park, April 21, by Jean Artes**

There were a dozen of us this Saturday morning and I am please to tell you that three of us were under 15. Ina-Marie, one of our Youth Bird Camp alumni, Rueben and Brandon were all very serious birders. We had 48 species which outdid yesterday's list. American Coots, Mallards, Common Grackle, Dark-eyed Junco, Northern Mockingbird, Pine and Black-and-white Warblers, Caspian and Royal Terns, Turkey and Black Vultures, and Bald Eagles were added to the previous day's list. Unfortunately, we did not get the Wild Turkeys, Swamp Sparrow, House Wren, Great Horned Owl, and the Ruby-crowned Kinglets. The weather was absolutely wonderful. The company was great. What would have made for perfection would have been Cora Fulton sharing her wonderful homemade breads, or Carmen Anderson, or Shirley Wood with their equally wonderful breads, at the end of the trip. We miss their presence on these trips!

## **BIRDING LAFAYETTE, LOUISIANA, APRIL 2007**

*by Tyler Bell*

Jane Kostenko and I have been working American Birding Association conventions since 1994 when they were biennial. Since 1996 they've been annual, making the Lafayette convention our 12<sup>th</sup>. Attendance was light, less than 300 attendees compared to the usual 600-700. We discussed this at the convention and the only reason we could come up with is a mistaken perception that all of Louisiana was flattened by hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Lafayette happens to be between the paths of both and was virtually untouched.

We have birded in that area (Beaumont, Texas, just to the west) and had no target species for this trip, which made for a relaxing itinerary. So, on our first day of field trips, after we had loaded buses and the last one had departed, we headed south to New Iberia, to Avery Island and the Tabasco factory. The factory tour is free although the McIlhenny's charge you a dollar to get onto the island.

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There is an additional fee to get onto Avery Island which is basically an arboretum.

One of our focuses for the Avery Island tour was the egret colony. There is a large pond with wooden platforms well away from the pond edge. These platforms were covered with Great Egret nests with young from downy to almost fledged. The noise was quite interesting as the older young were very vocal in begging for food. There was some interesting behavior between a returning adult and its mate at the nest. They would call to each other on approach, then bob their heads and flare their plumes before the returning bird would disgorge the latest meal. In the cypress trees nearby were Snowy Egrets and Anhingas on nests.

On our second field trip day we did a swamp tour at Lake Martin which is only about 15 minutes from Lafayette. This was once a naturally flowing bayou that was dammed to make it a lake. The boat driver was a Cajun named Butch Gutchereau. He would describe things as we nosed the quiet 4-stroke-powered boat through the cypress trees. Occasionally he would lapse into French. The Cajun accent is unique! Anyway, we saw Black-crowned and Yellow-crowned Night-Herons on nests, and elsewhere across the lake, we saw Great Egrets and one pair of Roseate Spoonbills (or rosettes as Butch called them) on their nest.

Our final day of birding was in a local nature preserve. The first dinner speaker at the convention had told us that hackberry trees have the most bird species feeding in them. I can't remember the second, but pecan trees came in third. There were a couple of large pecan trees at the entrance to the park so we scanned the branches and found them crawling with Tennessee Warblers as well as a number of other species of warblers. So, if you're ever in the south in April, look in the pecan trees. Apparently there is a hairless worm that erupts shortly after the leaves start growing and the birds coming across the Gulf of Mexico know it. Yum!

So despite the low number of attendees, the convention was a birding success. There was a total of 238 species for the week. Our total was much lower but we weren't trying very hard. It's nice to be in a place where you can see Roseate Spoonbills and Mississippi Kites flying by your hotel room window! I highly recommend a trip to Louisiana or eastern Texas in late April. There's nothing quite like seeing trans-gulf migrants come streaming in off the water in early afternoon.



## 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: \_\_\_\_\_  
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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)

## NOMINATIONS FOR 2007 OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS

by Bob Lukinic, Nominating Committee Chairman

The nominees are:

President - Gwen Brewer

She has served for 2 years and has agreed to be nominated for one more year-long term.

Vice-President – George Jett

He now serves as chair of the field trip committee.

Treasurer- Will Daniel

Will now serves as our treasurer.

Secretary – Matt Dement

Matt now serves as secretary, agrees to stand for reelection.

Director – Bob Lukinic

Bob is serving as Director and agrees to be nominated again.

Director – Chris Ordiway

Chris is a relatively new member of SMAS. He is a naturalist at Hard Bargain Farm in Southern Prince Georges County.

We all want to thank the members who are leaving the board.

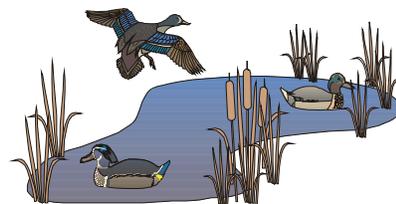
Julie Daniel had to give up her spot as vice-president because of the arrival of twin girls at the beginning of May. We are sorry to see her leave, but equally pleased that she and Treasurer/husband, Will, have two new, healthy family members.

Marsha Pugh has asked to be replaced in her expiring director position. She served as director and chair of the Hospitality Committee. We will miss her input on running SMAS and her help providing refreshments at the monthly meetings.

Voting on all nominees will be take place at the Annual Meeting on June 3.. Nominations for any of the above positions remain open, and may be made now and during the Annual Meeting until nominations are closed by vote of the members..

## 2007 CONSERVATIONIST OF THE YEAR AWARD

The Board of Directors has selected Dr. James P. Long of Accokeek as our 2007 Conservationist of the Year. The Conservationist of the Year Award will be presented at the Annual Meeting on June 3. Although a physicist by profession, he is interested in natural history and has spent many years studying the spawning of anadromous fish in the Mattawoman Creek. He founded Friends of Mattawoman Creek in 1992, now expanded to the Mattawoman Watershed Society, and works tirelessly to protect that valuable resource from further degradation. At Chapman Forest he conducted many botanical, aquatic, and living resource studies that contributed to the property's purchase by the state in 1998.



### “GREEN IS KLEEN” CLOTH BAG FUNDRAISER

Would you like to reduce your use of plastic bags? Lee Duer of the Wild Bird Center in Waldorf, a great supporter of SMAS, will sell cloth bags at his store imprinted with the slogan that he has developed, “Green is Kleen!.” These high-quality bags are made of 10 oz. recycled cotton in a natural color, are the size of a large grocery bag (18 in. W X 17.5 in. H X 7 in.), and have a 25 inch handle so that they can go over the shoulder. The price will be \$9.95, with \$3 of every sale donated to SMAS. The bags are expected to be in stock near the end of May.

The Wild Bird Center is located in the Waldorf Shoppers World Shopping Center, between Borders Books and Radio Shack.



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## JUNE EVENTS

June 3—**Sunday**—1:30 PM. **Annual Meeting and Potluck Lunch**

Greenwell State park, Steerhorn Neck Road off Sotterly Road (Rte 245), Hollywood, St. Mary's County. Potluck Lunch 1:30-3:00; Host's Briefing 3:00-3:30; Election and Business Meeting 3:30-4:00; Bird Walk and Canoe Trips 4:00-5:00. Bring your family, friends, and a favorite dish and join us at scenic Greenwell State park in St. Mary's County, where we will enjoy views of the Patuxent River and access to the beach for wading and fishing. There is a canoe/kayak launch, so bring your canoe or kayak and plan to explore the river after our business meeting. Directions: From Rte 235 turn east on Rte 245 (Sotterly Road) and travel 2.5 miles to Steer Horn Neck Road. Turn right and drive 0.8 miles to the park entrance. Follow the "SMAS" signs to the covered pavilion.

June 9—**Saturday**—8 to 11 AM. **Field Trip**

Myrtle Grove WMA, Charles County. **Birding for All Levels.** Leader: Fred Burggraf (301-934-8042, [fburggraf@aol.com](mailto:fburggraf@aol.com)). Three-hour trip to look for hawks, sparrows, woodpeckers, and nesting birds. Great for beginning birders! From Rte 301 in La Plata, take Rte 225 west about 4.5 miles to the WMA on the right. From Rte 210 take Rte 225 east about 4 miles to the WMA on the left. Follow the dirt road to the end (about a mile) and meet in the parking lot near the lake. No facilities and no fees.

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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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