



<https://www.3rbc.org>

# *The Peregrine*

## *Three Rivers Birding Club Newsletter*

Vol. 24, No. 2 March/April 2025

### Pennsylvania's 3rd Bird Atlas: Celebrating the First Year!!

We are excited to report that the featured speaker at the next 3RBC meeting on April 2<sup>nd</sup> will be Amber Wiewel, coordinator of the Pennsylvania Bird Atlas 3, combining a breeding bird atlas (our third) and a wintering bird atlas (our first ever).

Amber's talk will give all of us a general intro to the Atlas, including the very basics of participating, and she will share with us the results of the first year, including both the breeding and winter seasons.

Amber grew up in Missouri where she fell in love with birds in the Ozarks. She received her bachelor's degree from the University of Missouri and studied birds and other wildlife in Missouri, California, Puerto Rico, and western Africa before earning a master's degree from Iowa State University. She worked as a wildlife biologist for the US Geological Survey in Maryland and Pennsylvania before taking on the role of Pennsylvania Bird Atlas Coordinator in 2023.

This will be a hybrid meeting starting "live" in Beechwood Farms at 6:30 PM (ET) and a Zoom presentation starting at 7:00 PM (ET) giving you time to log on. The business meeting will begin at 7:30 PM, and Amber's program will start around 8:00 PM. Details on how to join the Zoom event, will be supplied a few days before the meeting.

Here are some useful web pages that explain the goals and participant instructions for the Pennsylvania Bird Atlas 3:

- <https://ebird.org/atlaspa/home> (the data entry portal for PBA3)
- <https://bit.ly/atlasgamecommission>
- <https://bit.ly/atlashawkmountain>
- <https://pabirds.org/pa-atlas/>



### Winter Bird Photos from the Field



*IMMATURE BALD EAGLE INTENTLY OBSERVING A DEER CARCASS IN THE SNOW IN NORTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA IN FEBRUARY. PHOTO BY DAVID ROHM, WILD EXCELLENCE FILMS (SHOT ON 4K VIDEO WITH SONY FX3)*



*DAN MENDENHALL PHOTOGRAPHED THIS IMMATURE COOPER'S HAWK WHEN IT LANDED UNEXPECTEDLY IN THE JANUARY SNOW AT BEECHWOOD FARMS NATURE RESERVE IN FOX CHAPEL.*

### Future 3RBC Meetings

- June 4, 2025: Kenn Kaufmann- Topic TBA
- August 6, 2025 Tom Kuehl - Birding Across Africa



*PENNSYLVANIA BIRD ATLAS 3 PROJECT COORDINATOR, AMBER WIEWEL (PHOTO PROVIDED BY OUR SPEAKER)*

See *The Peregrine* in beautiful color at [3rbc.org](https://www.3rbc.org)

## President's Message

### The Last Curlew and Extinction

I remember when I was a kid in the 1970s, there was a series of programs on television called *After School Specials*. I don't remember the frequency of these shows, but they were regularly televised. The topics varied and were made to teach kids about various subjects to broaden our horizons and learn valuable life lessons.

I remember one program related to birds (of course I would remember that one): *The Last of the Curlews*, based on the 1954 book of the same name by Fred Bodsworth. The fictional story followed a pair Eskimo Curlews migrating to their breeding grounds and the challenges of migration that all birds face, finding food, bad weather, etc. I gather Curlew hunting was permitted at the time, and in the end, one of the birds was shot. It hung on with its mate for a bit but later succumbed to its injury, leaving its mate as the last surviving curlew. A sad ending. The episode was on YouTube years ago, but now I can only find clips of the film. The comments from viewers mention how upset they were by the ending when they watched it as kids.

I recently read the species account on Cornell's Birds of the World online to learn about the birds' natural history. The information is limited because so much is unknown, but it provides a window into a species that is very likely extinct. While the story in the book was fictional, the final outcome of the Eskimo Curlew is a reality and one that many rare species continue to face today.

Extinction is awful, but we can make efforts to preserve other species so they remain as part of the world's natural heritage. Years ago I attended a lecture by Canadian wildlife artist Robert Bateman, and during his lecture he talked about conservation. One of the suggestions he made regarding how individuals can help was to join five conservation organizations. That's not within reach of everyone for financial reasons, but the other point made was doing whatever you can help, as long as you do something. Locally, our atlas efforts, and even our entries in eBird, map bird distributions, and this contributes to conservation decisions in our state and beyond.

A recent article in the American Bird Conservancy's journal *Bird Conservation* summarized efforts to preserve habitats in South America where birds with small ranges reside. It would be so easy to wipe out these localized species. Some were thought extinct, but through focused surveys, a few were rediscovered! Perhaps the Eskimo Curlew will be rediscovered someday.

I can remember when Cerulean Warblers were widespread in the area. I would see and hear them in the various parks in Fox Chapel, Harrison Hills Park, on my Breeding Bird Survey in Butler County and Duff Park in Murrysville. They are no longer found at these sites. With modern recording at our fingertips these days, I started to save recordings I've made of birds that are declining such as Henslow's Sparrows and Cerulean Warblers. Who knows what their status will be in the future? Recordings can also be added to eBird checklists to build the online database.

When I see the few photos and videos or hear recordings of Ivory-billed Woodpeckers, I always wish there was more, but I recognize filming and recording in those days wasn't as easy as it is today. I also cherish the few color photos of Bachman's Warbler that are in *Wood Warbler's World* by Hal Harrison (a native of Tarentum) and the *Peterson's Field Guide to Warblers* by Jon Dunn and Kimball Garrett (both photos taken by the same photographer). Wouldn't it be nice to still have the opportunity to see an Eskimo Curlew?

Mike Fialkovich  
Three Rivers Birding Club President

## The Peregrine

Three Rivers Birding Club Newsletter

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## Outings to Come

### Spring Excitement Ahead

**Sunday, March 16 - Pymatuning Area.** Meet leader Ken Knapp ([ckknapp50@gmail.com](mailto:ckknapp50@gmail.com)) at 8:00 AM in the parking lot of the former Pymatuning Wildlife Center, 12590 Hartstown Road, Linesville, PA. (GPS coordinates: 41.63526, -80.43404) for this half-day outing. Plenty of waterfowl species and a variety of raptors should be around. Sandhill Cranes are also a possibility. We will spend the morning visiting various locations in the area. **Please let Ken know if you plan on attending.**

**Wednesdays, March 19, March 26, and April 9 - Woodcock Walks.** Enjoy the woodcock walks again this spring with leader Tom Byrnes (724-715-7184). Meeting times will all be 7:00 PM. We will drive a short distance to a field in Harmar Township that has produced lots of American Woodcock in the past several years. Be prepared for a muddy walk and bring a flashlight. Before going to the field, we will check the Great Blue Heron nest and look for cormorants, which in previous years were exciting finds. **Please note:** For these walks we are meeting at a new location (GPS coordinates: 40.540648, -79.810521). From PA Route 28, take exit 11, turn left and head east on Freeport Road. Continue under the Turnpike and travel another 0.6 miles until you see the **Futule's Harmar House** parking lot on the left.

**Saturday, April 5 - Yellow Creek.** This outing will be a joint outing of the 3RBC and the Todd Bird Club. Meet Margaret Higbee

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## Outings to Come

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(724-354-3493) at the park office at 8:00 AM. The Park office is located on Route 259 just off Route 422 east of Indiana. Allow an hour and a half to drive from Pittsburgh. The park has a wide variety of habitats and a large lake that attracts a wide variety of waterbirds and sometimes exciting rarities. *Please email Margaret ([bcoriole@windstream.net](mailto:bcoriole@windstream.net)) to let her know you will be attending.*

**Friday, April 25 – Sewickley Heights Park.** Meet Sheree Daugherty ([shereedaugherty@gmail.com](mailto:shereedaugherty@gmail.com)) for our spring bird walk starting at 8:00AM in the upper parking lot. See <https://3rbc.org/directions.html#sewickley> for directions. Be prepared for muddy trails. This park is noted for having a variety of spring migrants such as warblers, vireos, and other surprises.

**Saturday, April 26 – Boys Home Park in South Fayette Township.** Meet Malcolm Kurtz ([malcolmwkurtz@gmail.com](mailto:malcolmwkurtz@gmail.com)) at 8:30AM at the parking lot at the end of Rutherglen Drive (40.385180, -80.175165). This is a new birding location for the club, an eBird hotspot and an opportunity for an outing in the South Hills.

**Friday, May 2 - North Park.** We will meet our leader Adrian Fenton ([AF9963285@aol.com](mailto:AF9963285@aol.com)) at the Gold Star Pavilion in North Park on Lake Shore Drive at 7:30 AM. GPS coordinates: 40.593884, -80.003844. We will bird Gold Star wetlands area, Marshall Lake, and, if time permits, portions of the Latodomi Nature Center. *Please email Adrian if you plan to attend.*

**Friday, May 9 – Sewickley Heights Park.** Join Sheree Daugherty ([shereedaugherty@gmail.com](mailto:shereedaugherty@gmail.com)) for our second spring bird walk starting at 8:00AM in the upper parking lot. See <https://3rbc.org/directions.html#sewickley> for directions. Be prepared for muddy trails. This park is noted for having a variety of spring migrants such as warblers, vireos and other surprises.

**Saturday, May 10 – Deer Lakes County Park.** Meet John Vassallo ([johnnvassallo@yahoo.com](mailto:johnnvassallo@yahoo.com)) and Todd Hooe at 7:30 AM. From Creighton-Russelton Road, enter the park on Kurn Road, then turn right onto Cattail Drive, and proceed to the last parking lot (GPS: **40.618722, -79.815371**). Although the trails are pretty well maintained, please wear good water-resistant hiking shoes or boots.

**Sunday, May 11 – Harrison Hills.** Meet leader Dave Brooke (724-487-3586) at 8:00 AM at this county park off Freeport Road between Natrona Heights and Freeport. Dave will be at the Environmental Learning Center parking lot. GPS: 40.6572, -79.7024. As you enter the park stay left, then turn left at the first intersection and go up the hill to the large parking lot. Dress for wet grass and mud. Previous spring outings have produced a nice variety of migrants, including many warblers and vireos.

**Saturday, May 17 – Sewickley Heights Park.** This walk is intended for beginning/inexperienced birders and will be *limited to the first six people who email the walk leader Adrian Fenton at [AF9963285@aol.com](mailto:AF9963285@aol.com)*. Sewickley Heights Park is an excellent location for seeing spring-migrating birds. We will go slowly to give everyone the opportunity to see and identify birds. The starting time will be at 7:30 AM in the upper parking lot. For directions, see <https://3rbc.org/directions.html#sewickley>. Please bring binoculars.

**Sunday, June 1– Picnic at Harrison Hills.** We will hold our 3RCB picnic this year at Harrison Hills Park on Sunday June 1st. This will be a **bring-your-own-lunch** picnic starting at 12:00 PM at the **Yakaon** pavilion. The pavilion is located across from the environmental center. As you enter the park stay left and then turn left at the first

intersection and go up the hill to the large parking lot. Prior to the picnic there will be a bird walk starting at 9:00 AM at the Rachel Carson parking lot near the pond (as you enter the park, bear right and proceed to the parking lot at the end of the road, GPS: 40.6506800, -79.6946574).

## Outings Revisited

### Close-up Views Reward Us

**Dead of Winter Outing at Frick Park—February 1, 2025.** This outing was rescheduled due to frigid weather and trail conditions in the park. Upon arrival, I noticed a large group of people gathered at the entrance to the park. It was a running group, and I wondered if a race was going on at the park. It ended up the runners took to the sidewalks of Squirrel Hill to run probably due to possible ice on the trails. A wise move and good for us, too, although I don't think it would have been a major disruption after the start.

A nice group of 14 people joined me for this outing. Most were beginners, and some were on their first club outing!

We started at the Environmental Center where the birds were very active. We saw many wintering Red-winged Blackbirds and discussed how the feeders are likely keeping them at the park with a reliable source of food. We had good views of both Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers that allowed for comparison between the two.

Dark-eyed Juncos and White-throated Sparrows were around the feeding area at the base of Clayton Hill. We also saw a Red-bellied Woodpecker working on digging a cavity in one of the trees; next, our first White-breasted Nuthatch of the day made an appearance.

We walked South Clayton Trail and heard a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker calling. This has been somewhat of a target bird for me during these outings, although we often miss them. But not this time! We had very close views of an immature bird tending its drilled holes within a few feet of our group, completely unconcerned with us.

As we continued on the trail, distancing ourselves from the feeder area, bird activity was reduced. However, we were rewarded with another close view—this time it was an adult Red-tailed Hawk perched low just off the trail. It remained in place the entire time we viewed it, allowing those with cameras the advantage of a very cooperative subject.

We also came across two Pileated Woodpeckers. The first was low, working the bottom part of one tree and a nearby fallen tree. We then found a second bird just a bit farther down the trail. I mentioned this would have been unheard of years ago as Pileated Woodpecker was truly rare in the city not that long ago.

We had to carefully navigate some ice on the trail, but the areas off the trail were devoid of snow thanks to mild temperatures and rain during the previous days. This allowed us to walk along the edge of the trail to keep from slipping. We descended to Tranquil Trail and stopped to see one of the resident Barred Owls sleeping in a tree cavity. Thanks to those who knew where to find the roost site; the specific location was unknown to me. A few of the local birds noticed the roosting owl and started to alert everyone in the neighborhood. Dark-eyed Juncos, chickadees, Tufted Titmouse and American Goldfinches were flying around the roost tree, keeping careful watch on this drowsy predator.

The trail here was quite icy due to the location in the valley where sunlight was limited. We walked up Falls Ravine on another icy trail to check two Eastern Screech Owl roosts, but both were empty.

We worked our way back up to the Environmental Center where we saw three soaring Red-tailed Hawks before the outing ended. We saw 22 species. Thanks to the attendees for braving the cold temperatures and icy spots on the trails. — **by leader, Mike Fialkovich**



## Notes from Our Members

### A Beneficial Bark Furrow

By Pat McShea (photos by Amy Henrici)

Watching a Brown Creeper search for food requires a viewer to visually separate the chickadee-sized bird from the tree bark it's climbing. An early sentence in the National Audubon Society's online account for this species hints at this challenge: *"Looking like a piece of bark come to life, the Brown Creeper crawls up trunks of trees, ferreting out insect eggs and other morsels missed by more active birds."*

After long acquaintance with this common Pittsburgh area winter resident under such bird-at-work conditions, Amy and I were delighted early in 2024 to be presented with repeated opportunities to view a resting Brown Creeper at our leisure. Our observation portals were west-facing dining room and kitchen windows that look out on the massive trunk of a silver maple. During five nights in January, and at least nineteen nights in February (we left on a vacation after that), a deep furrow in the tree trunk's rough bark served as the nighttime roost for one of these birds.

When the bird initially appeared during dinner preparations on January 18, we assumed its visit was just a feeding foray. After landing on the trunk within inches of the tree's base, the creeper climbed upward along a diagonal route to a height of seven feet. Then it entered the lower end of a yard-long, vertical bark furrow that was two-inches deep and never more than that dimension in width. The creeper quickly ascended this wooden canyon to the top, a location ten feet above the ground where a slanted flake of bark the size of a playing card capped the channel. Here the bird stopped, and when its pause continued past the five-second mark, Amy ran for her camera, while I retrieved my binoculars.

That evening our observations of the resting bird continued for an hour until full darkness ended the show. Binocular views of the stationary feathered subject, just eighteen feet away, allowed us to admire the effectiveness of the bird's camouflage. Perched vertically, white belly against the trunk, and with the spines of its tail feathers braced against the furrow's bark floor, the creeper's plumage blended well with its immediate surrounding.

For the rest of the winter, we devoted a nearby kitchen calendar to penciled notes of the bird's arrival and departure times. The notations document the creeper's roosting in the bark furrow on twenty-four of the next 40 nights, a pattern that strongly correlated with cold, but dry nights. Arrival times ranged from as early as 3:48 p.m. on January 19, to as late as 5:06 p.m. on February 25. Morning departures, which were missed as often as they were observed, occurred as early as 6:45 a.m. and as late as 7:57 a.m. Departures were richer observational opportunities, even though they occurred in the half-light of dawn.

Detectable stirring within the narrow chamber began with the bird shifting to a sideways position, bowing its head forward, and using its strongly curved thin bill to preen its breast feathers. The bird then re-shifted its body position to slowly open, briefly preen, and fold each wing. Then it suddenly was out of the furrow, either hopping to a nearby perch on the trunk and climbing rapidly out of sight, or else launching itself directly backward and into flight.

This winter the bark furrow remained an active site with our first observation of a roosting creeper occurring on December 11, 2024. Whether this was the same individual we last observed ten months earlier remains an open question: Two evenings later, on December 13, the appearance of two Brown Creepers along the furrow triggered an aerial chase from which a lone bird returned to roost. The competition seemed to confirm that deep bark furrows on the lee side of larger trees are a key habitat component for wintering brown creepers in our region.



THE ROOSTING BROWN CREEPER CIRCLED AND POPPED OUT FOR A BETTER VIEW

Stronger evidence for the importance of sheltered bark furrows took the form of routine brown creeper behavior on the morning of January 22. At 7:26, as the outside temperature slowly crept upward from a low of eight degrees below zero, the roosting bird stirred, preened, stretched its wings, and headed out for a day of patrolling tree trunks.

### Do You Have a Magic Bird Tree?

For two 3RBC members, Dave Brooke and Paul Hess, it might well be the humble river birch, a common landscape tree planted throughout suburbia. The magic happens in fall when warblers of many varieties swarm the trees to feast on the predictable abundance of birch aphids. Birch aphids feed on the largest leaf veins of birch trees, both on new leaves in spring and on senescent leaves in fall. And when they do, they might just catch the eye of mixed flocks of foliage gleaning wood warblers!

Dave wrote, "I didn't know I had a 'magic' birch tree until this fall when I noticed tiny insects covering everything in my driveway. In 30+ years here, I had not seen this kind of infestation before. After I *iNaturalist*'ed the insects, I found that they were in fact Birch Aphids, and there were tens of thousands of them. As a result of this infestation, warblers were spending hours feeding in this tree in late September and October. There were sometimes four or five Yellow-rump in the tree at one time. In addition, I had Black-throated Green, Tennessee, Cape May, Blackburnian, Black-and-white, Nashville, and Blackpoll, and my neighbor saw an Ovenbird there. I've never had that variety of warblers in my yard before and certainly not 30 feet from my window! I would love to have the same experience with the warblers next fall, but I'm not sure I want to see that many aphids again."

Paul Hess said of his bird magnet: "We planted what became our magic birch as a large sapling in our front yard in Natrona Heights in 1989. I was told it was a gray birch. This is only a few miles from Dave's birch, and my experience was similarly entertaining to his."

"The tree's warblers first caught my eye through our wide living room window while I watched the evening news on TV. For some reason, it took a long time until I recognized the birch's magic. I was able to watch the warbler spectacle on many evenings during September

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## Magic Bird Tree

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and October from years 2013 to 2019.

These are my warbler totals from highest to lowest numbers:

<i>Cape May</i> 21	<i>Wilson's</i> 2
<i>Yellow-rumped</i> 19	<i>Nashville</i> 1
<i>Blackpoll</i> 5	<i>Bay-breasted</i> 1
<i>Black-throated Green</i> 5	<i>Chestnut-sided</i> 1
<i>Magnolia</i> 4	<i>Blackburnian</i> 1
<i>Tennessee</i> 2	<i>Palm</i> 1
<i>Pine</i> 2	

Besides the warblers, I listed a variety of other species feeding in the birch: Golden-crowned Kinglet, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Blue-headed Vireo, Philadelphia Vireo, Warbling Vireo, Indigo Bunting, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak.

It's a shame we decided to cut down the tree because it began losing more and more branches and bore fewer leaves year by year. I've read that the gray birch's life span is about 30 years, and ours was a few years older. Back then, I had no idea how to identify those tiny black creatures on the autumn leaves, so I'm thankful to see Dave's ID via *iNaturalist*.

Finally, I think it would have been interesting to see how my little "magic birch" warbler fallouts might have reflected the pattern of peaks in nocturnal migration that we now can measure with weather radar and track online!"



CAPE MAY (LEFT) AND YELLOW-RUMPED (RIGHT) WARBLERS FEEDING ON BIRCH APHIDS (PHOTOS BY DAVE BROOKE)

## Birding in Girty's Woods

By John Dzikiy and David Bennett

Girty's Woods is a recent acquisition by Allegheny Land Trust. John Dzikiy and I wondered if we could realize the full birding potential of this green space and make it a top 100 birding location in Allegheny County.

The 165-acre Girty's Woods is situated in Millvale, near Shaler and Reserve Township. There is a trail network that was developed by dirt bikes back before the acquisition by Allegheny Land Trust. The trails feature some steep elevation changes, which at first glance might deter some birders. But in the past year we have started our birding from the top area, where the trails are less physically challenging. To access these, use the small Irwin Lane parking area (hikers are asked not to block the gate). The other trailhead is on Siegel Street, where the parking is on-street. Additional trailheads are in the works. Regular trail maintenance volunteer days have improved the trails in a remarkable way.

One of the attributes which seems to attract birds is the high elevation (1,190ft. at the peak). We have found several migrating birds that may have arrived because of the height and proximity of it-to the Allegheny River.

Just outside of the Irwin Lane entrance are several radio towers

which have made this site attractive to a pair of nesting kestrels this past year. Chimney Swifts, nighthawks, and raptors can be viewed from this vantage point.

Further into Girty's from the Irwin Lane entrance you enter a small meadow area, where sparrows, Red-winged Blackbirds, and wrens are often abundant. One morning in particular, we were able to see a nice mix of warblers in the surrounding trees.

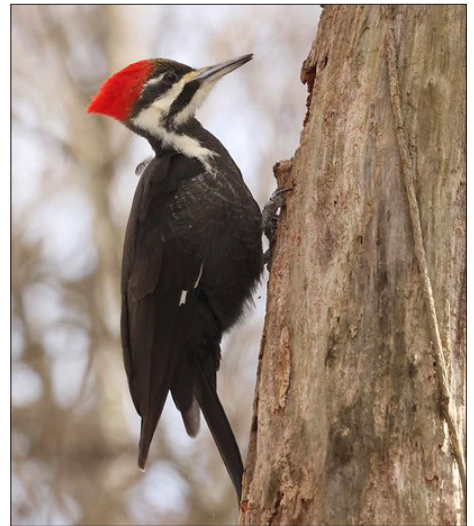
As you proceed on the trail, there are several places where the trail approaches the power line cut, where we often see Red-tailed, Cooper's, Broad-winged and Sharp-Shinned hawks. Throughout the green space there are many vistas and outlooks that give great views of soaring raptors.

Five species of woodpeckers can be found in Girty's with a notable number of Northern Flickers and Hairy Woodpeckers. There are many places throughout the reserve where grapevines attract warblers. The dense undergrowth along the trails is a constant and provides cover for breeding White-eyed Vireo and Gray Catbird in the summer, as well as migrating Wood Thrush and Swainson's Thrush.

This past week we have reached our goal of 92 species, which finally puts Girty's in the top 100 Allegheny County Hotspots (thanks to a beautiful Palm Warbler and a Philadelphia Vireo). Next goal is to break the 100 species mark!

*Editor's Note: According to eBird, there are now are 113 species on the official checklist for Girty's Woods! (<https://ebird.org/hotspot/L21246070/bird-list>)*

*For additional info on Girty's Woods, including a trail map and a list of Allegheny Land Trust's Know Before You Go visitor policies, please visit [alleghenylandtrust.org/green-space/girtys-woods/](http://alleghenylandtrust.org/green-space/girtys-woods/)*



WOODPECKERS ABOUND IN GIRTY'S WOODS. PILEATED WOODPECKER PHOTO DAN MENDENHALL.

## Another Birding Destination Recommendation

3RBC member, Carole Winslow, recently published a wonderful article about birding in her home county, Clarion County, and her article is illustrated with excellent photos by another 3RBC member, Steve Gosser.

Her article begins, "A day spent birding in Clarion County can yield a large number of species, especially from spring through early fall. From hiking the trails at Cook Forest, the North Country Trail, driving along game land roads, kayaking on the Clarion or Allegheny, and biking along the Armstrong and Redbank Valley trail, a full day here can yield a great slice of Pennsylvania bird life all in one county."

You can read her full article here: <https://discoverclarioncounty.com/birding-in-clarion-county-rivers-fields-and-forests/>.



## Observations

### Peanut Butter and Suet – High Energy Bird Foods in Winter

By Tom Moeller

Two high-energy foods that are good for birds in the winter are suet and peanut butter. Both are high-fat sources of energy and protein, especially for birds that eat insects and their larvae.

Birds are protected in the winter by their three layers of feathers – their **contour feathers**, symmetrically vaned with interlocking barbules which result in a uniform, waterproof ‘shell’ on a bird’s body; the light, fluffy **semiplumes** found between the contour feathers and the down feathers, and the insulating **down feathers** with many barbules close to a bird’s skin. Plus, there are adaptations to prevent heat loss from their scaled feet. (See my article “Keeping Warm in the Winter” on Page 8-9 of the March/April 2019 edition of *The Peregrine* for more details.) Foremost, the birds must keep their inner body heat up with foods rich in fat and protein, which suet and peanut butter both provide.

Beef suet is best if you can find a source at a butcher’s counter (avoid lamb or mutton suet), but commercial suet cakes are readily and cheaply available in many places. These cakes may come in a pure suet form or have other ingredients mixed in like fruits, berries, nuts, seeds, mealworms, etc. There are many cages available for holding the suet cakes from simple, square wire cages to elaborate, multi-caged, wooden feeders. There are also suet pellets that can be used in large mesh feeders. Suet is used mainly in the fall and winter, but cakes are now made for year-round use. Yet, avoid using suet in temperatures above 90°. Woodpeckers, wrens, nuthatches, chickadees, Blue Jays, starlings, and cardinals are all birds that will visit a suet feeder.

Peanut butter is a more controversial high-protein food. Earlier authors (Martin, 1963 and Dennis, 1975) warned of birds choking and dying on peanut butter. Later authors (Harrison, 1979 and Kaufman & Schrader, 2023) say that birds choking on peanut butter is a myth. Dead birds that have been found with peanut butter stuck in their beaks were sick birds taking their last meals at a peanut butter feeder, since that food was easy to access in their weakened state. Natural, unsalted peanut butter is best. In low-fat varieties the oils can separate and become messy for birds. Peanut butter can be provided in drilled out holes in log feeders or smeared on the bark of trees. I have a heavy plastic peanut butter feeder with four grooves on each side placed inside a wire suet cage (see photos). Another product is Bark Butter, made up of suet, peanut butter, and corn, which is also smeared on tree bark. The



DOWNY WOODPECKER (ABOVE) AND BOREAL CHICKADEE (BELOW LEFT) AT SUET FEEDERS. A CANADA JAY (BELOW RIGHT) FEEDS FROM A GOB OF PEANUT BUTTER

same birds that are attracted to suet come to peanut butter.

At the Sax-Zim Bog Festival, held in the middle of freezing February in Minnesota, volunteers smear gobs of peanut butter on tree trunks for Boreal Chickadees, Canada Jays, nuthatches, and woodpeckers. Raw beef suet is also hung in cages at the feeding stations for those and other birds. Of course, red squirrels and ermines are attracted to these feeding stations too, just as squirrels are attracted to our local suet and peanut butter feeders.



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## Observations

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THIS NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD IS ENJOYING PEANUT BUTTER FROM A FEEDER PLACED INSIDE OF A SUET CAGE.

Northern Mockingbirds are not winter rarities in our area, only at feeders. They do not eat seeds, usually berries and insects – suet and peanut butter are good cold-month alternatives for them. However, mockingbirds can be very territorial, so including a feeder in their area can be stressful for them since they tend to chase away other species from a food source. Too many species come to my established feeders for a mockingbird to take over. Stokes' *Bird Behavior* says if a mockingbird does take over a feeder, the best thing to do is move or remove the feeder.

Birds have adapted to living in conditions where winter food may be scarce. They can usually find what they need to survive. Establishing a feeding station in your yard with seeds, nuts (including peanuts), suet, and peanut butter will supplement birds' diets. They are not dependent on feeders, so constant maintenance is nice but not going to deprive birds of their nutrition if not maintained daily. High-energy foods like suet and peanut butter do help the birds, but they do not depend on them completely.

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## Christmas Bird Count Highlights from Pittsburgh and South Hills

By Brian Shema, Pittsburgh CBC Coordinator and Compiler

The Pittsburgh Christmas bird count was conducted on Saturday, December 28th 2024. Weather was mild, and all water was unfrozen for the count.

*Several records were set during this unprecedented year:*

- 209 field observers is our highest ever for the Pittsburgh count. It is through that participation that we increase coverage of the count circle and are able to achieve our next record: an all time high of 85 species were recorded within the Pittsburgh count circle. The previous high count of 80 was set back on December 29, 2012. The ten-year average is 75 species.

*Waterfowl diversity clearly influenced that exceptional species total. A few were notable:*

- A **Brant** at Schenley is a first ever for this circle. Two **Long-tailed Ducks** along with a **Ruddy Duck** on the Allegheny River were also firsts on count day. A number of waterfowl species set new high counts - 8 **Gadwall**, 61 **Common Mergansers**, and 16 **Pied-billed Grebes** are all new records.

*A few other birds added to the species count:*

- Our third-ever **Black Vulture**, fourth-ever **Iceland Gull**, and seventh-ever **Red-headed Woodpecker**. Two **Red-headed Woodpeckers** were found on count day - one in North Park and the other at Schenley Park, which set a new high-count record.

*Other observations that certainly stand out:*

- 117 **Fish Crow** were found on count day as that population continues to grow. 84 **Turkey Vultures** is a new high count, again a trend clearly tied to their changing winter range. 18 **Swamp Sparrows**, 19 **Eastern Towhees** and 120 **Red-winged Blackbirds** are also impressive numbers for the end of December.

A total of 34,002 birds were counted. As always, I'd like to thank everyone that helped out this year. It was the most successful count that I have experienced to date, and I look forward to continuing to add field observers and increasing our success in the coming years.

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By Gigi Gerben, South Hills CBC Coordinator and Compiler

The South Hills Christmas Bird Count took place on December 14<sup>th</sup>, with around 30 individuals participating. Sixty-six species were found, with 3,592 individual birds counted, in relatively nice weather conditions for a change! Participants fanned out throughout the South Hills Circle, from Mt. Lebanon, to Pleasant Hills, to the northern reaches of Washington County. There were some new participants and many long-time participants. Some hiked suburban areas, some in more remote areas, some driving counts were noted, and some feeder watchers participated. We welcome all levels of participation!

Of note, four owl species were found: **Great Horned**, **Barred**, **Eastern Screech-owl** and one lonely **Northern Saw-whet**. A couple of **Rusty Blackbirds** and a single **Yellow-rumped Warbler** were found. **Brown Creepers** and **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers** were nice finds. Waterfowl numbers were down for a couple of readily-identifiable reasons: Many spots were frozen over, and we lost a highly-skilled participant to Minnesota this year. (Hope Minnesota appreciates you, Ryan!)

We are not wishing the rest of the year away, but we do look forward to another fun count in December. If you are interested in coming south, get in touch!

## Birding Far Afield

### Borneo Birding Adventure

#### Article and photos by Sam Sinderson

In 2023, I went to Columbia with the American Birding Association (ABA) and thought that it might be my last big birding trip. But I made the decision in March 2024 to have at least one more birding adventure. This time a trip to Borneo, also sponsored by the ABA, caught my attention. The tour would be organized and guided by Rockjumper Birding Tours. So I made the decision to go in hopes of reaching a milestone for my life list—2,000 species.

Borneo is halfway around the world (my destination, Kota Kinabalu, was four long flights and 31 hours away), and the part to be toured is the Malaysian Sabah province of Borneo. The area is essentially the northern portion of the island of Borneo, which is the third largest island in the world following Greenland and New Guinea. The southern portion is part of Indonesia, and there is also a small Sultanate, Brunei, on the western edge of Sabah.

The first four days centered around Kota Kinabalu, a very modern city with a population of about 600,000. We got up each morning in time for breakfast at 5:30 a.m. at the hotel and a departure for the day's birding at 6:15. There were 19 participants, an ABA representative, three Rockjumper guides, and two local guides. Other local guides joined us from time to time.

We were divided into three groups, and we traveled in separate 10- or 12-passenger vans. The Rockjumper guides rotated between groups, so we got to bird with all three guides at some point. Lunch each day was at a local restaurant close to the day's birding site. On the first day my group went to Kinabalu Park located on the side of Mt. Kinabalu at around 6,000 feet elevation. It was only an hour and a half drive from the hotel. We primarily road-birded, which was practical because it allowed us to use the numerous roadside shelters when it rained.

The guides were great at hearing, spotting, and showing us the birds. They each had laser pointers to guide us to the birds. Many of the target birds were hard to see, so sometimes we spent a lot of time waiting for a bird to respond to taped calls that the guides used. On that first day, August 28, I recorded 29 species of birds, 27 of which were life birds.



A WHITE-THROATED FANTAIL WAS ONE OF 16 LIFE BIRDS FOR THE AUTHOR IN THE CROCKER MOUNTAIN RANGE.

Each evening we would be back at the hotel close to 6 p.m. After a short time to clean up for dinner, each group would meet and complete their checklist for the day, followed by dinner at 7.

On August 29, was a return to the same site as the first day attempting to pick up species we had missed. The birds of the day was a pair of **Bornean Forktails**. This species resides along streams, and we had a slippery, little walk down alongside a small, forest stream to see them. I recorded just eight life birds this day, including the **Eye-browed Jungle Flycatcher**.

On Day 3 my group visited the Kilas Swamp. As one can imagine, it was hot and humid, though the walk was along a boardwalk into the swamp to a viewing pavilion. On the way to the swamp we stopped at a field and recorded several species there. On the way back from the swamp we birded a fallow rice field, made a stop in a suburb to see three new species, and finally, a stop at Prince Phillip Park, where we recorded more new birds. For the day I recorded 24 life birds, including the **Nankeen Night-heron**.

Our final day of birding around Kota Kinabalu was primarily aimed at the Crocker Mountain Range, southeast of the city, which hosts many different birds than Mt. Kinabalu and is about the same elevation of 6,000 feet. Among the 16 life birds that day were **Pale-faced Bulbul**, **White-throated Fantail** and **Golden-naped Barbet**.

Next we flew from Kota Kinabalu to Lahad Datu, and from there we drove to our Rainforest Lodge three hours away. There we were in the Danum Valley, a large area of preserved lowland rain forest, for four days of birding. On the way there we stopped to see a **Black Eagle**, a **Whiskered Treeswift**, and a **Crested Serpent-Eagle**, all life birds for me. We also had a late afternoon walk that yielded seven life birds and a Bornean Orangutan. On our first night walk I saw three new species of owls. This day yielded a wonderful 13 life birds!

At the Lodge we were required to remove our footwear whenever we entered a meeting room, dining room, or our chalet. The dining area was on the second floor of the lodge and was open to the outside with just ceiling fans. Food was served buffet style with a wide variety of dishes available. We had fresh fish, squid dishes, a soup bar, a barbecue bar, and fresh cheese of two varieties. There were salad makings, a choice of nuts, and always smoked salmon and smoked duck. The food here was outstanding. Every breakfast, lunch, and dinner was a treat. This lodge is three hours by truck from Lahad Datu, and all the food is



PALE-FACED BULBUL ANOTHER LIFE BIRD FROM CROCKER MOUNTAIN RANGE.



# The Peregrine

trucked in. The variety and quality of food was amazing.

Our routine here was a morning walk at 6:15, then return for lunch, followed by a midafternoon walk, returning around 6 p.m. in time to clean up, go over our group checklist for the day. Each night there was either a night walk or night drive. The drives were done in large electric vehicles holding four to six of us with a guide standing at the rear with a large battery-powered spotlight.

The two walks on September 2, our first full day in the Danum Valley, produced 19 life birds. The highlight was a walk down a steep and slippery trail to the display site of a **Great Argus**, the second largest pheasant-like bird in the world. The next morning it was raining, so we birded just behind the lodge which had a view of the river. I saw several life birds there. The highlight of the day was the flyby in the rain of the very-rare **Great-billed Heron**. For the day I added 20 life birds.

On our last full day of birding in the Danum Valley, on September 4, we were transported to the entrance to the Canopy Walkway. Each group birded the Canopy Walkway, one group at a time, while the other two groups birded near the entrance. The walkway is a series of walkways suspended between towers that are built around large trees. One is basically half-way up in the forest where many species spend their time, giving us a chance at new species. After we had all had a chance at the walkway, we walked further away from the lodge towards the river where there was a grove of fruiting trees. Again, a chance for new birds. For the day I added 11 life birds.

My last morning at the Borneo Rainforest Lodge I missed the morning birding walk because I was packing. Since I missed the walk, I birded behind the lodge again, and there I found a **Lesser Fish-Eagle** perched on a dead limb. I was able to get good pictures as the eagle never left the perch. We had an early lunch and departed for Lahad Datu and our flight back to Koto Kinabalu. We arrived at the tiny airport in plenty of time as our flight was delayed a bit. Sitting in the waiting room, we had a great view of the runway and the grassland around it, and we saw three more life birds, making it four for the day.

We arrived back at our hotel in Kota Kinabalu in time for dinner. There would be no more birding as the next day was reserved for departures. The flights home should have been uneventful, as I had plenty of time for transfers and had gotten all my boarding passes after check-in at the Kota Kinabalu airport. But, at Doha, Qatar my departing flight to Philadelphia (a 15-hour flight) was about two hours late. Because of delays at immigration and TSA, I missed my connecting flight to Pittsburgh. Thankfully, American Airlines, with no questions



*LESSER FISH-EAGLE WAS A LUCKY FIND AT BORNEO RAINFOREST LODGE.*

asked, gave me a voucher for an overnight hotel stay and \$12 worth of food.

It took almost an hour to get the hotel shuttle, and by the time I got into bed it was after 11 p.m. From the time I got up in Borneo until then, I had gone almost 50 hours without any meaningful sleep! Not wanting to be late the next morning, I got up in time to get the 5:30 a.m. shuttle to the airport. I was at the gate three hours ahead of loading for my flight to Pittsburgh. The gate attendant was able to trace my bag and said it would be on this flight. We boarded the flight on time, but then on the taxiway we stopped. There was a mechanical problem requiring us to return the terminal. After a further delay, they had us deplane and walk back to our original gate to board a different plane. I finally arrived in Pittsburgh at 12:30 p.m. on Sunday—an exhausting trip home to say the least. But, the trip was an adventure of a lifetime, and I had seen 143 life birds, bringing my life list to 1,954. Now, I wonder where I will go in search of my 2,000<sup>th</sup> species.



*THE AUTHOR FULLY OUTFITTED FOR BORNEO BIRDING.*



*GREAT ARGUS (PHEASANT), A HIGHLIGHT OF THE DANUM VALLEY.*

A longer version of this article appears on our website. Please visit [3rbc.org/reports.html](http://3rbc.org/reports.html) where you'll find trip reports from around the world!

## Birds in the Three Rivers Area

### October – November 2024

#### By Mike Fialkovich, Bird Reports Editor

Some rain from the remnants of Hurricane Milton in early October provided some moisture, but the remainder of the month was very dry and unseasonably warm. A powerful cold front moved through November 22-23, with rain and snow and temperatures near freezing. It finally looked like November.

A **Ross's Goose** was a nice find at North Park 11/29 (SG). It was present 11/30 but flew off just after dawn. **Tundra Swans** were reported flying over during a passing weather system that brought the first rain for weeks 11/23. Flocks of 120 were observed flying over Oakmont (AH, PM) and Findlay Twp. (SDi) and 38 over Penn Hills (EH). The following day, 40 were seen flying over South Park (JB). Five **Blue-winged Teal** were at Wingfield Pines 10/21 (eBird) and one was at Oakmont 11/15-21 (AH, PM, m.ob.). A **Northern Shoveler** was at North Park 10/2 (AF) and three were at Duck Hollow 11/26 (MKu, m.ob.). Two **Gadwall** were at the Gulf Lab Wetland in Harmar Twp. 11/10 (OL) and three were there 11/21-23 (m.ob.). One was at Janoski's Farm in Findlay Twp. 11/15 and two 11/17 (MV). Four were at Duck Hollow 11/18 (LK, APe). An **American Wigeon** was at the Sharpsburg Docks 10/31 – 11/21 (DM, m.ob.). One was at North Park 11/5-11/14 (m.ob.) and three were at Oakmont 11/8-16 (DM, JD, m.ob.). A female **Northern Pintail** was at the Gulf Lab Wetland in Hamar Twp. 11/22-23 (JD, et al.). A **Canvasback** was at Duck Hollow 11/22-23 (MKu, m.ob.). The only report of **Greater Scaup** was five at Sharpsburg 11/20 (JD). There were two reports of **Lesser Scaup**, including two at North Park 11/7 (m.ob.) and seven at Sharpsburg 11/20 (JD). Two **Surf Scoters** were a nice find on the Allegheny River at Sharpsburg 10/27 (JD) and one was on the Ohio River near Brunot Island 11/16 (MK). A **Long-tailed Duck** was on the Allegheny River at Aspinwall 11/24 (AH, PM). High counts of **Common Merganser** include 37 at Dashields Dam 8/9 (MV) and 43 at Leetsdale 10/14 (MV). Double figure totals of this species is now regular. Five **Ruddy Ducks** were at Imperial 10/17 (MV) and four were at Aspinwall 11/15 (AF). Single **Horned Grebes** were on the Allegheny River at Verona 11/23 (RBu), Aspinwall 11/24 (RBu) and two at Chapel Harbor 11/24 (AH, PM).

A late **Ruby-throated Hummingbird** visited a feeder in Wilkins Twp. 10/13-19. It was identified as an immature male Ruby-throated by Sheri Williamson (author of *A Field Guide to Hummingbirds of North America*) by photographs sent to her.

A **Sora** was at Wingfield Pines 10/1-9 (RH, ST). **Killdeer** remained through the end of the reporting period. Large numbers gathered at a traditional fall location at South Park, where a flock of up to 55 birds were present from 11/15 through the end of November (JF, et al.). Another gathering spot at Hampton Community Park hosted 31 birds on 11/24 (eBird). Two **Dunlin** were at Oakmont Riverfront Park 11/1 (DM, et al.). A **Pectoral Sandpiper** was at Dashields Dam 10/17-21 (MV), the only report. **American Woodcock** are not often reported in fall because they are silent, so they are harder to find. One was at Hartwood Acres 10/5-7 (DM, RBu) and one was at Moon Twp. Park 10/18 (RBu). A **Wilson's Snipe** was at North Park 10/4-11/17 (DM, m.ob.) and one was at Duck Hollow 10/16-24 (RF, JF). A rather late **Solitary Sandpiper** was at Peter's Creek 10/17-19 (JF).

A **Common Loon** at Dashields Dam 10/21 was observed to have an injured wing (MV). The bird remained through the season (m.ob.). It was able to dive to catch food. One was on the Allegheny River at Sharpsburg 11/14 (DM) and one was nearby at Aspinwall 11/24-25 (AH, PM, et al.). One was also on the Monongahela River at Duck Hollow 11/25 (LK).

Migrant **Northern Saw-whet Owls** were banded at Sewickley

Heights (record total of 62 banded), Harrison Hills (24 banded), and Boyce-Mayview (seven banded) parks. An immature **Red-headed Woodpecker** visited a feeder in Franklin Park 11/21 (OM). An adult and immature were discovered in North Park 11/2, where they remained through the reporting period (TC, m.ob.). Interestingly, an adult and immature were in the same area in November and December 2015. An immature **Northern Shrike** was a nice find at Imperial 11/24 (JPu); it remained to the end of the season (m.ob.).

**Marsh Wren** continued at Wingfield Pines to at least 10/1 (m.ob.). One was at Boyce-Mayview Park 10/1 (ST). Up to two birds were seen at Wingfield Pines through November (m.ob.). Given the close proximity of these three locations, the birds could have been moving between them, but it's impossible to know for certain. One was at Hartwood Acres 10/7-9 (DBe, DM, m.ob.) in a meadow. One was at a marsh in North Park 10/16-19 (AF, et al.). This species has become regular in recent years as more people search wetlands that have become established as good habitat.

Twenty **American Pipits** were at Imperial 10/18 (AF) and one flew over Indiana Twp. 11/17 (BSH). There were a few **Pine Siskin** reports in November, including single birds flying over Upper St. Clair 11/7 and 11/18 (ST), two at North Park (eBird), and one flying over Beechwood Farms 11/26 (DM).

**Savannah Sparrow** reports continued from the last period. Two were at Imperial 10/6 (JPu), one was in West Mifflin 10/6 (JF), one was at Hartwood Acres 10/3 (DN) and one was in agricultural fields in West Deer Twp. 10/5 (LC). A bird in North Park 10/16 had a broken or deformed bill with a short upper mandible (AD) and another bird with a normal bill was there 10/18 (DM). One was at Duck Hollow 10/18 (JF) and one was in Homewood Cemetery 10/20 (MK).

A late male **Baltimore Oriole** was in Dormont 10/23 (CT). There were quite a number of **Rusty Blackbird** reports in Oct and November. One was at Wingfield Pines 10/10, 16 were there 11/8, 43 on 11/11 (Corvus), 27 on 11/12 (ST), ten on 11/21 (JF) and 76 on 11/23 (Corvus). Two were at Duck Hollow 10/16 (RF) and one was there 10/18-21 (m.ob.). One was at Hartwood Acres 10/23 (JD), one was at North Park 11/5 (Corvus); two were there 11/12 (ZV, AD). One was in Allison Park 11/12 (NB); one was in Frick Park 11/21 (CK).

A late **Tennessee Warbler** was photographed at Frick Park 11/26 (BL). **Orange-crowned Warbler** is a rare but regular fall migrant. Reports were submitted from nine locations, many with good photographs. There were quite a few **Orange-crowned Warbler** reports in October, most of them photographed. Single birds were at Sewickley Heights Park 10/1 (AF), Hartwood Acres 10/3 (DN), Gibsonia 10/9 (KP), North Park 10/12-15 (SD, AD) and 10/18-19 (ZV, m.ob.), Hampton Twp. 10/17 (DN) and Duck Hollow 10/27 (BL). One was in Wilkinsburg 10/6 and 10/27-28 at the same location (CT). A **Connecticut Warbler** was found at Sewickley Heights Park 10/1 (AF). One was at Wingfield Pines 10/1-11 (JF, m.ob.), a rare long staying individual that many observers were fortunate to see. A late **Common Yellowthroat** was photographed at North Park 11/8 (DBe). There were two reports of the eastern subspecies of **Palm Warbler**, the "Yellow" Palm Warbler that is more common east of the Appalachians. One was at South Park 10/12 (JF), and one was at Deer Lakes Park 10/12 (RBu).

*Observers: James Baker, David Bennett (DBe), Nathaniel Bowler, Ron Burkert (RBu), Thomas Connor, Corvus, Linda Croskey, Ankur Dave, Michael David, Steve Denninger, Sofia Di Gennaro (SDi), John Dzikiy, Rebecca Fabbro, Adrian Fenton, John Flannigan, Steve Gosser, Eric Hall, Amy Henrici, Rob Hooton, Lisa Kaufman, Charity Khesghi, Michelle Kienholz, Malcolm Kurtz (MKu), Bryon Langerman, Oliver Lindhiem, Pat McShea, Dan Mendenhall, Oscar Miller, Dick Nugent, Jim Offhaus, Kevin Parsons, Amber Pertz (APe), Joe Pumford (JPu), Brian Shema (BSH), Shannon Thompson, Christopher Turbert, Mark Vass, Zachary Vaughan, m.ob. (many observers).*