

# The Osprey

Newsletter of the Southern Maryland Audubon Society



*Lesser Yellowlegs*  
Photo by: George Jett

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<http://somdaudubon.org/>

## Naval Air Station Patuxent River Trip Report

March 1, 2014

by Dean Newman

Seven brave souls took on the cold temps that Saturday for, what turned out to be, an excellent day of birding. In fact, this was probably the best trip we've had in the last five years that I've been "herding" this trip. In fact, As it turned out, the absence of wind and our multiple layers of clothes, made the morning feel absolutely balmy.

It didn't hurt either, that we had some of the best birders in our club leading me to the correct identification and even the correct location of species found. The addition of a couple of dedicated, hard-core newcomers kept the trip interesting and fresh as they allowed us the privilege of seeing birds we take for granted through fresh eyes. Even if we hadn't seen a single bird, hanging with this crew made the whole morning worthwhile.

Our best bird of the day was a Red-necked Grebe seen in the Goose Creek Lagoon. Additionally, in that same location was a large raft of Hooded Mergansers with males in full breeding plumage. We were also able to come up with several Brown-headed Nuthatches in the campground as well as Ruddy Ducks, American Wigeons, displaying Buffleheads, and Canvasbacks. There were more Tundra Swans in that lagoon than I've ever seen before and, of particular note, we had Greater and Lesser Scaup side by side for comparison.

While Bald Eagles made frequent appearances, the traditional nest by the golf course was not occupied this year. What we did find was a Great Horned Owl roosting in the abandoned nest with an adjacent tree being occupied with its mate sitting on eggs. We did see a pair of eagles sparring in the air but none of the "fist locking" free fall of legend.

Over by the Test Pilot School, we had the best looks at Long-tailed ducks I've ever seen. For some reason they weren't as skittish as normal and we actually had to back our scope magnification off to get the whole bird in the frame. There were also Horned Grebes, Red-breasted Mergansers and Common Goldeneyes feeding as well.

About the only "big miss" of the day was White-winged and Black Scoters. While we had lots of Surf Scoters, the other two species were conspicuously absent. On the brighter side, many of the Surf Scoter females were very cooperative allowing us to see the dark cap that separates them from their white-winged cousins. Of course, the males were striking in their dress plumage.

All told, I call this the best trip I've sponsored to the Naval Air Station. I'm standing well clear of the "lead" word since it took all I could do to keep up with the rest of the group. I sincerely hope you'll put it on your schedule to attend next year. We always target the first Saturday in March for this trip. No social security numbers or reservations are required. The days of needing that information are long gone. All you need is a picture ID, like a driver's license, if you're accompanying someone with base access. I'm already looking forward to next March.

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## From the Field

The January 26 Hard Bargain/Piscataway Creek joint trip with the Audubon Naturalist Society was canceled by Leader Mike Callahan due to creeks being totally iced over. The Polar Vortex strikes again!

### Signs of Spring!

SMECO recently installed four Osprey platforms at Point Lookout State Park. These platforms were placed atop power poles already located in the park and will keep the Ospreys away from the lines, reducing the risk of electrocution and providing nesting areas. Kudos to SMECO for a job well done!

Melissa Boyle



## Rarity Roundup

Red-necked Grebes staged an unprecedented surge into Maryland late in the winter as the Great Lakes became 88% frozen. Mikey Lutmerding reported 19 of them in the Patuxent River viewed from the Town Creek Pier! Here's his checklist with photos: <http://ebird.org/ebird/view/checklist?subID=S17009284>

White-winged Scoters, though not nearly as unusual as Red-necked Grebes, also staged a late winter surge from the Great Lakes. Typically, this is the hardest of the three scoter species to find in southern Maryland but they've been showing up in strange places far up the Potomac River as far north as Harper's Ferry, WV!

In February, also tied to the several Polar Vortexes responsible for the big freeze up north, as well as locally, a female King Eider, originally found at Sandy Point State Park, was seen at North Beach on February 4 by Jim Stasz. Heavy ice formation further up the Chesapeake presumably pushed this bird, and other waterfowl, southward. There is only one previous King Eider record in Calvert County, also seen by Jim Stasz.

Several winters ago, a Greater White-fronted Goose was found in Glasscock Field just south of the Thomas Johnson Bridge in Solomons. It came back for several winters though it was absent last winter. A bird, perhaps the same one, was a one day wonder on March 5. Coincidentally, a large liftoff of geese began the next day as warmer temps and longer day length prompted many migrant waterfowl to start their journey to breeding grounds.

In the For What It's Worth category, a drake Mandarin Duck was found at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center in Edgewater on March 10. It was consorting with a female Mandarin Duck. They have been hanging out with Wood Ducks, birds in the same genus, Aix. On the Anne Arundel Birding Facebook page, two other observers noted a pair (maybe the same pair?) not too far north of SERC before the creeks all froze. A Google search of images turned up a web link of a similar pairing:

<http://www.utahbirds.org/featarts/2004/MandarinDuck2.htm>

birds' breasts soar through the  
unexpected, neutral minds sing  
joy, eyes unblinking

by Dale Louise Raney  
Mar 18, 2013



## Maryland's Midwinter Waterfowl Survey Results Announced

by kking

January Midwinter Waterfowl Survey for Maryland  
2010 – 2014

Each winter, aerial survey teams of pilots and biologists from The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources make visual estimates of ducks, swans and geese along Maryland's Chesapeake Bay shoreline and Atlantic coast. This year the teams witnessed more than 905,000 waterfowl, 22 percent higher than those observed in January 2013 (739,600).

Biologists attribute the higher count to the fact many species flocked to Maryland's portion of the Chesapeake Bay due to severe winter conditions to the north. Additionally, large areas of the Bay and tributaries were ice covered during the survey period, concentrating waterfowl in ice-free, open waters where they were more easily counted.

The survey estimates for mallards, black ducks and canvasbacks were the highest they have been since the mid-1970s. Overall, dabbling ducks were more abundant this time around (128,000) compared to last winter (72,800). There were nearly twice as many diving ducks this survey (190,300) over last year (98,100). The canvasback count (68,400) was the highest since the mid-1960s, and far greater than the January 2013 estimate (18,400).

Survey teams also observed large numbers of wintering Canada geese (512,100) along the upper Chesapeake Bay. The extensive snow and ice in northern latitudes pushed large numbers of geese south to the Chesapeake from their normal wintering areas in southern Ontario and the Finger Lakes region of New York.

The Midwinter Waterfowl Survey has been conducted annually throughout the United States since the early 1950s. The Maryland survey results (see chart below) are ultimately pooled with other states' results to provide a measure of the distribution and population size of waterfowl wintering in the Atlantic Flyway, as well as information on long-term trends. The final Midwinter Waterfowl Survey numbers for other Atlantic flyway states may be viewed here:

[http://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Hunt\\_Trap/pdfs/2014\\_Final\\_MWS.pdf](http://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Hunt_Trap/pdfs/2014_Final_MWS.pdf)

Keep up to date with DNR's Wildlife & Heritage Service on Facebook and Twitter @MDDNRWildlife.



Species	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Mallard	34,200	55,100	57,400	33,100	75,900
Black Duck	22,500	23,000	27,700	22,500	39,300
Gadwall	2,000	6,400	5,000	7,400	4,000
Widgeon	300	200	1,400	500	800
G-W Teal	600	600	3,700	6,300	3,900
Shoveler	0	100	200	1,700	100
Pintail	500	1,200	1,200	1,300	4,000
<b>Total Dabblers</b>	<b>60,100</b>	<b>86,600</b>	<b>96,600</b>	<b>72,800</b>	<b>128,000</b>
Redhead	3,400	4,700	4,500	16,700	15,900
Canvasback	26,400	46,100	14,300	18,400	68,400
Scaup	43,500	37,100	69,200	27,500	47,100
Ring-neck	900	1,600	1,300	1,900	1,600
Goldeneye	600	300	900	800	1,500
Bufflehead	13,700	7,800	19,800	15,600	21,800
Ruddy Duck	13,400	17,500	15,300	17,200	34,000
<b>Total Divers</b>	<b>102,000</b>	<b>115,100</b>	<b>125,300</b>	<b>98,100</b>	<b>190,300</b>
Scoters	900	200	5,100	2,000	7,600
Long-tailed Duck	200	300	800	600	200
Mergansers	10,600	7,800	2,800	2,000	6,200
<b>Total Ducks</b>	<b>173,700</b>	<b>210,000</b>	<b>230,600</b>	<b>175,500</b>	<b>332,400</b>
Brant	1,000	1,500	500	1,500	600
Snow Goose	78,600	28,200	43,400	83,300	44,200
Canada Goose	519,500	397,700	342,600	462,000	512,100
Tundra Swan	14,000	14,400	16,600	17,300	16,100
<b>Total Waterfowl</b>	<b>787,100</b>	<b>651,800</b>	<b>633,700</b>	<b>739,600</b>	<b>905,500</b>

<http://news.maryland.gov/dnr/2014/03/07/dnr-announces-midwinter-waterfowl-survey-results/>

### House Sparrow

Despised immigrant  
twice misnamed dirt common - your  
voice draws through window

### Warbler

Defined by your rump -  
how gauche. But you could belong  
to failed storekeeper,

Aphrodite's tree,  
or Latin obscurity.  
So, be butter butt.

Al Schirmacher  
Muscotah, KS

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## With So Many Snowies to Study, Scientists Are Discovering How Little We Know About This Bird

By Scott Weidensaul

Published: March-April 2014

Audubon Magazine

After a banner year for Arctic rodents, the greatest snowy owl explosion in half a century has descended on the eastern United States--and it's teaching us about these nomads from the north.

No one saw it coming. The earliest signs were from Cape Race, Newfoundland, just about the easternmost point on the continent--the very definition of the end of the road. It's not the sort of place that usually makes news: When the Titanic sank, Cape Race got the distress signal, but that was back in 1912. It's been pretty quiet ever since.

In November, though, people started noticing a bizarre number of snowy owls there. One or two would be normal, but 18, as reported on Nov. 22? "It is now officially a BIG Snowy Owl event," Newfoundland birding blogger Bruce Mactavish wrote excitedly. "How big will it get? . . . In extreme Snowy Owl years I think the Cape Race road record is more than 30. . . . [this] may be just a hint of what is about to happen."

The next day there were 42 owls there.

About a week later the count was 138. And on December 8 Mactavish tallied 206 of the ghostly raptors. Owls flushed from the roadside as he drove out the cape, or crowded together, three or four at a time on each little hillock, in gusty snow squalls and rising wind. "Anywhere you looked you could see them flying low over the barrens," he reported that night to the local birding list. From one spot, he said, he counted 75 with a single sweep of his binoculars.

Across the map--from Minnesota to the Maritimes, all around the Great Lakes and down the Atlantic Coast to the Carolinas--snowy owls were appearing like magic. One even showed up in Bermuda, another in Florida (just the third in recorded history). They were flooding across the border in numbers that hadn't been seen in perhaps half a century.

This record-breaking irruption--as such unpredictable invasions of northern birds are known--was unfolding just as scientists are making one stunning discovery after another about these gorgeous and charismatic birds, turning much of what we thought we knew about snowy owls on its head.

We now know that these birds are among the world's great avian nomads, ranging thousands of miles across the Arctic. They somehow ferret out areas with exploding populations of lemmings, a favorite summer food, provisioning their nests with literal heaps of dead rodents. Well fed and fertile, the female owls produce chicks in astonishing numbers--youngsters that, when conditions are right, move south en masse.

Every four years or so there's a modest irruption, timed to four-year lemming cycles. But when the stars align perfectly--superabundant food, a high concentration of nesting owls, early and deep snows in the north--there can be a huge invasion like the one this year.

Still, even when all the conditions are right, it can be tough to predict an avalanche. In fact, scientists like Jean-Francois Therrien, working in the Canadian Arctic, have found that at least some snowy owls will actually go north for the winter, spending months of endless darkness amid the desolation of the polar ice pack, a behavior no one suspected until recently.

Snowy owls, frankly, are largely a mystery--which is why this winter's invasion provided an unparalleled opportunity. Through several hectic weeks in December, some colleagues and I assembled dozens of collaborators across the irruption zone, each bringing their own specialty to bear in a frenzied effort that we have named Project SNOWstorm. (SNOW is the shorthand, four-letter code that banders and birders use for this bird.)

Some of us are trapping and tagging owls to track their movements; others are testing blood samples to determine a bird's sex and genetic makeup, or analyzing tiny snippets of feathers whose chemical isotopes may shed light on just where the owls originated. Some are coordinating wildlife veterinarians and rehabilitators to gather data from injured and ill owls, enlisting wildlife pathologists to conduct necropsies on dead ones, and taking tissue samples that could be tested for toxins and contaminants.

I thought I was going to have a quiet winter, finishing up a book on owls, until the news spilled down from Newfoundland. "We won't live long enough to see something like this again," my friend Dave Brinker said, shaking his head when I told him about the count.

Read more! <http://tinyurl.com/NAS-Snowy-Owls>

### WELCOME, NEW MEMBERS!

Jan Degeneffe, Huntingtown  
Lori B. Geisweidt, La Plata  
Matthew Horr, Lexington Park  
Cindy Keller, Mechanicsville  
Karen Lane, Dunkirk  
Dale Sakahara, California  
Shirley Spano, Prince Frederick  
Daniel P. Waltz, La Plata  
Caesar White, Suitland  
John Wood, La Plata

## Book Notes: More Rarities

If you have a hankering for understanding, or finding out more about some of the rarities that we profile on a monthly basis, *Rare Birds of North America* (Princeton, 2014) is the book for you. This is a unique and beautifully illustrated guide to most of the vagrant birds that have occurred across the continental United States and Canada. The authors - Steve N.G. Howell, Ian Lewington, and Will Russell - cover 262 mouth-watering species originating in three different regions - the Old World (Europe and NE Asia), the New World tropics (mostly Mexico and the Caribbean), and the ocean waters which touch North American shores.

The book contains 275 sumptuous plates (by Lewington) depicting every species profiled in the book, including illustrations of some more common look-alike species to help clarify identification problems.

The authors' standard for inclusion in this book of vagrants is the confirmed occurrence of five or fewer individuals of any species found annually in North America. One can quibble over what to include or not include, but the authors have done an amazing job in choosing what species to profile.

Most informative is the dense - but essential - introductory 41 pages which attempt to explain patterns of species' occurrence by region and season, a synthesis of the theories that account for occurrences of these rarities, and finally putting all of this information in an appropriate context. As a primer for understanding vagrancy and migration, the introduction is remarkable. Furthermore, the seven explanations for North American vagrancy are thoughtfully presented: drift, misorientation, overshooting, dispersal, association, disorientation, and false vagrancy.

Each of the 262 species accounts is terse, yet thorough. The "comments" section for each species account is particularly interesting, summarizing solid knowledge and informed speculation on the occurrence of each species in question. Identification details, although essential, can be found in other books, but it's good to have it all in one place.

*Rare Birds of North America* should enrich the field experience of those interested in finding and observing rare birds, and it should serve as an encouragement to all.

Birding Community E-bulletin  
Paul J. Baicich  
410-992-9736  
[paul.baicich@verizon.net](mailto:paul.baicich@verizon.net)

You can access past E-bulletins on the National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) website:  
[www.refugenet.org/birding/birding5.html](http://www.refugenet.org/birding/birding5.html)

Southern Maryland Audubon Society

## ADOPT-A-RAPTOR

Foster Parents Needed!!



The Southern Maryland Audubon Society supports raptor conservation and research projects in the Southern Maryland area through the "Adopt-A-Raptor" Program. The program currently includes four species: **Osprey, Barn Owl, American Kestrel and Northern Saw-whet Owl.** Each bird is banded by a licensed bird bander with a serially numbered metal band, in cooperation with the U.S. Bird Banding Laboratory. A limited number of birds are available for adoption each year!

**NEW FOR 2013!! "Adopt-A-Nest" now available for Osprey, Barn Owl & Kestrels!**

### **Adoptive "parents" will receive:**

A certificate of adoption with the bird's band number, and location and date of banding.

Information on the ecology and migration patterns of the species

Any other pertinent information that may become available

### **Your support helps provide:**

- Barn Owl Nest Boxes
- Osprey Nesting Platforms
- Kestrel Nest Boxes
- Mist Nets or Banding Supplies

Complete the form below to "Adopt-A-Raptor" with the Southern Maryland Audubon Society

Mail completed form to: *Melissa Boyle, Adopt-a-Raptor,  
10455 Point Lookout Rd. Scotland, MD 20687*

Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
as it should appear on Adoption Certificate

Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I wish to adopt:

\_\_\_\_\_ (# of) Osprey, \$10 each / \$25 per nest

\_\_\_\_\_ (# of) Barn Owl, \$25 each / \$50 per nest

\_\_\_\_\_ (# of) Northern Saw-whet Owl, \$30 each

\_\_\_\_\_ (# of) American Kestrel, \$35 each / \$75 per nest

Amount Enclosed: \_\_\_\_\_

*Make checks payable to: Southern Maryland Audubon Society*



## UPCOMING EVENTS

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**April 2 – WEDNESDAY – 7:30 p.m.**

### **Monthly Meeting Program**

#### **Charlotte Hall Library, St. Mary's County**

37600 New Market Road (Rt. 6 at Rt. 5)

Charlotte Hall, MD 20622

#### **“BUTTERFLY BIOLOGY: THE BASICS OF BUTTERFLY GARDENING”**

Kerry Wixted, Biologist II, MD DNR Wildlife and Heritage Service

What's a host plant, and why is Butterfly Bush bad? Learn the answers to these questions as well as the basics of butterfly biology and gardening. Kerry is a native plant enthusiast and runs the Wild Acres backyard wildlife habitat program for MD DNR.

**April 13 – SUNDAY – 7:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.**

### **Field Trip**

#### **Indian Head area, Charles County**

“INDIAN HEAD RAIL TRAIL AND SMALLWOOD STATE PARK”

This is a joint trip with the Audubon Naturalist Society.

Leader(s): Carol Ghebelian (301-753-6754,

[ghebelian@comcast.net](mailto:ghebelian@comcast.net)) and

Lynne Wheeler ([comstockel@aol.com](mailto:comstockel@aol.com))

The Indian Head Rail Trail is one of the best locations for Red-headed Woodpeckers in the state. We will also bird Smallwood State Park, Marbury, MD for early migrants. Come and see the Red-heads and help us find migrants who are heading north! Meet at 7:30 a.m. at the Burger King, 3165 Marshall Hall Rd, Bryans Rd, MD 20616. RSVP not required, just come and have fun!

**April 19 – SATURDAY – 8:00 a.m. – 11 a.m.**

### **Field Trip**

#### **Sotterley Plantation, St. Mary's County**

“EAGLES, EARTH DAY, AND SOTTERLEY”

Leaders: Michael Patterson and David Moulton

(240-278-4473)

Usher in your Earth Day week with a bird-filled exploration of this scenic and historic Patuxent River property. Nesting Bald Eagles, meadowlarks, woodpeckers and waterfowl can be found via Sotterley's extensive new trail system. Beginner Birders Welcome! GPS Directions: 44300 Sotterley Lane, Hollywood, MD 20636. From MD-235, go north onto MD-245, Sotterley Road. Turn right onto Sotterley Lane to the gravel parking lot on the Sotterley historic property. RSVP to [moulton.davidh@gmail.com](mailto:moulton.davidh@gmail.com) by April 18.

**May 4 – SUNDAY – high tide**

### **Kayak and Bird Water Trip**

#### **Allen's Fresh, Charles County**

“KAYAKS, EAGLES AND OSPREY'S...OH MY!” a guided paddle trip on Allen's Fresh

Leader: Melissa Boyle ([melissaboyle3@gmail.com](mailto:melissaboyle3@gmail.com) or

443-340-3035) and Blue Heron Expeditions

Join SMAS and Blue Heron Expeditions for this unique trip on Allen's Fresh. We have designed a trip that combines the best of the best: one of the best places to bird in Southern Maryland, and one of the best paddles spots too! Certified kayak guides and experienced birders will lead you through the wetlands during this leisurely half-day paddle. A great trip for beginning birders or beginner paddlers alike! All kayaking equipment is provided; \$40/person. Arrangements are being made if you have your own kayak and paddle equipment; talk to Melissa. The time for this trip is to be determined by the high tide. You will be told of the exact meeting time upon registration. **RSVP by April 28th to Melissa.** A Minimum of 10 people is necessary for this trip.

**May 7 – WEDNESDAY – 7:30 p.m.**

### **Monthly Meeting Program**

#### **Leonardtown Library, St. Mary's County**

23250 Hollywood Road (Rt. 245), Leonardtown, MD

“SALTMARSH PROJECT”

Krysta Hougen, Teacher Naturalist and Camp Director, Pickering Creek Audubon Center and David Curson, Director of Bird Conservation, Audubon MD-DC

Join Audubon Maryland-DC to learn more about our state's salt marshes. Audubon will share how their ongoing work in Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge betters our understanding of this Globally Important Bird Area and how, along with partners, is working to prepare the vital habitat for changes due to climate change. Following the presentation, participants will learn of the “Audubon at Blackwater day;”, a day created for regional Audubon chapters to meet each other, tour Blackwater, and participate in a restoration project.

**May 10 – SATURDAY – All Day**

### **COUNTY MAY COUNTS**

#### **Calvert, Charles, Prince George's, St. Mary's Counties**

Help is always appreciated from all: backyard birders, beginners, new members. This is a great way to learn! Data and information help save our birds! The county coordinators for you to contact are as follows:

Calvert: Sue Hamilton (410-586-1494,

[seal10n2002@yahoo.com](mailto:seal10n2002@yahoo.com))

Charles: George Jett (301-843-3524,

[gmjett@comcast.net](mailto:gmjett@comcast.net))

Prince George's: Fred Fallon (301-249-1518,

[fwfallon@earthlink.net](mailto:fwfallon@earthlink.net))

St. Mary's: Patty Craig (301-872-5670,

[walelu67@yahoo.com](mailto:walelu67@yahoo.com))

**EDITOR:** Tyler Bell E-mail: [jtylerbell@yahoo.com](mailto:jtylerbell@yahoo.com)

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.

### **2013-2014 Officers**

President, Mike Callahan (240-765-5192)  
Vice-President, Michael Patterson (301-752-5763)  
Secretary, Lynne Wheeler (301-743-3236)  
Treasurer, Will Daniel (301-274-5756)