

# The Todd Nuthatch



Indiana, PA

The Quarterly Newsletter of the Todd Bird Club  
[www.toddbirdclub.org](http://www.toddbirdclub.org)

October 2023

## Meetings

**Tuesday, October 3** – Kraig Cawley will present *Exploring Australia after the Fires and Floods of 2020*. Kraig will share the highlights of the trip he and his wife took, focusing on each region's endemics. For more information about this program and our speaker, go to our website, [www.toddbirdclub.org](http://www.toddbirdclub.org), click on "Resources" and select "Newsletters," then "August 2023."

**Tuesday, November 7** – Mike Fialkovich will present *Costa Rica Birds and Wildlife* at our November meeting.

Mike Fialkovich, the Vice President of the Three Rivers Birding Club (3RBC) in Pittsburgh, a field trip leader, and Bird Reports Editor for 3RBC, has presented several excellent programs to our group in years past.

He currently is an eBird reviewer for three counties – Allegheny, Fayette, and Westmoreland.



The Blue-faced Honeyeater is just one of the endemics we'll meet at our October meeting.

Photo by Kraig Cawley

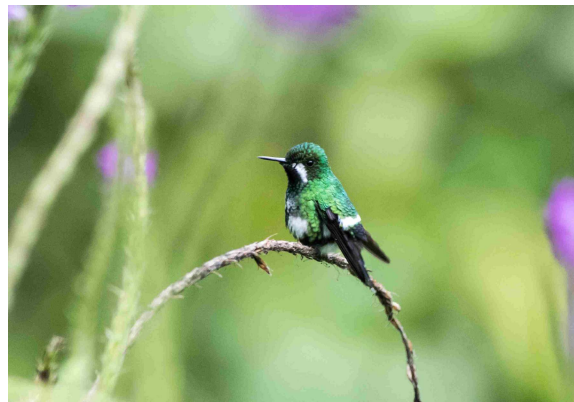
Previously Mike served as a PSO Board member, Vice President, President, and Past President. He is a Seasonal Editor and Allegheny and Fayette county compiler for *Pennsylvania Birds*, the journal of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology. Mike served on the Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee from 2012-2021 and wrote the PORC annual reports from 2012-2021.

During the *Second Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas*, Mike was a Regional Coordinator and author for the Atlas.

He was the recipient of the Todd Award from the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania in 2011.

Mike also was a block owner during the Pennsylvania Herpetological Atlas Project and ran a frog calling survey in northern Allegheny County.

We extend a warm welcome to Mike!



Mike Fialkovich photographed this female Green Thorntail, a very small hummingbird that is found in humid foothill forest and edge with adjacent second growth.

**Tuesday, December 5** – Court Harding is a biology graduate student in the Townsend Lab at IUP. Court returns to the Todd Bird Club to talk more about birding in Honduras. A trained biologist (and wildlife photographer!), Court lived in Honduras from March to June this year between field work on the Caribbean island of Utila and a study abroad course taught by Dr. Townsend on the mainland. Court will talk about birding an island during spring migration and on the mainland



A Golden-hooded Tanager made an appearance at an ecolodge and cacao farm in Santa Cruz de Yojoa, Honduras.

Photo by Court Harding

while with a group of students. Of the 224 bird species observed this year by the group, at least 100 bird species will be showcased in this presentation.

**Tuesday, January 2** – Members' Night. Please bring your digital or printed photos, anecdotes, stories, souvenirs, etc. We want to see and hear your birding experiences! It's more fun if everyone participates!!! We hope to see you there.

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## Outings

**Tuesday Morning Outings** – These will continue until regular deer season which starts November 25 and runs through December 9. On Tuesdays, meet on the north shore at 7:15 a.m. in October until the time change on November 5; after that, meet at 7:00 a.m.

**Saturday, October 7** – Yellow Creek State Park, led by Gloria Lamer (724-349-1159). Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the park office, located along PA 259 just off US 422. We'll be targeting migrants and early wintering birds.

**Saturday, October 14** – Yellow Creek State Park, led by Court Harding (chardinglou@gmail.com). Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the park office, located along PA 259 just off US 422.

**Tuesday, October 17** – The Allegheny Front. We'll meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Yellow Creek State Park office and carpool to the Allegheny Front near Central City. We'll spend the day sitting on top of the mountain watching for hawks. Dress warmly and bring your lunch and something to sit on. This trip is weather dependent. We are hoping for an east wind to keep the hawks close to the site.

**Saturday, October 21** – Blacklick Valley Natural Area, led by Roger & Margaret Higbee. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the parking lot along McFeaters Road, just off US 22 near Armagh. We'll walk the paths searching for migrants and early wintering birds along the trail.

**Saturday, October 28** – The Allegheny Front. We'll meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Yellow Creek State Park office and carpool to the Allegheny Front near Central City. We'll spend the day sitting on top of the mountain watching hawks. Bring something to sit on as well as your lunch. This trip is weather dependent. We are hoping for an east wind to keep the hawks close to the site.

**Saturday, November 4** – Yellow Creek State Park, led by Matt St Clair. This is our joint outing with Three Rivers Birding Club. Meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Yellow Creek State Park office, located just off US 422 on PA 259.

**Saturday, November 11** – Moraine State Park, led by Linda Wagner (724-657-0867). Meet at 8:00 a.m. in the day-use area by the restrooms. We'll bird the day-use area for migrants and wintering birds.

**Tuesday, December 26** – Indiana Christmas Bird Count. This count is conducted in a 15-mile-diameter circle centered at the intersection of Second and Grandview in Indiana. If you live within 7.5 miles of this intersection, you are welcome to do a feeder and/or yard count. Otherwise, you may join one of our field parties or take responsibility for a section of the count circle. Please contact Roger or Margaret Higbee (724-354-3493) if you plan to participate.

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## Help Needed

Todd Bird Club needs an Outings Director. The job includes scheduling outings on a quarterly basis by emailing or calling trip leaders well in advance of our newsletter publication dates (before the last week of

December, March, July, and September) as our newsletters are published in January, April, August, October. Please call the Higbees (724-354-3493) if you are interested.

# New Year's Day 2024 Birding

What will be your first bird of the new year? Will you hear a Great Horned Owl hooting at 12:01 a.m.? Or will you hear a Northern Cardinal chipping at 7:00? Or, if you've been partying the night before, will it be a House Sparrow at noon?

Whatever your first bird is, please let us know. The list of "first birds" will appear in our January issue of "The Todd Nuthatch." Either email or call with your first bird. ([bcoriole@windstream.net](mailto:bcoriole@windstream.net) or 724-354-3493)

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## January 1 Birding

One more thing to do on New Year's Day.... No matter where you are on January 1, make a list of all the birds you see. It doesn't matter if you're in Pennsylvania, New York, Arizona, Florida, Costa Rica, Timbucktu, wherever!

Let's see how many species Todd Bird Club members can compile on January 1, 2024. E-mail your bird list to [bcoriole@windstream.net](mailto:bcoriole@windstream.net) or call 724-354-3493.

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## Birding in the Northern Outer Banks

By Trent Millum

Starting on Saturday, August 12, 2023, my partner Haley Romanko and I began the drive down to Corolla, North Carolina, for a weeklong vacation on the Outer Banks. This is the spot her family travels to each summer in August. I had never been there before and was looking forward to a needed break from work, and of course, new birding opportunities. Since becoming a birder a little over two years ago, I have had minimal birdwatching opportunities along the coast. In my first summer as a birder, when I lived in New Hampshire, my friend and I took a trip to Portland, Maine, and had a great day birding. Other than that, and going to the Erie shoreline with Todd Bird Club, I really haven't done a lot of coastal birding.

Back in the spring, from their collection Margaret and Roger lent me three North Carolina birding books that I leafed through ahead of time while scouting places to bird in and around Corolla. In addition, I was keeping a close eye on eBird checklists for hotspots in Corolla, excited at the opportunity it seemed I would have to see shorebirds and other summer residents to add to my life list. Finally, on August 12, we arrived in the Outer Banks, and I was able to take my binoculars out into the extreme humidity for the first time that week.

The first location was the Nags Head Ecological Preserve, owned by the Nature Conservancy. We stopped here for some birding before making the drive on Route 12 up to Corolla. The preserve was a nice mix of swamp and forested habitat. We decided to walk the Roanoke Trail to



At Nags Head we spotted the first of many Osprey.

the sound. Overall, the woods were really quiet minus the bugs, which began a theme that carried through the rest of the week. I did not see many birds on my hikes through the maritime and coastal forests, regardless of where I was. We arrived close to 10:00 a.m., and it was already hot and humid. The trail wound through the woods and ended up in a small opening on the shore of the sound. Here I saw my first

ever Blue Grosbeak, one of my songbird targets. I heard it singing from the woods then saw it perched on a dead tree when we reached the end of the trail. This was also where we got the first of many Ospreys for the week, calling and diving for fish.

Once in Corolla, I birded in the same areas throughout the week. Just north of the vacation home is the Currituck Banks National Estuarine Research Reserve. Early one morning (which did nothing to cut down on the humidity), we hiked the boardwalk trail that opens up over the Currituck Sound. The morning was pretty quiet for birds, especially in the woods. However, when we arrived at the end of the boardwalk, four Osprey were perched in trees along the edge of the woods. They were very noisy, screeching loudly, and occasionally taking off to fish. Haley Romanko, an adept photographer who just recently started photographing birds, gets all the credit for photos in this article.

After hiking at the reserve, I decided to stop at Currituck Heritage Park/Whalehead Club, the area I would frequently visit during the week. I merely parked my bike,



walked up to the first boardwalk on the sound with a gazebo overhead, and was greeted by hundreds of shorebirds feeding on the mudflats at an amazingly close distance. This was the perfect place for a birder inexperienced with shorebirds to camp out to study them. This is exactly what I did for a few hours. The mudflat flock was made up of mostly Semipalmated and Least Sandpipers. With the sunlight at my back and plenty of cooperative birds, I was able to study their subtle differences in color and size. While scanning the flock, I noticed a few other sandpipers I had not yet identified. One was right in front of the salt marsh bobbing its tail, a behavior I had read up on ahead of time and therefore recognized as belonging to a Spotted Sandpiper. Also present were a few Pectoral Sandpipers, Solitary Sandpipers, and Semipalmated Plovers, in addition to Lesser Yellowlegs and Killdeer. Most of these were life birds for me, and the ones that weren't provided a much clearer view than I had ever had before.

While I was scanning the flock, I did a double take as my eyes caught a bird at the back of the group in front of the salt marsh bobbing up and down and feeding. It was clearly bigger than the other birds, and when I trained on it, I saw it was very different as well. Through the use of my field guide (as Merlin did not consider this bird likely for North Carolina at that time), I was able to identify the bird as a Sora. This was exciting as it was both unexpected and a life bird! eBird did not want to believe me, and I was not able to get a great photo of it that day, so I attempted to return later in the week to see if it would appear again for a photo. Sure enough, while watching the same area two days later, the Sora popped out for a few minutes again, and this time Haley was with me with her camera in tow to get a photo.

As we left that boardwalk and walked around toward the water's edge on the sound in Currituck Park, we stopped first at the pond and found a Little Blue Heron, another life bird for me, just sitting on the boardwalk railing looking out over the pond. It was spooked by another



The flock included many Semipalmated Sandpipers.



A few Lesser Yellowlegs were also present.



Haley snagged a photo the second time Trent spotted the Sora.



The pond in Currituck Park yielded yet another lifer for Trent.

visitor and flew over to the other edge, and Haley was able to snag a photo of it in flight. The edge of the sound was seething with shorebirds, all feeding in the extensive mudflats. Periodically, they would all take off and make a quick loop in flight before landing back in nearly the same locations as they had been before, almost in unison. In addition to the species spotted earlier, we saw Ruddy Turnstones, another new shorebird for me. I could have stayed here all day studying the shorebirds, even with the beating sun and hot temperatures.

Maybe the most enjoyable birdwatching of the week were the moments when I was not actively looking for birds or compiling a list. Sitting on the beach, it was immensely enjoyable to watch the Sanderlings and Willets feeding in the tide. They would scurry along the sand and remain remarkably in line with the water's edge, gracefully feeding as the waves came in and out. As I mentioned earlier, the Osprey were plentiful. It was almost impossible to look up in the sky and not see one flying over or diving into the ocean, twisting in midair, then coming out of the water with a fish in its talons. Every morning I would sit on the deck waiting for the sunrise, and at almost the same time each day as the daylight began to streak through, flocks of Purple Martins would appear out of nowhere, gracefully dipping and flying along the rooftops of the beach houses. Haley and I took a couple of walks on the beach to the northernmost point before the Currituck Banks Reserve began, about a mile from the vacation home, and would pass by dozens of

groupings of birds, including many Laughing Gulls, Herring Gulls, and a few Great Black-backed Gulls as well.

Overall, I tallied 13 life birds on the trip: Blue Grosbeak, Sora, Semipalmated Plover, Least Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, Spotted Sandpiper, Sanderling, Willet, Ruddy Turnstone, Little Blue Heron, Laughing Gull, Sandwich Tern, and Boat-tailed Grackle, in addition to some of the best looks I have ever had of several other species.

# Birding Mysteries

By Debbie Kalbfleisch

On May 23, the Todd Bird Club had an outing to the South Shore of Moraine State Park, and Margaret and Roger Higbee invited several people from Indiana to ride with them. As they made the turn into the first parking lot, Carol Guba had her window down and heard the song of a Golden-winged Warbler! This is a species that is not often seen in western Pennsylvania, although they once bred here. The dozen people in our group valiantly surrounded the weedy patch between the Sunken Garden Trail and Pleasant Valley Road, where the bird was singing. Unfortunately, the bird eventually stopped singing, without anyone's getting to see it. Margaret suspected a hybrid, and it never made the day's final list. We continued to have an excellent morning thanks to Mike Shaffer, with a total of 47 species.

I have the advantage of living only 20 minutes from the South Shore; and two days later, I drove to Moraine to see if the mystery bird was still singing. Arriving just before 9:00 a.m., I heard the Golden-winged Warbler (GWWA), this time singing on the west side of Pleasant Valley Road, just before the turn into the parking lot. It sang for about 10 minutes, moving from bush to bush, before going up the hill. It returned a couple of times after that, always moving in a counter-clockwise circle, and I wondered if it might have been setting up a territory. It always sang "bee buzz buzz," with two buzz notes at the end. Frustratingly, I never got a glimpse of the bird.

On the 26<sup>th</sup>, I arrived at 8:22 a.m. Just before 9:00, the GWWA sang from the hillside with its two-buzz song and continued for about ten minutes, always keeping itself carefully hidden. Melissa Little and her dog Henry arrived a few minutes after it stopped singing, and she was with me at 9:28 when it started again. We could pinpoint the GWWA song coming from very thick shrubbery close to where we were standing, but we never detected any motion. This time, however, a Blue-winged Warbler



This Golden-winged Warbler, photographed on territory in Centre County at Scotia Barrens by Roger Higbee, turns up occasionally in western PA.



This Blue-winged Warbler, photographed at Blue Spruce, also by Roger Higbee, is a common nesting bird in western PA.



Steve Gosser photographed this hybrid Lawrence's Warbler near West Lebanon.

(BWWA) answered from the other side of the road. The GWWA answered the challenge with a BWWA song — bee buzz back atcha! At that point, we knew we had a hybrid! The two birds hurled insults at each other, and occasionally, the GWWA hybrid would throw in a more typical GWWA three-buzz song, as well as a four-buzz song. Clearly, we were dealing with a talented individual! Two pairs of eyes are better than one, and Melissa spotted a BWWA crossing the road just up from where the hybrid was singing. At first, I assumed the male was coming to do battle and hoped we might catch a glimpse of both birds, but no fight ensued. After a while, we heard the GWWA hybrid moving up the hillside, still singing. Perhaps a female BWWA crossed the road to investigate the newcomer who was crooning *je t'adore* at her.

On the following day, Saturday, the 27<sup>th</sup>, the GWWA hybrid was singing when I arrived at 7:44 a.m., but quit at 7:50, and did not sing again until 9:21 when it sang for only four minutes, although I heard it farther back in the woods than I usually did. Both times it sang its bee buzz buzz song. I spent about an hour at that location on the 28<sup>th</sup>, but never heard it sing, nor did I hear it when I went back on May 30. On June 7, I heard the bird calling at 9:39 a.m. when I arrived, and it sang for almost ten minutes, quitting at 9:57. I heard it again briefly and for the last

time at 10:30. The last time I went to look for the ghost bird was July 16, but it was silent on that occasion. No, I never did see the bird!

As you probably know, there are two main hybrids between BWWA and GWWA, one called Brewster's Warbler and another called Lawrence's Warbler, with many variations in between. The Brewster's is thought to be the result of a mating between a pure BWWA and a pure GWWA, and has the black eye-line of the BWWA parent, with more white on the underparts from the GWWA parent, caused by the dominant genes. A

Lawrence's Warbler has the black mask of the GWWA and yellow underparts of the BWWA, which are recessive genes. Even if its parents look like a pure BWWA or GWWA or even a Brewster's, as long as both parents carry the recessive genes, their offspring will most likely look like a Lawrence's. I was intensely curious as to what

the Moraine hybrid looked like, but it turned out that this is just another birding mystery that will have to go unsolved. Next spring, I plan to check that South Shore spot at Moraine in case the mystery bird returns again to sing its song!

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## The 2023 Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation Was a Huge Success

By Laura Jackson, PSO Conservation Chair

PSO's 2023 Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation (Blitz) was wildly successful on many fronts. Thanks to all who generously contributed to the \$19,311.00 total – almost double what was raised in 2021 and significantly exceeding our original goal. Not only did the 214 donations from birders, bird clubs, and PSO raise significant dollars for bird conservation projects, but the Blitz also inspired 80 birders to form 21 teams to fundraise and document bird observations by submitting 637 checklists to eBird. Birders found more species this year, too: a total of 175, surpassing 152 in 2021 and 169 in 2022.

The Blitz incorporated a sense of competition by recognizing top teams in fundraising, species counts, and low carbon birding (bird counts done on foot or by bike, etc.), but also encouraged teams to submit their findings to eBird. There was also a category for "Least Birded," encouraging teams to explore counties where few eBird reports are submitted. The eBird data are invaluable to our understanding of bird dynamics. Since the Blitz occurred in mid-June, many participants documented breeding birds and made some surprising discoveries.

The County Champs in the Northeast Region were the "**Day and Night Hawks**," recording 84 species in Susquehanna County. The **Day and Night Hawks** also won the Low Carbon competition, recording 60 species in Susquehanna County.

The "**Lyco Dendroicas**" were County Champs in the Northcentral Region, recording 59 species in Lycoming

County. The "**Teatime Towhees**" won the Least Birded category, recording 52 species.

The County Champs in the Northwest Region were the "**PA Plovers**," who found 122 species in Erie County. The Low Carbon award went to a new team called "**LumBIRDjacks**," led by Steven Latta. They recorded 31 species in Erie County.

The Southwest Region County Champs were the "**Todd Towhees**." Team captain was Roger Higbee and included Carol Guba, Marg Higbee, and Gloria Lamer. They found 103 species in Indiana County. The "**Bondi Birders**," comprised of Dick Bondi (captain), and Trip Bondi, captured the Low Carbon recognition in Washington County with 6 species.

County Champs in the Southcentral Region were the "**Crazed Cuckoos**:" They found 105 species in Perry County and also earned the Least Birded designation in Fulton County, finding 101 species. The "**Raven Lunatics**:" captured the Low Carbon Award by documenting 57 species in Cumberland County.

The "**Kingfishers**" were County Champs in the Southeast Region, recording 113 species in Dauphin County.

"**Rosalie's Raptors**" won the Regional Count after finding 100 species in Berks, Schuylkill, and Lehigh Counties. This region also had the top Youth Team, the "**Garnet Valley Vireos**," recording 88 species in Delaware County.

## Congratulations to the PA Champs

The top two teams were the PA Plovers for recording the most species (122) and the Todd Towhees for raising the most money (\$4,155).

Other teams that participated, even though they didn't qualify for any of the special recognitions are:

Black Valley Buzzards  
Brandywine Breeding Bird  
Blitzers

Gator Birders  
Hendricks' Hawkwatchers

Manada Bird-brains  
Quittie Audubon  
Reelly Kid-Icking Good Birders

South Mountain Audubon  
Stork Raven Mad



All of the teams should be proud of the money raised that was donated to our three partners:

**Hawk Mountain**, which will use their donation to help fund the Third Breeding Bird Atlas in Pennsylvania, which starts in 2024. The **Foundation for Sustainable Forests**, another partner, will use their funds for two projects: invasive species management in the Floraroz Forest in Erie County, and a video production that will highlight ecological forestry and ongoing bird research on their property. Our third partner, **South Middleton**

**Township**, will use their funds to restore habitat for marshland species like the Virginia Rail, which breeds along Yellow Breeches Creek on township property.

We owe the success of the 2023 Blitz to Vern Gauthier (mastermind of the website and the Blitz protocol) and Brian Byrnes (publicity chair), as well as Frank Haas, PSO Treasurer. In addition to Vern and Brian, other Conservation Committee members who helped with the Blitz were Carolyn Hendricks, David Barber, and Laura Jackson.

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## The 2023 Indiana Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation Revisited

By Margaret Higbee

Todd Bird Club sponsored one team, The Todd Towhees, headed by Roger Higbee and including Carol Guba, Gloria Lamer, and me, to participate in the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology's Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation (Blitz). The Blitz ran from June 9-19.

Starting on Friday, June 9, the Towhees decided to start our first day at Yellow Creek State Park. Driving along South Harmony Road, the group scored 19 species before arriving at the park. The north shore alone yielded 44 species with the highlights including the day's only Great Blue Herons, Common Ravens, White-eyed Vireo, Orchard Oriole, and Louisiana Waterthrush – species that had been tough in 2022. A stop on the south shore produced an unexpected Common Tern in addition to Double-crested Cormorants, Green Heron, Purple Martins, and Chestnut-sided Warbler plus 49 other birds with a lot of overlap with those seen on the north shore. After birding a few roads near Yellow Creek, we headed to Snyder Road to pick up Horned Lark, Grasshopper and Clay-colored Sparrows, and Black-and-white Warbler then walked the new section of SGL 273 for Henslow's Sparrow. Our next destination was Two Lick Reservoir for Cliff Swallow, and again we were successful. A drive to Stitt Road added the Hermit Thrush and a stop at the intersection of PA 553 and Laurel Run Road produced an American Kestrel. Along Brown Road we dipped on the Vesper Sparrow, but the Jacksonville area yielded Bobolinks, two more White-eyed Vireos, and Prairie Warbler. A stop at Conemaugh Dam added Common Merganser and Cerulean and Yellow-throated Warblers to our list. We continued birding, hitting various other areas, but we were stuck at 91 species. We knew we had a chance for Eastern Whip-poor-will at SGL 332, so as dusk approached, we headed there with the hope of snagging a Barred Owl as well. We heard the Whip shortly after 9:00 p.m. and ended Day 1 with 92 species and no owls.

All four of us were exhausted, so we decided to take June 10 off and bird on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

On Sunday, June 11, we started our route at our home, heading north toward Plumville then east across the northern part of the county, south to Snyder Road, then ending at Yellow Creek State Park. On this route we added eleven additional species that we had missed with our count of 92 on the 11<sup>th</sup>. They were Wild Turkey, Ruffed Grouse, Virginia Rail, Bald Eagle, Great Crested Flycatcher, Warbling Vireo, Savannah Sparrow, Kentucky Warbler, Northern Parula, Magnolia Warbler, and Blackburnian Warbler. We ended the birding day at 8:19 p.m. with no time to head for the whip-poor-will as we were too far south. Our count at Yellow Creek was 88, so we called it quits with the realization that it was time to rest.

The forecast for Monday, June 12, was not good for birding as rain and strong winds had been predicted. As a result we decided to use the day as a planning day. At 7:30 a.m. we ventured out to check a few places we hadn't hit during the previous two B4C outings. Stops at Windy Ridge Industrial Park, Two Lick Reservoir's East Pike access, Kovalchick Pond and Slough, Oakland Cemetery, and the West Lebanon Strips yielded nothing new except for ten eBird checklists and photos of drenched birds. A stop in Indiana confirmed Fish Crow so we figured that we may be able to find it tomorrow. The four of us returned to our house where Roger pulled out the Indiana County map. We had a fairly good idea of locations we need to bird to up our species number. We cut up strips of post-it notes and pasted them on the map. By noon we had determined a route that would hopefully yield the maximum number of birds in the shortest period of time.

On Tuesday, June 13, we once again started in the northwestern section of the county. In 38 minutes we'd

tallied 45 species. Things were looking up. We confirmed Common Mergansers on two different sections of Mahoning Creek – a hen with five young along Allen Flats Road and a hen with three young at North Point. Looking up, Gloria spotted a Double-crested Cormorant flying overhead, and we were all able to get on it, too. Unfortunately, we also had a few misses. Too much farming activity around our Savannah Sparrow spot created a disturbance, so we missed it. The Virginia Rail was not calling, and we could not see it in the vegetation, but we lucked out spotting an adult and two immature Bald Eagles in the air at one time. By noon on the 13<sup>th</sup> we had listed 80 species. By 5:00 p.m. our count had reached 91, so we were hopeful that we could break 100. We stopped along Philadelphia Street for the Fish Crows. Tick. We headed to two area ponds adding the day's first Mallard and Northern Rough-winged Swallow. Tick...tick. We also spotted our first Cooper's Hawk. Our tally was 95, and we had the rest of the day to find five more species. Dark clouds were starting to form overhead, but we believed we were going to make it to 100! Our next stop was at Snyder Road. The winds picked up, the temperature dropped, and the rain started to fall. Suddenly it was a downpour. No Clay-colored or Grasshopper Sparrow. No Horned Lark. Not even a starling! Roger checked the radar. It did not look promising. The rain would be continuing into the night. So close....

The four of us made plans to try again on Thursday, June 15. We had arrived at our first location in northwestern Indiana by 5:43 a.m. We ran the same route that we had on Tuesday, but we were having better luck. The Virginia Rail that had not been calling on the 13<sup>th</sup> called. The Savannah Sparrow that was nowhere in sight on Tuesday was singing today. We were listing almost all of the same species. By 10 a.m. we had spotted 74 species; by 4:00 p.m. we had reached 92. We picked up Wild Turkeys, Ruffed Grouse, Hermit Thrush, and Magnolia Warbler. A highlight was a Canada Warbler foraging right along the road on private property. We thought that it may have

been carrying food, but we weren't certain, so we didn't count it as a confirmation; but it was one more species for our list. By 4:16 we were back in Indiana adding the Fish Crows to our list. Next we headed to the old VFW pond but added nothing new. Snyder Road yielded the Grasshopper Sparrow but not the Clay-colored. We hurriedly walked out the new section of SGL 273 and snagged the Henslow's Sparrow. From there we drove to Yellow Creek but added nothing new. En route to Conemaugh Dam we added two Mallards. Along Auen Road we amazingly added the day's first Hairy Woodpecker. Conemaugh took us over the top with the addition of Downy Woodpecker, Cerulean Warbler, and Yellow-throated Warbler. A stop along Park Drive near Clarks-burg yielded 14 species including two Swamp Sparrows but no additions to our list. We arrived at SGL 332 at 9:02 and had to wait only seven minutes before the Eastern Whip-poor-will took us to No. 103 for the day. We made it!!! We were finished.

### Epilogue

Well, you'd think that four and a half days of intensive birding would have been enough! Apparently, it wasn't!

After hitting 103 species on the 15<sup>th</sup>, we started studying the map of Indiana County again, thinking about the 2024 Blitz and realized that we had not covered southeastern Indiana at all. What did we miss because we ignored a large section of the county? We decided to check out some of the areas that we did not bird on the Blitz.

Of course, we had to start at Yellow Creek State Park as that was our meeting point. From there we continued south and birded 32 different areas. By 1:30 we had not listed a single species that we had not seen elsewhere in the county. Our last stop of the day was at Fox's Pizza in Seward at 1:40 p.m., an amazingly good stop, complete with a flyover Bald Eagle and a Turkey Vulture. After eating our delicious pizza, it was time to go home. Next year we will do better!

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## What Do Ducks Eat?

By Roger Higbee

While birding at Yellow Creek this spring, the question arose, "What do ducks eat?" This seemed a simple enough question except that there were a number of different answers. Some said fish, some said plants, and others said invertebrates. So what is the answer? Well, I thought this seems like an interesting question to research, so I began to dig into our reference books and did a little searching on the internet. What I found was rather interesting.

To start I reviewed our eBird checklists for several Yellow Creek outings to determine which duck species were present during migration, particularly in February, March, and April of this year. It turns out that during this time period we saw 21 species of ducks. Three of those species were sea ducks (White-winged and Surf Scoter and Long-tailed Duck), and we saw an Eurasian Wigeon, all of which can be classified as accidental. I am separating them from consideration with the fresh water



ducks because of the different diet for the sea ducks and because the Eurasian Wigeon is not a normal migrant through this area. This leaves 17 species to evaluate.

The remaining ducks can be divided into two general categories, surface feeding or dabblers and diving ducks. The surface feeders are those ducks which feed from the surface of the water, eating what they can by either tipping up and extending their heads and necks below the water or eating from the surface and feeding on what they can reach without diving. These ducks remain in the shallow water around the edges of the lake and eat mostly plant material. The divers move away from the shore and dive in the deeper water to feed. There are eight ducks in the diver category, and in general four consume more animal life than plants. Approximately 55% to 90% of their food is animal life. The other four divers consume more plants by a margin of 70% to 90%.

When looking at Yellow Creek as a food source for ducks, it is a veritable smorgasbord. It has the shallow edges from which the surface feeders feed, the deeper water for the divers, and the near-shore land area which the ducks also use.

So what exactly do ducks eat? At the risk of becoming tedious and boring, here are some examples of their plant food intake: aquatic grasses; roots; pondweeds; land grasses; seeds of various aquatic plants such as bulrushes, smartweed, sedges, millet, and others; tubers of aquatic plants; and various other aquatic plants. They also forage on land for nuts such as acorns, beechnuts, and other tree nuts and seeds. Many of them also glean grains including corn, wheat, rice, barley, oats, and other grains from harvested agricultural fields. And just like people, they have their preferred food types with some eating mainly seeds and others, plant material. It was reported in one reference that, if available, Wood Ducks will eat acorns to the exclusion of all other foods. Animal foods eaten include snails; mussels; fish and fish eggs; insects such as dragonflies, damselflies, caddis flies, and mayflies, as well as insect larvae; worms; tadpoles and frogs; leeches; crayfish and other crustaceans.

The diet of some ducks varies according to location and availability of food which can include many different types of food. As an example, the diet of American Black Ducks, surface feeders, that frequent inland freshwater ponds consists mainly of plant foods. This also includes various foods on land including acorns, beechnuts, and blueberries. If when they migrate they move to the coast, they change their diet to almost entirely animal foods including snails, small mollusks, and crustaceans.

The Lesser Scaup, a diver, does not seem to specialize at all and eats what is available wherever it happens to be. Its plant food intake can vary from 10% to 85% which means that animal foods vary from 15% to 90%. It consumes nearly all the above mentioned foods.

One interesting note about both the American and Eurasian Wigeons is that the former will try to take plant food from Canvasbacks, Redheads, or coots when they surface from diving to obtain their own plant food or the latter will try to snatch the leftovers from what swans or geese bring to the surface.

The sea ducks have an almost entirely animal diet. They all eat nearly the same animals including mussels, clams, oysters, small crabs, shrimp, sea squirts, marine worms, small fish, and zooplankton. One impressive fact is that the Long-tailed Duck will dive up to 200 feet deep to obtain food. Quite a remarkable feat!

So in conclusion, ducks as a species seem to eat just about anything aquatic or near shore terrestrial including seeds both aquatic and terrestrial, grains and weed seeds, shell fish, fish, insects, worms, aquatic vegetation, and just about anything they can get their bills on. As I mentioned before, ducks are like people. They have their favorite foods, some are mainly vegetarian, some are mainly carnivorous, and all seem to be omnivorous to some extent.

So to answer the question "What do ducks eat?"

If you answered that ducks eat any of the above foods, you were right.

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## Indiana, Armstrong, Cambria Summer 2023

Abbreviations: Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation (B4C), North Point (NP), Prince Gallitzin State Park (PG), West Penn Trail (WPT), Yellow Creek State Park (YC).

The first 11 days of June were dry with only a small amount of rain falling during this period except for some locally heavy rainfall. This was a continuation of very dry conditions from the end of May which saw no significant rainfall for three weeks. Rainfall then increased for the last part of the month and finished with at or above normal amounts of rainfall with some local areas getting significantly above normal precipitation. Increased moisture continued in July with over 7" of rain falling during the month in some areas which is 2" above normal, but all areas were above normal for the month.

Temperatures ranged from a low of 35° F to a high of 91° F for the month of June. The temperatures averaged below normal for the month. July's temperatures ranged from a low of 51° F to a high of 91° F and averaged above normal.

Water levels remained high at YC as well as at other area ponds throughout June and July; areas that in dryer years provide mudflats for migrating shorebirds were well under water. The puddles in the fields near West Lebanon that in previous years provided great shorebird habitat now contain large stands of grass, so the mud is now non-existent.

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Unusual was the continuing presence of a **Tundra Swan** at Hinckston Run Reservoir 6/22-7/28 (AM); the observer theorized that the bird was probably injured, but nothing was apparent as the bird continued its normal molt. A drake **Ring-necked Duck**, accompanied by a male **Lesser Scaup**, lingered at PG through 6/3 (AL). A single **Hooded Merganser**, an uncommon breeder in *Indiana*, was a nice find at YC 6/17 (CG, MH, RH, GL); unfortunately it was not reported again. **Common Mergansers** were twice confirmed for the B4C when a hen with 5 fledglings was spotted along Mahoning Creek in the county's

northwestern corner 6/13 (CG, MH, RH, GL) and another female with 3 young was found, not too far away, at NP on the same day.

SGL 174 in the northeastern corner of *Indiana*, yielded single **Ruffed Grouse** 6/11, 13 (CG, MH, RH, GL) while another was sighted at Nolo 7/1 (AB). This is an improvement from 2021 when none were reported and 2022 when only one location boasted a grouse. None were reported in *Armstrong* or *Cambria*.

The scarcity of **Black-billed Cuckoos** was unusual as the only individuals were found near Lewisville 6/1, 3 (MC) and in *Armstrong* near the Redbank Trail parking lot 6/8 (KA).

The region's lone **Common Nighthawk** was found in Johnstown's Central Park 6/2 (MHu). A single **Eastern Whip-poor-will** was heard at SGL 332 on 6/9, 15 (CG, MH, RH, GL). Whip-poor-wills were no longer calling near West Lebanon where they were last heard in 2021.

A **Virginia Rail** was calling from the marsh at NP 6/11 (CG, MH, RH, GL).



This photo by Court Harding depicts the entire list of shorebirds found this summer in *Indiana* – 2 Short-billed Dowitchers, one Greater Yellowlegs and one Stilt Sandpiper.

Water levels remained high throughout the summer allowing no mudflats to form for shorebirds. The white sand beach at YC provided minimal habitat in rainy weather when swimmers were absent. July 25 (CH, MH, RH) brought a downpour to YC during Todd Bird Club's Tuesday morning outing. During the storm four shorebirds landed on the beach – a **Stilt Sandpiper**, 2 **Short-billed Dowitchers**, and a **Greater Yellowlegs**. As soon as the rain stopped, all four took off again. Three **Lesser Yellowlegs** were found at Colver Reservoir 7/21 (PI, WI), the only ones noted in the region.

The only **Ring-billed Gull** report in our area mentioned 3 individuals at YC 6/3 (KD). It appears that the **Herring**

**Gull** pair at KT fledged only one chick this year as a large juvenile was observed near the nest with both parents present 6/29 (TR). One **Common Tern** appeared at YC 6/9 (CG, MH, RH, GL); this is only the fourth eBirded summer record for Common Tern.

Single **Double-crested Cormorants** visited PG and four *Indiana* locations on dates bracketed by 6/2 (AL) and 7/25 (CH, MH, RH) with high tally of 7 on the latter date.

Seldom found in *Indiana* during the summer, an **American Bittern** near Union Cemetery 7/22 (HR) was the third summer record. A **Great Egret** that stopped at YC 7/8 (AM) was the lone one observed in the region.

**Black Vultures** were confirmed nesting 6/23 (GT) when two nestlings, “fully in down with wing and tail feathers erupting,” were photographed in the cave opening along the Ghost Town Trail; the adults were not present. Two other sightings of this range-expanding species were noted along US 119 south of *Indiana* on 6/12 (MS) and 7/16 (JT). **Ospreys**, still unconfirmed at YC, were noted there on four dates this summer (v.o.); in addition, Ospreys were found at PG 6/2 (AL), along the WPT 6/4 (AH), at Beaverdam Run 6/6 (JMc), at Mahoning Creek Reservoir 6/24 (AK, JK), and at Duman Lake 7/21 (PI, WI). Two **Northern Harriers** were observed 6/18 (DP, BS) at the Babcock Mine Area where they were observed and photographed hunting together; they were observed again 7/12 (DP, BS). The most consistent spots for **Barred Owl** included the Nolo area (AB, DB) and midway between Crooked Creek and the Allegheny River.

As they continue to expand their range, **Merlins** were listed at four *Indiana* locations (v.o.). Two **Peregrine Falcons** were sighted from the Graff Bridge on the electrical structure 6/23 (MH, RH); a week later 6/30 (ABu) two were observed in Ford City.

Five **Alder Flycatchers** were heard in the northern part of the county 6/13 (CG, MH, RH, GL) – 4 near NP and one s.e. of Smicksburg along Mahoning Creek; another was at the Jimmy Stewart Airport 7/9 (JP). Ever more difficult to find in the region, the only **Least Flycatcher**, possibly a late migrant, was recorded at Blue Spruce 6/4 (ES).

A congregation of 1500 to 2000 **Barn Swallows** continued to arrive in flocks of 50-60 post-dusk in a marsh along the WPT 7/26 (DL).

An uncommon breeder in the county, **Golden-crowned Kinglets** were found at two locations – 3 near Brush Valley 6/15 (MSC) and one at YC 6/23 (AvM, HR). Previously a nesting species at this location near Shelocta before the red pines had been thinned by dying, the appearance of a scruffy female **Red-breasted Nuthatch** on 7/29 (MH, RH) was a surprise. Single **Winter Wrens**

were sighted near Johnstown 6/12 (NS) and at Laurel Highlands Conservancy 6/23 (AM).

A **Veery** at YC 7/11 (CH) is the only summer report on record for the park.

The number of **Grasshopper Sparrow** locations this summer increased to 12 with top counts of individuals reaching 5 near Brush Valley 7/19 (MSC) and 4 at the Babcock Mine area, on both 6/18 (DP) and 7/3 (BS). Unusual for *Indiana*, a **Clay-colored Sparrow** was found on 6/3 (DL) near SGL 273 where it continued singing through 6/10 (MS). A **Vesper Sparrow** at Mayport 6/29 (AJ, MiS) was the lone summer report in the region. It was

good to see **Savannah Sparrow** reported at ten locations this summer as they had become increasingly difficult to find in recent years. **Henslow's Sparrows** were noted in early June (MW) this year at the newly acquired addition to SGL 273 near Brush Valley; they continued at this location through 6/24 (KD) when the top count of 7 was obtained.

Twenty-one warbler species were listed in the region during the breeding season. Twenty were noted in *Indiana* where the highlights included one to 2

**Pine Warblers** at YC 6/11 (CJ, HR) through 7/4 (MH, RH); **Yellow-throated Warblers** at three locations along the WPT between 6/4 (AH) and 7/10 (EH); **Worm-eating Warblers** at three new spots in the northwestern part of *Indiana*, found during the B4C 6/13, 15 (CG, MH, RH, GL); and a **Canada Warbler** that was possibly carrying food after foraging alongside a back road near SGL 174 on 6/15 (CG, MH, RH, GL). Among *Armstrong's* 20 warbler species, the highlights were **Worm-eating Warblers** at Murphy's Bottom 6/11, 7/8 (TR) and another along the AT 6/17 (TR); 4 **Kentucky Warblers** counted from the Redbank Trail parking lot 6/8 (KA); and numerous **Cerulean Warblers** in the Crooked Creek valley (v.o.). In *Cambria* PG yielded 2 **Northern Parulas** on 6/2 (AL) and 6/24 (JA); Point Trail hosted a **Magnolia Warbler** 7/16 (CS); and near Johnstown a **Canada Warbler** was a nice find 7/29 (LM-R).

A **Blue Grosbeak** was a great find near SGL 273 on 6/3-4 (MW).



Court Harding captured this Osprey photo at Yellow Creek on July 11.



Mark Strittmatter photographed the Blue Grosbeak near SGL 273 on 6/3.



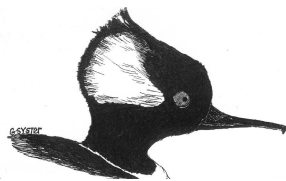
Observers: KM Andersen, Julian Avery, Alice Beatty, Marcy Cunkelman, Kristin Duty, Carol Guba, Eric Hall, Court Harding, Amy Henrici, Margaret Higbee, Roger Higbee, Matthew Hunt (MHu), Alyssa Jones, Caelie Jones, Avis Keener, John Keener, Gloria Lamer, Dennis Lauffer, Adam Leisenring, Andy Mack, Avi Marshall (AvM), Linda Martin-Rust (LM-R), Joshua McCoy (JMc), Michael McDevitt, Dave Poder, Joseph Pumford, Henry Rummel, Matt St Clair (MSC), Connor Schmitt, Emma Skundrich, Nicholas Stahlman, Bob Stewart, Mike Stinson (MiS), Garrett Strittmatter, Mark Strittmatter, John Taylor, Greg Tomb, Mike Weible.

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