



The Peregrine

Three Rivers Birding Club Newsletter

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

Vol. 22, No.1 January/February 2023

We'll Learn the Mysteries of a Fabulous Winter Ghost at Our February 1 Meeting

It has been called the "Great White Owl," the "Ermine Owl," and the "Arctic Owl" in past centuries. We know it now beautifully as the Snowy Owl.

Rebecca McCabe, a staff biologist at the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and a researcher whose studies include the Snowy Owl, will tell about this owl's fascinating secrets at our 3RBC meeting on Wednesday, February 1, 2023.

Her program titled "Uncovering the Mysteries of the Snowy Owl South of the Tundra" will tell us about these owls we are excited to see in Pennsylvania during their winter visits.

Rebecca received her B.S. in Environmental Biology at Millersville University (2013), and earned her M.S. in Biology at East Stroudsburg University (2016) studying nesting behavior of Broad-winged Hawks in Pennsylvania.

In 2021, she defended her Ph.D. research at McGill University in Canada studying Snowy Owl ecology and survival in winter.

Rebecca joined the staff fulltime at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in May 2021, serving as one of the Sanctuary's biologists.

This will be another Zoom meeting starting at 7:00 PM ET, giving you access time to log on. The business meeting will begin at 7:30 PM, and Rebecca's presentation will start before 8:00 PM. Details on how to join the event, including Zoom passcodes and other instructions, will be supplied a few days before the meeting.



NOT QUITE SNOWY – Some Snowy Owls you may discover in Pennsylvania are not completely "snowy." These are immatures, sometimes seen more often than the exquisite all-white adult males. Dave Brooke photographed this excellent example at Presque Isle State Park. In a year or two, if it's a male it will be truly white, and if it's a female it will retain some dark feathers on its underparts. Both adults and immatures migrate southward in winters when their main food, lemmings, are periodically scarce in the Arctic.



Do You Want to See a Golden Eagle?

Mark your calendar for November 2023 to visit the Allegheny Front Hawk Watch on the Somerset/Bedford County border.

November is when to see these magnificent raptors migrating southward. The site is famous for its numbers of Golden Eagles. In fall 2022, the total was 256!

Many birders from southwestern Pennsylvania have excitedly watched these huge raptors fly closely along the cliff.

David Poder gives us this marvelous image taken on November 18, 2022.

We are welcome to the watch thanks to the Allegheny Plateau Audubon Society, which began counting raptors there in 1989.

In addition, Allegheny Front volunteers band Saw-whet Owls and tag migrating Monarch butterflies. Learn about the society at www.alleghenyplateauaudubon.org.

See *The Peregrine* in beautiful color at 3rbc.org

President's Message

My Nemesis Bird Is a Pesky Goddess

By Sheree Daugherty

In Greek mythology, Nemesis was a goddess who gave trouble to humans she felt deserved it. She was especially hard on those who exhibited excessive pride of accomplishment. Well, I don't know what I did to upset her, but I've been searching for a certain bird in southern Arizona for decades—my Nemesis Bird.

The Bird Who Shall Not Be Named has eluded me since my first trip to southern Arizona in the early 1980s. Often I have declared that The Bird is not real and is a marketing tool for the Arizona Board of Tourism. It has become a running joke that The Bird is the reason that I keep returning to continue the search. (As if anyone needs an excuse to bird southern Arizona!)

Many of us have similar Nemesis Birds. It can be a motivational goal to get out and bird. It can also be extremely frustrating.

It doesn't help when others see your Nemesis easily and everywhere with very little effort. These people gleefully let me know that they have seen the Bird by sending photos, or showing off a new ball cap with the embroidered image of my Nemesis on the front. I've tracked down leads of sure-fire spots where The Bird is always seen. I've had people tell me they get The Bird at their feeders almost daily. I even rented a house in a remote canyon where it was supposed to be relatively common. No luck.

I know that I've been in close proximity to my Nemesis; the little balls of cryptically patterned feathers were probably hunkered down in dense brush snickering at my futile attempt to spot them.

I consider myself to be solidly based in reality, but this bird is making me somewhat superstitious. Don't ask me for the name of The Bird. Sorry, I won't say it! Are my motives not pure enough? Am I too greedy to earn a sighting? Should I meditate?

The Bird Who Shall Not Be Named was not my first Nemesis. For many years a small nuthatch claimed that role. No matter how hard I looked, how hard I tried, I could not find a Pygmy Nuthatch, a fairly common bird in the correct range and habitat. Several times I had bad looks at what I thought was the diminutive nuthatch, but never good enough to satisfy my strict self-imposed rules for identifying a life bird. Very frustrating! But, as such things often happen, once I finally spotted one, they seemed to be everywhere. Single birds, family groups, even pairs feeding a hungry brood of noisy ready-to-fledge young. So it goes...

Many of you probably have Nemesis Birds as well. But, if your experience is anything like mine, even after you finally spot it, there will be another to take its place, and another, and another after that. Is there a moral to this tale? Probably not. If there is a take-away, it's that you don't always get what you are looking for right away; but any excuse to bird is a good excuse.

And, when that glorious day does arrive with the perfect sighting of your elusive Nemesis, congratulations! But remember, don't be too proud of your accomplishment! That pesky goddess, Nemesis, is always watching, ready to teach you a little humility!

(Editor's note: Can you guess Sheree's Nemesis Bird in Arizona? You'll find out in the March-April issue.)



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Letter from the Editor

By Paul Hess

I'm seeking articles and/or photos from new and developing birders for *The Peregrine*.

In our September/October issue you saw an important article and photos by Malcolm Kurtz about Pittsburgh's historic first Merlin nesting. His report was importantly well done.

This issue includes an enjoyable essay about winter birds by Larry Chobi – the sort of essay that plugs into our own enjoyment of back yard birds.

Please tell the bird-oriented people you know that I'm interested and to contact me at phess@salsgiver.com. The articles and photos certainly don't need to be professionally written. That's what I'm here for – to help as an editor.

Your observations and feelings, though they might seem unimportant, are welcome and might encourage others to watch and appreciate their birds even more.

Apart from *The Peregrine*: My family is downsizing from a house larger than we need. With no success, I'm trying to donate my complete collection of beautiful Birding magazines all the way back from Volume 1 in 1968. Contact me if you're interested.

Outing to Come

We'll Look for Winter Birds

By Steve Thomas, Outings Director

It is our intention to follow the CDC and local county guidelines that are in place during this winter. We request that social distancing still be observed, and encourage people not to share equipment. The leader may have other restrictions in place and can end a walk if an uncomfortable situation arises. Also, the leader may have specific requirements that are stated in the outing description.

Saturday, January 28 – Frick Park: This “Dead of Winter” outing continues our tradition of getting out in January to look for winter birds. As in the past, Mike Fialkovich (412-731-3581) will be the leader. We will check the feeders at the Environmental Center and walk the trails. Meet at 8:00 AM in the Environmental Center parking lot at 2005 Beechwood Boulevard in Pittsburgh.

In the event of bad weather or adverse trail conditions, a notice will be posted on the 3RBC website and Facebook if the outing will be canceled.



FABULOUS FLIGHT – Our October 2 outing at Goddard State Park included a fly-over of Sandhill Cranes, always a treat. Dave Brooke photographed this group during the outing.

Outings Revisited

Late Autumn Gave Us Many Seasonal Treats

Maurice K. Goddard State Park – October 2: A clear, bright horizon started the day glimmering with action. Eleven birders met at Lake Wilhelm Marina and were greeted by 2 Bald Eagles, 40 Ring-billed Gulls, and 6 Double-crested Cormorants. Clearing skies with abundant sunshine raised our hopes for exciting birding. After scoping the lake and seeing Wood Ducks on the opposite shore, we walked a grassy shrubby area for great looks at 2 Tennessee Warblers. We then proceeded across the road to the Wildlife Observation Deck.

As we gathered on the deck, we heard a raucous noise in nearby trees; then a Peregrine Falcon swooped out chasing a Rock Pigeon right above and in front of us! The chase was short-lived as the Peregrine captured the Pigeon in mid-air then flew a short distance opposite us and landed to devour its meal. The whole scenario amazed the group for a “National Geographic Moment.” Scopes and cameras were on the Peregrine for an extended time for observation and photos. We also saw a close-up American Coot and an estimated 100 Red-winged Blackbirds.

State Game Lands 270 was our next destination, adjacent to the north end of the park. The first area at West Pines Road is a huge marsh where we observed 6 Bald Eagles (two twirling in the air), plus an Osprey, 2 Golden-crowned Kinglets, and 4 flyover Sandhill Cranes. The second area of State Game Lands 270 at Milledgeville Road with marsh, woodlands, and fields held 3 Great Blue Herons, a Bald Eagle, and a Belted Kingfisher.

Nearby Wilhelm Winery with an outdoor deck was a perfect setting for lunch, offering cheese trays and beverages and a chance to get better acquainted with fellow birders. Many of us “birded on” and drove along Creek Road to view the dam at the end of Lake Wilhelm. Two soaring Red-tailed Hawks were our grand finale of two dozen species for a fun day of birding at this hot spot in Mercer County. --by leader **Linda Croskey**

Frick Park – October 8: A small group gathered at the Frick Environmental Center to celebrate fall’s “World Migratory Bird Day.” First we set out to explore Clayton Hill, a well-known hotspot for migratory songbirds. Despite being able to see our breath on this chilly morning, it didn’t take long for the first migrants to be spotted, along with numerous resident birds.

Most of the warblers were spotted flitting in and out of the mulberry tree in the middle of the meadow and in the trees close to the trail. We got great looks at several Cape May and Tennessee warblers, as well as a Bay-breasted warbler and a Northern Parula.

We continued up the hill and to our delight a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker called and made an appearance. Shortly after, a flock of both Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglets accompanied by a Brown Creeper also appeared. At the top of the hill in the deer enclosure we encountered another large group of birds dominated by migrating sparrows, primarily Dark-eyed Juncos, White-throated Sparrows, and both kinglet species. Other highlights from the enclosure area included a Swainson’s Thrush perched mid-crown in a black cherry tree and an Eastern Phoebe.

Most of our descent down to South Clayton Trail was quiet or filled with various resident birds, but the area around the environmental center was active with a large flock of Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles, though only a handful were seen coming down to the feeders, as well as an impressive number of Mourning Doves.

It was a fantastic albeit chilly walk with a great group of birders, and 30 species. A special thanks to Susie Solomon who was an invaluable asset in identifying the warblers. --by leader **Stephen Bucklin, naturalist and educator**

Yellow Creek State Park – November 5: Members of the Todd Bird Club and the Three Rivers Birding Club birded on an unusually warm November day. Temperatures were into the 60s by 8:00 AM when the outing began. Upon arrival, Roger Higbee filled the feeders by the park office. As more birders arrived, a few birds did as well, including the day’s first Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Tufted Titmice.

We then caravanned to Dragonfly Pond to search for the day’s

continued on page 4

The Peregrine

Outings Revisited

continued from page 3

most targeted bird, a Northern Shrike, which had been reported the previous week. I was quite excited, as it would be a lifer for me. While scanning the goldenrod field for the shrike, we also focused on waterfowl on the far shore. We were able to key in on each group of birds, which included more than 50 Ruddy Ducks, smaller numbers of Canada Geese, Ring-necked Ducks, Mallards, Wood Ducks, Gadwalls, Green-winged Teal, Pied-billed Grebes, and a Great Blue Heron.

Some excitement came from the otherwise quiet meadow when a 3RBC member spotted the shrike shoot up from the goldenrods and fly quickly before dipping out of sight. I caught the bird in my binoculars just before it dove but could not make out anything specific. The 3RBC member was confident he had seen the shrike, but unfortunately no one else had seen it. Eventually we moved on to the rest of the park. (At the end of our outing we returned to Dragonfly Pond, and two more members got to see the shrike in a shrub near the water before it again disappeared.)

At the boat launch, we counted 115 American Coots, and I was able to watch a Fox Sparrow sing while it perched in a tree along the water's edge. The beach was quiet, with just 4 Killdeer hanging out. From the wetland platform we saw our first raptors of the day: Bald Eagle, Red-tailed Hawk, and Turkey Vulture soaring far in the distance. Finally, in the woods we added Ruby-crowned Kinglet and Brown Creeper to our list that finished with 42 species and more than 530 individuals. —by participant **Trent Millum**

Moraine State Park -- November 20: On a sunny but very cold and windy morning 16 brave participants gathered to look for birds. Many in the group were new to our outings. We started at the South Shore boat ramp, and surprisingly there were no waterfowl to be seen, but lots of European Starlings.

Sheree Daugherty (co-leader) took us to the Sunken Garden path, and as the sun climbed higher, the birds became active. We first heard Song Sparrows that were hiding in the undergrowth; then Golden-crowned Kinglets and juncos popped out to the delight of the group. Chickadees followed us along the path, and Red bellied Woodpeckers and White-breasted Nuthatches were calling. We checked out the gulls on the lake shore and saw only Ring-billed and Herring.

We had better luck at the point, where we saw Common Loons, Ruddy Ducks, Buffleheads, Common Mergansers, and Pied-billed Grebes. Two Bonaparte's Gulls and two Bald Eagles flying over were highlights. A cardinal and a mockingbird landed in a low bush. Bear Run boat launch was our next stop, where we had only a distant view of some 300 unidentifiable gulls. A cold wind off the lake encouraged us to move along to the next stop.

The waterfowl observation deck was a bust because the water was frozen solid. Although it was very cold and windy at the road's end, we found Gadwalls, Ruddy Ducks, American Wigeons, and American Coots on the open water.

After that, most of the group were ready to leave the cold, but a few of us pushed on to the Upper 528 boat launch. We found 50 Tundra Swans, our first Canada Geese, Hooded Mergansers, more Gadwalls, American Wigeons, and a Green-winged Teal.

We had a total of 33 species, not bad for a November day that began with a wind chill of zero degrees. —by **Stephen Thomas (co-leader) and Suzanne Thomas (participant)**



FEEDER LOVER – Larry Chobi welcomes Dark-eyed Juncos at his feeders. He photographed this one on January 23, 2022

Here's How Your Feeders Open a Wonderful World

By Larry Chobi

(Editor's note: Larry has been taking classes for lifelong learning at Carnegie-Mellon University. In a writing class, he chose the topic of this story. He tells us, "My dad was very active outdoors and had a deep interest in birds. He maintained a blue bird trail at Prince Gallitzin State Park. Through the years he fledged over a thousand birds. I got my interest from him. I am a longtime resident of Penn Hills, and I maintain habitats for wildlife in my back yard. I enjoy watching the creatures, and I recently started to try to photograph them.")

Three inches of heavy snow dropped across my backyard as the month of March was waning. Survivors and new migrants of the bird world look for shelter and food.

My feeders attract birds in droves, their usual feeding places now covered in snow. The tubes, one filled with black oil sunflower seeds, another with thistle, draw the perching birds. The chickadees and the titmice fly in, take one sunflower seed, and fly out to a near branch where they hold the seed in their foot and peck until the kernel is free. They are the ladies and gentlemen of the bird world. The finches, gold and house, perch and eat from both tubes, hogging the feed until they are frightened off or have their fill. The male goldfinches are less bright now than they will be after the spring molt.

The tray has a mix of seeds and attracts birds that don't perch. Cardinals, Blue Jays, and some sparrows often visit. I would love to see an Evening Grosbeak, but haven't in years. They hog a feeder too. This year a Red-winged Blackbird stayed for a short while. I have cowbirds. The males are black with a brown head and cape; the females are somewhere between black and brown all over. They travel in small flocks and can take over the feeders. The cowbird is a parasite. A female lays an egg in another bird's nest. The bigger cowbird nestling forces the other nestlings out, leaving it the sole occupant. It will run the poor foster mother ragged while trying to keep up with the cowbird's demands for near constant feeding.

continued on page 5



Observations

People Have Loved Their “Redbirds” for a Long Time

By Tom Moeller

When Christmas card makers want to depict a natural winter scene on their creations, they often choose a pair of Northern Cardinals as the focus. The brilliant red of the male contrasts perfectly with a snowy, green pine bough, and the female’s brown adds a warm glow.

A detailed look at the male reveals a medium-sized bird (7 to 9 inches long with a 12-inch wingspan). He is brilliant red from his distinctive crest to his tail, with some grayish tinge to his lower body feathers. He wears a black mask around his conical, orange beak, which is powerful in crushing seeds and painfully latching onto the fingers of bird banders. His irises are a deep brown. The dimorphic female has the same conical, orange beak, but she wears subtle, tawny-brown feathers with red fringes only in her crest, wing, and tail edges. Her face mask is also subdued in grayish black. She is about the same size as the male.

A Cherokee legend says that a wolf was so grateful to a brown bird who removed dried mud from its eyes that the wolf let the bird and his mate swim in a magic pool of red. After turning all red, the male let his mate into the pool, but only enough color was left for her to get her crest, wings, and tail red.

The cardinal was not always a winter bird; it expanded its range from its original southeastern habitat north to New England, Minnesota, and even into Canada in the past 100 years. John James Audubon never saw “Virginia redbirds” north of Philadelphia in his lifetime. In 1939, the publication date of National Geographic’s *The Book of Birds*, contributing writer Arthur A. Allen was surprised to find a cardinal wintering in central New York. The cardinal’s range now covers the entire eastern United States out to Texas up through Minnesota even extending back to the maritime provinces of Canada as well as southern Ontario.

Cardinals follow Bergmann’s Rule: in cold climates birds



JUST PLAIN GORGEOUS – Asked which backyard bird they consider most beautiful, many people would say a male cardinal. This portrait by Tom Moeller shows us why.

are larger than those same birds found in warmer climates. In the west, Northern Cardinals are now found in the southern halves of New Mexico and Arizona as well as the eastern edge of California, an unusually arid region for this bird. The Pyrrhuloxia, a close

continued on page 6

Here's How Your Feeders

continued from page 4

Another bird, not a favorite, is the European Starling. It was brought over from England, along with the House Sparrow, to populate New York’s Central Park as species mentioned in the works of Shakespeare – a notion now questioned by some researchers. Considered a nuisance here, the starlings come in flocks and clean out the hanging suet baskets.

The suet attracts woodpeckers, the little Downy and what looks like its big brother or sister, the Hairy. The Red-bellied Woodpecker comes around as well. Maybe the most misnamed bird, its belly is mainly a pale gray-white color, with a small and pale reddish patch that is rarely visible. The head has a bright red crown, shaped like a Mohawk haircut. The better-named Red-headed Woodpecker has a crimson head and is rare around here.

Nuthatches also take time from climbing the branches of a chestnut tree to hang on the baskets. Unusual for woodpeckers, the Northern Flicker migrates away from Western Pennsylvania in winter. An early spring arrival surveys the scene from high in a tree and then flies off.

Mourning Doves with light pinkish gray breast colors come in good numbers, hunting grain scattered about. Other ground feeders

include the junco. They have a dark gray cape and flashy white outer feathers on the tail.

Song Sparrows and Carolina Wrens, too, often forage for spilled seed. The House Wren will show up soon and build a nest in the box hanging on the plum tree. It will be made of twigs and the small “cotton” cocoons of spider eggs which, when hatched, will eat any mites that dare to enter.

A pair of Red-tailed Hawks soar in a thermal nearby. The crows appear and pursue and annoy the hawks, but never for much effect. Turkey Vultures ride the same thermal without a wing flap. They rise in a corkscrew until they get to the height where they set their wings and are gone.

Under the feeder, the snow melts into bare ground. The robins wander around, heads cocked, searching for worms. A quick flock of grackles drop in, watching the robins to see if they found any food. The grackles will intimidate a robin and take the find. Other foragers pile in, hoping for seed that was under the vanished snowstorm.

A sudden snowstorm late in winter opens a window to the world.

The Peregrine

Observations

continued from page 5

relative of the cardinal, is better suited for this area. Cardinals are also found throughout Mexico. Cardinals have also been successfully introduced in Hawaii, where they're called "Kentucky Cardinal," and Bermuda.

What has caused this expansion? We have. As the first European settlers cut down the virgin forests of eastern America, more woodland edge habitat became available to cardinals and other southern birds. Cities and towns offered trees and shrubs in more open landscapes for the birds. Winter bird feeding became popular in the 1960s, enabling seedeaters like cardinals to survive the cold. Spreading black oil sunflower seeds, cracked corn, peanuts, etc. on the ground helped cardinals. They seem to prefer ground feeding, although they will use table feeders and hanging feeders with stable perches. I guess cardinals followed sun worshippers into the deserts of New Mexico and Arizona.

Male Northern Cardinals establish their 2 to 5-acre territories in March or April through singing. They have a repertoire of 8 to 12 songs, such as "what-cheer, what-cheer, what-cheer," "wooit, wooit, wooit, chew, chew, chew," or "birdie, birdie, birdie," which are repeated in various order over and over again with up to 60 songs at a time. When encountering another male near his territory, the resident male will counter-sing with his neighbor, either singing at the same time or alternating, vying to see who the better singer is. If the resident matches a phrase exactly copying his neighbor, it means "This is my territory. Keep away!"

The female cardinal also sings. When establishing a pair bond, she will counter-sing with her prospective mate, matching his phrases. As they learn each other's songs, their bond strengthens. Once established, Northern Cardinal relationships are monogamous for life. Early each year, a bonded pair will re-establish their link through counter-singing. She may also sing on the nest, either to let the male know she needs food and it is safe to come, or, conversely, to let him know NOT to come at this time, depending on her song.

Communication is also through several calls. The "chip" is usually a contact call between separated birds. A male cardinal can chip as he approaches a nest to let the female know of his arrival. Yet, it can also be a warning if repeated quickly and more loudly. The "kwut" call is lower than a chip, just as short but used less frequently. It may be used in courtship or when danger threatens nestlings. Plus, it can be used with the chip call in aggressive confrontations between territorial neighbors. A third call is the "PEE-too" call, again used in aggressive situations.

Northern Cardinal courtship includes the countersinging between mates and calls (above) along with visual displays. The male performs a courtship flight wherein he flies up, then hovers with tail spread, chest out, and crest erect. He hovers down toward a female singing as he nears. The most endearing gesture is mate-feeding. The male approaches his partner with food in his beak, she may crouch and quiver like a fledgling, they then seem to kiss as he passes the food to her, and she takes the food to eat. Another display is the lop-sided pose as the male or female tilts to the side exposing the breast, perhaps raising a wing, and swaying back and forth, at times giving the "kwut" call.

The female cardinal builds the nest alone. In mid-April 2022 I observed a female building a nest in a bayberry bush. She went around to nearby bushes breaking off twigs with her powerful beak and bringing them back to construct the nest. She began before the leaves on the bayberry appeared, but soon the leaves were out effectively hiding the nest – good planning! The male stayed around to watch over her. The nest usually has a base of twigs to



A LOVING "KISS" – Tom describes this moment as endearing. Indeed! A male presents his mate a gift of food beak-to-beak.

which are added leaves, grapevine bark, grasses, and finished off with fine grass, hair, or rootlets in the cup. She takes about a week to complete her task.

The female lays three to four eggs on average. Although monogamous, females may be attracted to another good-singing male on the side. Not all the eggs a female cardinal lays are attributable to her mate. She incubates for 11 to 13 days. Rarely does the conspicuous, bright red male sit on the nest, but he does constantly bring her food when she deems it safe. The male now works hard to feed both the nestlings and the incubating female high-protein insects for about ten days. After five days of brooding, she also helps feed the young. Unfortunately, nest predation on eggs and nestlings by black rat snakes, other birds (Blue Jays and crows), small mammals (squirrels and chipmunks), and larger mammals (raccoons, skunks, and opossums) as well as cowbird parasitism makes nesting only 15% to 30% successful for cardinals.

The short nesting time (about three weeks) is still not enough for guaranteed success, so cardinals keep trying, making three or more nesting attempts per season.

Fledglings leave the nest after ten days and disperse, but remain nearby since they have not really developed any flying ability. They are mostly brown with black beaks. As they grow their short tails, wings, and little crests, they become lighter and tinged with red. Slowly the beak loses the black. They are fed by the parents, mostly the male, for almost two weeks when they can do some flying and foraging for themselves.

Adult cardinals also molt once a year. I was at an Aviary Nest Watch banding on June 30, 2016, where a male and female cardinal were captured. Both were in the midst of a molt, resulting in their appearance to be like a pair of punk rockers with only a few crest feathers protruding at odd angles out of their heads. Molting is completed by early fall.

In winter Northern Cardinals form loose flocks or groups of adults and juveniles, males and females, for protection, knowledge of food sources, and for huddling together for warmth at night. Winter groups are formed for practicality, especially when snow covers the ground. And winter is the time they need some assistance from our feeders. Let's do our part to help this beautiful, virtuoso singer survive till spring.

See the 3RBC website for more of Tom's photos displaying Northern Cardinals' beauty and behavior.

Birds in the Three Rivers Area

Aug.-Sept. 2022 Gave Us Good Numbers of Rarities

By Mike Fialkovich, Bird Reports Editor

Summer dryness continued through August, and September was warm.

American Wigeon is an uncommon migrant in the county, and notable was an early report of a pair in Findlay Twp. 9/30 (MV, many observers). **Common Merganser** is now a year-round resident in the county, and 28 were at Dashields Dam 8/16 (MV).

Common Nighthawk high counts included 110 at North Park 9/2 (eBird) and 100 in Scott Twp. 9/4 (ST).

A **Virginia Rail** was at North Park 8/13 (DNe, NN) and 2 at Wingfield Pines continued from July to 8/29 (many observers). A **Common Gallinule** was photographed at North Park 9/5 (BG).

A flock of 6 **American Avocets** were along the Allegheny River in Oakmont 8/22, spotted from a kayak (VM). They stayed until dusk, so a number of birders were able to see them. All but one flew off at dusk, and it remained the following day. This was unusual behavior. Most if not all avocets found in the county don't remain past the day they are discovered. (*Editor's note: Mike's avocet photos were highlights of our December "slide slam."*)

A **Least Sandpiper** was at Dashields Dam 8/10-23 (DBe). A **Semipalmated Sandpiper** was at Dashields Dam 8/28-30 (MV). A **Wilson's Snipe** was at Imperial 8/15 (DNe). Quite unusual was a group of 20 **Solitary Sandpipers** photographed in Oakmont 8/30 (JVa). It was a rainy day, so they must have been put down by the weather. A **Greater Yellowlegs** was at Imperial 9/20 (AF) and a **Lesser Yellowlegs** was there 8/14-15 (MV, et al.). A **Red Phalarope** was entered into eBird at Monongahela 8/2. The photograph submitted was inconclusive due to distance and clarity. It would be early for this species here.

Four **Black Terns** were in Verona 8/21 (SK, many observers) during another day of unsettled weather – always an exciting find. A **Forster's Tern** was in Verona 9/5 (MF) during a day of unsettled weather, the only report this fall.

A **Great Egret** was along the Allegheny River near the Highland Park Bridge 8/10-13 (JVa and others), and one was at Wingfield Pines 8/19-20 (eBird, JF).

Black Vulture reports continued rolling in with 2 at Beechwood Farms 9/7 (CKu). A **Merlin** continued at Chatham University 9/21 (MKu) after confirmed breeding there last summer, and 1 was at White Oak Park 9/10 (eBird).

Olive-sided Flycatchers were noted at the end of August with single birds in Hays 8/24 (NL, MKu, LK) and Chatham University in Squirrel Hill 8/25 (EW). Others were reported at Frick Park 9/5 (MMc), 9/11 (CK, KSJ) and 9/14 (MK, NH). One was at Chatham University's Eden Hall Campus in the northern suburbs of Pittsburgh 9/7 (DN), 1 at Beechwood Farms 9/9 (eBird) and 9/11 (DM) and South Park 9/14 (JP, JF).

Late August brought the first of the fall migrant **Yellow-bellied Flycatcher** reports with 1 at Beechwood Farms 8/25 (JVa) and 1 at Frick Park 8/30-31 (MK). I don't receive fall reports of **Great Crested Flycatchers** regularly, so three reports are notable: 2 at Frick Park 9/11 (MKu, JF), 1 at Deer Lakes Park 9/17 (JVa, OL), and 1 at Beechwood Farms 9/28 (LK, BSh).

It was a good fall for **Philadelphia Vireos** with widespread reports throughout the county through September.

Common Ravens have been seen in Franklin Park as they expand their presence in the county (OM). High counts of **Fish**

Crows include 33 in Oakland 8/8 (KSJ), 24 in Monroeville 8/16 (SM), 380 in Oakland 8/30 (KSJ), 75 at Chatham University in Squirrel Hill 8/30 (MKu), and 50 in Oakland 9/8 (JFr).

A **Marsh Wren** at Wingfield Pines 9/24 (BMc) continued through the month (many observers).

Gray-cheeked Thrush was reported at numerous locations in September, according to eBird.

Two **Rusty Blackbirds** were photographed at North Park 9/23 (eBird).

A total of 32 species of warblers were reported this fall. A **Northern Waterthrush** was a nice find at Beechwood Farms 9/24 (LM, DWa, LFH). A **Golden-winged Warbler** was at Beechwood Farms 9/2-22 (AH, many observers). An **Orange-crowned Warbler** was at Frick Park 9/1 (RBu). **Connecticut Warbler** reports include single birds at Beechwood Farms 9/15 (SD, VM), at the Churchill Valley Greenway 9/18 (eBird), Bethel Park 9/18 (BV), Beechwood Farms 9/29 (JVa.), and South Park 9/29 (JF). **Mourning Warbler** reports included single birds at Sewickley Heights Park 8/27 (SG) and 9/23 (AF), Beechwood Farms 9/3-23 (JR, many observers), and Frick Park 9/11 (CK). A **Prairie Warbler** was at Sygan Hilltop Park in South Fayette Twp. 9/7 (DNe). **Canada Warbler** reports included 2 at Sewickley Heights Park 9/2 (SG), singles there 9/10-11 (SM, AF), 1 at Beechwood Farms 8/21 (MK, DM, DBe), 9/14 (DM), 9/23 (BSh) and 9/26 (LG), 1 at Boyce Park 9/17 (ABu), and 1 at Frick Park 9/4 (CK) and 9/13 (eBird). **Wilson's Warbler** was reported in about 10 locations in eBird.

A **Blue Grosbeak** continued at Imperial from the summer on 8/14 (MV) and 8/28 (eBird).

Observers: David Bennett (DBe), Alex Busato (ABu), Ron Burkert (RBu), Sheree Daugherty, Mike Fialkovich, Louis Freeland-Haynes, Amy Henrici, Bill Goff, Adrian Fenton, John Flannigan, Jonathan Frantz (JFr), Lynn Goldbach, Steve Gosser, Lisa Kaufman, Charity Kheshgi, Michelle Kienholz, Scott Kinzey, Chris Kubiak (CKu), Malcolm Kurtz (MKu), Nathan Hall, Nick Liadis, Oliver Lindhiem, Brandon McRaken (BMc), Michael McDevitt, Virginia McQuown, Lori Maggio, Dan Mendenhall, Oscar Miller, Susie Moffett, Dean Newhouse (DNe), Norma Newhouse, Dick Nugent, Justin Rebitch, Kate St. John, Brian Shema (BSh), Shannon Thompson, Mark Vass, John Vassallo (JVa), Brian Vitunic, Diane Walkowski (DWa), Ezra White.



Don't forget About Indiana County

A reminder: 3RBC member Margaret Higbee is the editor of Pennsylvania Society of Ornithology's *PSO Pileated* newsletter. She also leads combined outings of Todd Bird Club and 3RBC at Yellow Creek State Park in Indiana County.

Many of our club members have enjoyed birds at the park's lake and surroundings with Margaret's and husband Roger's expertise.

For Todd's programs, outings, and other events, check out the club's website at toddbirdclub.org.

The Peregrine

An Odyssey Far North to the Land of the Midnight Sun



Birding in Scandinavia: from Ruffs to Steller's Eiders

It's hard to believe that the two males above are the same species, but that's the case with the Ruff. These contrasting color morphs are normal and arise from a simple genetic variation.

The Ruff's name refers to its huge ring of neck feathers resembling a ruffled linen neck collar worn by upper-class men and women in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Even more unusual is a rare genetic variant in which a male looks exactly like a female's plain and ruff-less plumage!

3RBC members Pat and Sherron Lynch saw this species and the wonderfully variegated Steller's Eider at right during a 2022 trip to Scandinavia (photographs courtesy of John Caddick).

Read the Lynches' exciting report of their trip plus more photos on our 3RBC website's Trip Reports & Articles page.



Notes About Our Birders

Notable honors: Two prominent birders well known to many 3RBC members have received awards from the American Birding Association "recognizing the attainments of influencers in the birding community." They are Ted Floyd, long-time editor of *Birding* magazine, the Award for Distinguished Service, and Holly Merker, who presented 3RBC's April 2022 program "Ornithotherapy: For Your Mind, Body, and Soul," the Award for Conservation and Education. Salute to both!

Another Spark Bird: Ted Weller tells us, "I grew up in what was (then!) a somewhat rural part of southern Butler County. My parents always fed the birds in the winter, and until I was 13, what arrived in our backyard represented the bird universe to me. But in July 1976, I ventured a walk up the hillside behind our house and spotted, for the very first time, what was (then!) known as a Rufous-sided Towhee. Wow – what a neat bird that I never knew existed so close to my home."

Blue Jay behavior: Tom Moeller has told us a lot about Blue Jay behavior in his "Observations" column. Here's a new one: "My backyard grass was thick, so a squirrel got a peanut I put out and "buried" it in the grass. Right above it was a Blue Jay, just nonchalantly sitting on a bird feeder pole. He did not stare down at the squirrel, but he knew what it was doing. The squirrel finished hiding the peanut and scurried off. Plop! Down came the Blue Jay to the spot where the peanut was hidden in the grass. It poked around until it found the peanut and flew off. The jay was in the right spot at the right time."

A Record Sighting: Jack and Susie Solomon, wintering in South Texas, were able to see the first U.S. record of a Bat Falcon – a beautiful raptor never reported north of Mexico until December 2021. Jack and Susie drove to the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge to see it. Very few of us have seen a new North American record of any bird. If you are an American Birding Association member, you can read about the falcon's discovery in the ABA publication *North American Birds*.