



The Peregrine

Three Rivers Birding Club Newsletter

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

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SOARING EXPERT – Black Vultures are common in eastern Pennsylvania but uncommon in our western region. Katie Fallon will discuss vulture biology at our June 1 meeting. Geoff Malosh photographed this Black Vulture at Gettysburg in March 2008.

Let's Learn to Love Vultures

Vultures are not what we would call pretty, but they are fascinating and ecologically important. Author and educator Katie Fallon will tell us why at the Three Rivers Birding Club meeting on Wednesday, June 1.

The meeting will be held at the Phipps Garden Center, 1059 Shady Avenue in Shadyside. Doors open at 6:30 PM for socializing, a business meeting begins at 7:30, and the program starts at 8:00.

Katie's program, "Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird," is the title of her book to be published by the University Press of New England in 2017. She will focus mostly on Turkey and Black Vultures will also talk about vultures in India and Africa.

Her book about the plight of the Cerulean Warbler, *Cerulean Blues: A Personal Search for a Vanishing Songbird* (Ruka Press, 2011), was



Katie Fallon

a finalist for the [Reed Award](#) for Outstanding Writing on the Southern Environment. She will sign it for those who bring a copy to the meeting.

She is one of the founders of the [Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia, Inc.](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to conserving wild birds through scientific research, outreach and public education, as well as rescue and rehabilitation. The ACCA is based near Morgantown, West Virginia.



A TALE OF TWO AGES – In the winter we may see two ages of Cedar Waxwings: adults (at left) and immatures (at right). Young birds hatched in the spring do not yet have the black face, colorful tail tips, and unstreaked "velvet" plumage of adults. Steve Gosser photographed birds of both ages at Harrison Hills Park in Allegheny County on December 19, 2015.

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

President's Message

Serendipitous Moments

By Bob VanNewkirk

If you had to choose a word to describe yourself as a birder, what would it be: novice, expert, casual, passionate, obsessive, impulsive chaser, ardent record-keeper, citizen-scientist participant, or a combination of those, or other words? Your answer may depend on how you choose to be a bird watcher.

While thinking about my bird lists recently, I recalled moments when I had a birder's stroke of serendipity – a happy coincidence.

"Serendipity" was coined by Horace Walpole in 1754 based on a Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, in which three princes became heroes after making accidental discoveries of things they were not looking for. In the spirit of the Three Princes, here are recollections of some of my most serendipitous moments.

* One gorgeous August day in 2006, a friend and I visited the Sandy Ridge Reservation in Ohio. While enjoying looks at Wood Ducks, Green Herons, and Sandhill Cranes in the marsh, I glanced upward just in time to spot the most beautiful soaring raptor I had ever seen pass almost directly over us. My jaw dropped at this unexpected sighting, and without thinking I yelled out excitedly three times, "Swallow-tailed Kite," as if this might be the most important discovery anyone could ever share.

* The corn fields along Old Ash Road in Mercer County are a good place to look for Sandhill Cranes. The fields are near the Pennsy Swamp wetland (SGL 284). Recently Sheree Daugherty and I stopped there while coming home from a day of birding at Pymatuning Lake. Scoping the field near the intersection of Old Ash and Black roads, we watched eight cranes suddenly appear like ghosts rising off the ground one by one in a line, out of a deep depression. While we watched them forage, they formed a loose circle and began to engage in a courtship "dance" consisting of wing-spreading, head-dipping, and leaping. The behavior lasted for about 10 minutes. In loose groups, 25 more cranes came into view from the same depression. I think with practice, even I could dance like a Sandhill Crane, but not so elegantly.

* I recall two different strokes of good luck while birding in Sewickley Heights Park that involved owl sightings. Passing a trail adjacent to the wildflower meadow one morning, I saw a Gray Catbird scolding something in the bushes. The catbird flew back and forth, perched, and raised quite a ruckus. I slowly walked to investigate the reason for the bird's distress and found the problem – a sleeping Eastern Screech-Owl perched within an arm's reach off the trail. Apparently the catbird had a nest nearby.

During a club outing while walking on Black Cherry Trail, the group came upon a dark object sitting on a branch over the trail. The object seemed to be a large, headless owl clinging to a branch. We approached the owl cautiously. Eventually the "headless" owl may have sensed it was being watched, spun its head around (to our relief), gave the group a once-over with its large black eyes, and decided to find somewhere else to rest undisturbed.

* One incredible moment burned into my memory involved my daughter Lori, me, and two Ecuadorian hummingbirds. While returning to Quito after a visit to the San Isidro region, our group stopped for lunch. The main restaurant feature quickly became the wonderful variety of hummingbirds at its many feeders, including Sword-billed Hummingbirds. This hummer has a four-inch-long bill. Imagine the size of its tongue! Rain began, so Lori put on her

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red raincoat and pulled the hood over her head. Standing close to a feeder, she held out her camera and waited for a Sword-billed to come. Without Lori noticing, a Chestnut-breasted Coronet landed on her shoulder almost at the exact moment that a Sword-billed began feeding. From my point of view, it appeared that the coronet was also looking through Lori's viewfinder as she took photos of the Sword-billed. I raised my camera to take a picture of this once-in-a-lifetime moment, only to realize that my batteries had died.

* Sometimes a happenstance can occur when you're sleeping, or in my case, because I couldn't sleep. One December night, as I lay awake at 3:00 AM, I heard the call of a Great Horned Owl in my backyard. I nudged my wife so she could hear it and to tell her how happy I was that the owl may have chosen our neighborhood as a nesting site. The next morning, Mary Ann sternly told me never to wake her to hear a bird call again. Maybe someday when she can't sleep, she'll come to appreciate how an owl's call is better than listening to the tick of a clock.

Perhaps now that you have read this article, you might begin to think of yourself as a serendipitous birder. Now every time I go birding near or far, I can't help to expect the unexpected. It's just one more facet of the joy of being a bird watcher.

Outings to Come

Want Long Species Lists? Come with Us This Spring

By Steve Thomas, Outings Director

Wednesday, May 4 – Linbrook Woodlands: Join Karyn Delaney and Bob Van Newkirk (412-366-1694; van126@comcast.net) at 8:00 AM at this recently purchased 168-acre Allegheny Land Trust property in Franklin Park Borough in northwestern Allegheny County. Features include steep wooded ravines, trails, many springs, and frontage along Big Sewickley Creek. Warblers, thrushes, flycatchers, and vireos will be targeted. Bring a lunch, snack, and water. Porta Johns are available.

From Pittsburgh, take I-279 North to the Wexford exit. Turn left onto Route 910 and go approximately one mile to the intersection where Dragun's Nursery is on the left. At the intersection turn right onto Rochester Road. Follow Rochester Road for about 0.5 mile and turn right onto Big Sewickley Creek Road. Follow Big Sewickley Creek Road approximately 0.7 mile and turn left where you will see the park's sign. The parking lot is on the right side bordering a ball field.

From the north, take I-279 South to the Wexford exit. Turn right onto Route 910 and go approximately one mile to the intersection where Dragun's Nursery is on the left. At the intersection turn right onto Rochester Road. Follow Rochester Road for about 0.5 mile and turn right onto Big Sewickley Creek Road. Follow Big Sewickley Creek Road approximately 0.7 mile and turn left where you will see the park's sign. The parking lot is on the right side bordering a ball field.

From the east, take Route 910, proceed straight through the intersection at I-79, and go approximately one mile to the intersection where Dragun's Nursery is on the left. At the intersection turn right onto Rochester Road. Follow Rochester Road for about 0.5 mile and turn right onto Big Sewickley Creek Road. Follow Big Sewickley Creek Road approximately 0.7 mile and turn left where you will see the park's sign. The parking lot is on the right side bordering a ball field.

Friday, May 6 – Sewickley Heights Park: In collaboration with the Fern Hollow Nature Center, Sheree Daugherty (shereedaugherty@gmail.com) will lead this outing. Meet at 7:30 AM in the upper parking lot. See the 3RBC website (3rbc.org) for directions. Be prepared for muddy trails, and bring water and a lunch. Besides birding in the park we will drive and make stops along Little Sewickley Creek. Louisiana Waterthrush, Yellow-throated Warbler, and Warbling Vireo nest in the area.

Thursday, May 12 – Knob Hill Community Park, Wexford (canceled): Leader Karyn Delaney (724-713-9474) announced with disappointment that this outing must be canceled because of construction work that restricts access to the park. We hope she will lead us in an outing at Knob Hill in the future.

Saturday and Sunday, May 14-15 – Barking Slopes: Todd Hooe (hooe@verizon.net) will lead us through this area along the Allegheny River above Oakmont. At December's slide slam program, Todd showed us pictures he took at this area belonging to the Allegheny Land Trust.

Given the difficult terrain and sometimes narrow and undeveloped trails, as well as issues of parking, two separate walks

are scheduled. Each will have a maximum of 12 participants.

Email Todd to reserve a space for one of the two days:

*May 14 (7:30 AM-12:30 PM): This will be an extensive hike of approximately 5 miles. Terrain will be difficult including narrow paths, steep climbs, loose rock and gravel, dirt, grass, and possibly muddy trails.

*May 15 (8:00 AM-12:00 PM): This will be approximately 3 miles of hiking on easier trails. There will be uphill climbs, but much of the time the trails will be relatively flat, wide, and with grass, gravel, or dirt surfaces. Some mud is possible.

Important reminders: Once we depart from the parking lot, we will not return to the lot until the end of the walk. There are no public restrooms. Bring water and packed food or snacks. There are ticks, poison ivy, and plants with thorns, spines, and prickles. Long pants and hiking boots are necessary.

Parking GPS Coordinates: 40.529130, -79.792003 (Coxcomb Hill Road). Todd will contact the Allegheny Land Trust to see whether we can park along the service road that connects with the parking lot on Coxcomb Hill Road. Carpool if possible, given the limited parking space.

Saturday, May 21 – Harrison Hills Park: Meet leader Jim Valimont (412-828-5338) at 8:00 AM at this county park off Freeport Road between Natrona Heights and Freeport. As you enter the park, take the fork to the right and proceed to the parking lot on the circle at the end of the road. Dress for wet grass and mud. Previous spring outings have produced a nice variety of migrants and resident birds in the park's many habitats. See tinyurl.com/HarrisonHills for directions.

Saturday, May 21 – Presque Isle State Park: This trip to one of Pennsylvania's greatest birding locations will be led by Bob VanNewkirk (412-366-1694; van126@comcast.net). Meet at 8:00 AM in the first parking lot on the right after entering the park. From Pittsburgh, take I-79 North until it ends. Take the exit for Route 5 West (also called West 12th Street) and continue for about 1 mile. Turn right onto Route 832, which leads directly into the park. Allow 2.5 hours driving time from Pittsburgh. Presque Isle has produced some of Pennsylvania's best records of rarities. Bring a lunch or join us at a restaurant just outside the park.

Sunday May 22 – Frick Park: Aidan Place (724-833-0998; placea@winchesterthurston.org) will lead this walk. Meet Aidan at 8:00 AM at the "Blue Slide Park" entrance, corner of Beechwood Boulevard and Nicholson Street in Squirrel Hill. Take Beechwood south from its intersection with Forbes Avenue, 1.1 miles to Nicholson. You will need to park on the street.

Saturday, June 18 – Jacobs Creek Wetlands, Fayette County: These wetlands serve as an environmental education center outside the town of Mt. Pleasant. We will meet leader Mike Fialkovich (412-303-0010) at 8:00 AM at the entrance to the wetlands.

The area has several small ponds, a grassland, dense brush surrounding the ponds, and numerous trails. The trails are mown grass and are generally level and dry, but as always when in the field a good pair of hiking shoes or boots is recommended.

Directions: From Pittsburgh take the Pennsylvania Turnpike to Exit 75 / New Stanton (18 miles from Monroeville). After the toll booth take the left lane following signs to Route 119 South toward Connellsville. Take Route 119 South for approximately 6 miles to the Route 31 / Mt. Pleasant / Ruffs Dale Exit.

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Outings to Come

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At the end of the exit ramp, turn left onto Route 31 east toward Mt. Pleasant. Travel for 3 miles, going through the town of Mt. Pleasant. Once through town, continue on Route 31 East.

At the bottom of a hill past the Mount Pleasant Glass Centre, look for White Bridge Road on the right, marked with a sign. It is just past a small sign marking Brush Creek. Turn right onto White Bridge Road. Cross a one-lane bridge and park in the parking area on the left just after the bridge, where we will meet. The entrance to the wetlands is across the road from this parking lot. Allow 45 minutes driving time from Monroeville.

If time permits and the group is interested, we may visit nearby Greenlick Run Lake for breeding species. Also, if the group is interested in lunch, there are a few good pubs and deli-style restaurants in Mt. Pleasant as well as the Sandhill Berry Farm/Greendance Winery where you can purchase a fresh piece of berry pie in the outdoor cafe surrounded by colorful gardens.

Outings are free and open to the public. In the event of inclement weather, call the leader in advance to confirm whether the outing is on or canceled. Call the leader, too, with other questions about weather, driving, or trail conditions.

CBC Participants Find Some Notable Species

The 2015-2016 South Hills and Buffalo Creek Christmas Bird Counts included species not found every year, including Tundra Swan, Red-headed Woodpecker, Hermit Thrush, Gray Catbird, Chipping Sparrow, Rusty Blackbird, Savannah Sparrow, and Common Redpoll.

South Hills

Compiler Nancy Page reported 65 species on December 19. They included 1 Northern Pintail, 2 Gadwalls, 2 Buffleheads, 1 Ruddy Duck, 1 Common Merganser, 4 Turkey Vultures, 1 Barred Owl, 4 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, 1 Eastern Phoebe, 4 Common Ravens, 33 Eastern Bluebirds, 1 Hermit Thrush, 2 Gray Catbirds, 1 Yellow-rumped Warbler, 4 Eastern Towhees, 34 American Tree Sparrows, 5 Chipping Sparrows, 1 Field Sparrow, 1 Fox Sparrow, 5 Swamp Sparrows, and 7 White-crowned Sparrows. The count week also produced 40 Tundra Swans and 1 Bald Eagle.

Buffalo Creek

Compiler Larry Helgerman reported 69 species on December 20. Highlights were 1 Snow Goose, 8 Common Mergansers (a record count), 4 Turkey Vultures, 1 Bald Eagle, 3 Northern Harriers, 4 Barred Owls, 7 Red-headed Woodpeckers (a record count), 16 Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, 6 Common Ravens, 1 Horned Lark, 5 Winter Wrens (a record count), 65 Golden-crowned Kinglets, 1 Hermit Thrush, 34 Yellow-rumped Warblers, 28 Eastern Towhees, 142 American Tree Sparrows, 2 Field Sparrows, 1 Fox Sparrow, 2 Swamp Sparrows, 50 White-crowned Sparrows, 3 Rusty Blackbirds, and 1 Purple Finch. New species for the count were 1 Green-winged Teal, 1 Savannah Sparrow, and 1 Common Redpoll.

Outings Revisited

Only One of Three Trips Gave Us Good Weather

Sewickley Heights Park – February 13: The Great Backyard Bird Count outing was cancelled because of weather. Predicted temperatures were as low as 8° F, winds gusting 15-22 mph, and probable snow showers. Leader Bob VanNewkirk judged that the weather would be unsafe.

Moraine State Park – March 20: Valerie Baker reported that only she, her husband, and three other birders arrived for the leaderless outing on this very cold, windy day. Their 24 species included Canada Geese, Wood Ducks, Mallards, Gadwalls, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Ducks, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Ducks, Bonaparte's Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, and Herring Gulls.

Pymatuning Area – March 26: You gotta love birders: 42 people showed up for Bob VanNewkirk's outing, and there wasn't a single grouch! Come to think of it, I don't think I know many grouchy birders. Maybe it's because we always have so much fun, whether birding alone or with 40 other people.

Part of the crowd consisted of 22 students from Chris Kubiak's Master Birding Program offered for the first time by the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania. It was encouraging to see so many young faces in the crowd. We also welcomed a couple from New Jersey who were visiting relatives in the area. It was a bit chilly, but it promised to turn into a beautiful day.

While we waited in the parking lot at the Wildlife Learning Center, a single Tundra Swan flew over. An Eastern Phoebe, an early harbinger of spring, announced his presence loudly. At the lake, the resident Bald Eagles were spotted almost immediately. We counted at least one adult and three immatures. The youngsters were dive-bombing a group of American Coots, hoping to flush them. As Bob noted, a coot can't outfly an eagle. The coots, however, dove under water every time the eagles made a pass over them, knowing that eagles can't swim.

We walked through the woods on the way back to the parking lot, listening to the chatter of Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, American Robin, and Song Sparrow. An Eastern Towhee teased us with his calls, but stayed hidden. We had to crane our necks to watch a Golden-crowned Kinglet foraging high in a spruce tree.

Next, we caravanned to the Spillway. As usual, there were many Ring-billed Gulls, but nothing out of the ordinary. A few Ruddy Ducks were swimming in the distance. A couple of Mallards flew in, and we observed two distant Bald Eagles.

There was more action at the Hartstown Project. Out on the water we could see Mallards, Northern Shovelers, Green-winged Teal, and Ring-necked Ducks. A beautiful male Hooded Merganser was swimming by himself. We heard Eastern Meadowlarks, and one of them posed in the open. A pair of Eastern Bluebirds seemed to be engaged in house-hunting. Someone got a scope on a Savannah Sparrow so people could get a better look at this Song Sparrow look-alike. As we left, we saw an American Kestrel perched on a corn stalk at the side of the road.

There were more Bald Eagles at the Miller Ponds, and we watched two immatures practicing their courtship and flying skills. A pair of Red-tailed Hawks soared overhead. Gadwalls were the most numerous ducks, but there were also Buffleheads and Hooded

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Outings Revisited

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Mergansers. The smaller pond produced 9 Wilson's Snipe, most of them easily seen, to the delight of all. We had both Greater and Lesser Yellowlegs there, as well as a Pectoral Sandpiper. A few Tree Swallows swooped over us, early scouts for the flocks that would soon follow.

We stopped briefly at the Fish Hatchery and heard a Killdeer calling as we drove up the hill. A mass of Gadwalls were on the far shore, along with Northern Shovelers, Buffleheads, and Common Mergansers. A single Canvasback was among them. A Pied-billed Grebe was more cooperative; it was closer to us. We turned our scopes onto the Bald Eagle nest, where the female was hunkered down. A House Sparrow was checking out one of the old Cliff Swallow nests plastered near the roof of the maintenance building.

After a leisurely lunch at the Spillway Inn, we were off to the Tuttle Campground in search of Red-headed Woodpeckers. Walking in, we heard a Red-bellied Woodpecker and a Tufted Titmouse, and saw an Osprey – all new species for the day. Sharp eyes located our target, and as we worked to get everyone to see

the Red-headed Woodpecker, a second one appeared. For a while, they circled around each other on the same snag. The outing's newcomers were thrilled with this striking bird; it is always great fun to share their excitement.

We moved on to McMichael Road, a favorite locale for viewing waterfowl and Rusty Blackbirds at this time of year. Many blackbirds, including Rusties, were vocalizing loudly in the marsh, but it required patience to spot the Rusties skulking in the underbrush. Among the ducks on the water, we were able to add American Wigeon and Northern Pintail to our list.

Our last stop of the day, Custards, produced three new species: Wood Duck, Blue-winged Teal, and Redhead. An adult Bald Eagle posed on a snag, and we noted yet another immature flying past.

We congratulated Bob for arranging a perfect day for our outing (especially as he had picked the date back in October). As always, it was wonderful catching up with old friends and making new ones. We had 57 species for the day. –by participant **Debbie Kalbfleisch**



Our Two Redpoll “Species” Will Likely Become One

By Paul Hess

Many 3RBC members have not seen a redpoll. That's understandable. Redpolls breed in the far north and come south only when a winter crop of their preferred tree seeds is insufficient.

When redpolls do come south for the winter, you'd better have your thistle-seed feeders ready. That's the best place to see them. Otherwise, look for stands of birches, such as at Presque Isle State Park. Birch catkins are among redpolls' favorite food.

Experienced birders know when redpoll “irruptions” are likely to occur here. Common Redpolls are usual, but birders always search for a rare Hoary among the flocks to add to their life list.

Jean Iron photographed the “frosty” Hoary Redpoll (*left*) at Toronto, Ontario, in January 2013. Geoff Malosh photographed the slightly darker Common Redpoll (*right*) at Bushy Run Battlefield in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, in February 2008.

The subtle difference won't matter if what I hear from the American Ornithological Union (AOU) “Check-list Committee” is correct. In July the committee is expected to merge the Common Redpoll and the Hoary Redpoll into one species. So, if Hoary Redpoll is on your life list, you will need to delete it because the American Birding Association checklist follows AOU decisions.

Why the merger? Studies of genetics, plumage, and habitat preferences show that all redpolls are one interbreeding population worldwide. Differences in plumage color and pattern between Common and Hoary are simply variations within a single species, just as hair color varies within our single *Homo sapiens* species.

See the proposal to merge the two species at the AOU website, tinyurl.com/merging-redpolls. It may be hard to decipher without knowledge of genetics, but it shows the depth of the scientific analysis. If you are an American Birding Association member, read my article in the June 2015 issue of *Birding* magazine.

How Does a Gull Open a Clam?

By Tom Moeller

If you were a gull, how would you get the meat out of a clam you found on the shore? In fact, how would you know that there was meat inside the clam?

In March 2013 I returned to Greenwich, Connecticut, where I lived as a boy. I visited Tod's Point, now called Greenwich Point Park, a place I had not visited in 50 years. I still have fond memories of the point, where my family had gone swimming during many summers in my youth. Now I looked at it with a birder's eyes.

Along the shore I found three gull species: Ring-billed, Herring, and Great Black-backed. Brant and American Black Ducks swam in Long Island Sound around the point. Large rafts of other ducks swam in the sound, too far out for me to identify them. Land birds included robins, starlings, and an occasional grackle. Nothing was unusual except the behavior of some gulls.

It was low tide when we arrived at the point. There was a sandy beach for swimming, but most of the peninsula had rocky beaches, which were exposed by the low water when I was watching. The rocks had been rounded – eroded by the ebb and flow of the tides. Most were the size of melons, with smaller rocks in between.

Many gulls were among the rocks pecking at algae or crustaceans to eat. However, adult and immature Herring Gulls were grabbing clams and other live mollusks in the rocks, flying up perhaps 20 feet, and dropping them onto the rocks below. When a shell hit, it would break open, and the gull would make a meal of the contents. Other gulls were watching and knew what was going on, and so the meal was often stolen or fought over by gulls waiting down on the rocks. To avoid theft, more than one gull took its shell to a parking lot or side road and dropped it there to eat in private with no other gulls around. Some gulls, probably juveniles, picked up rocks to drop, mistaking them for clams.

Is this behavior learned? Young gulls may learn from their parents, or from watching other gulls, that there is meat inside shells and how to access it from within the shell. Choosing the right shell, as opposed to choosing a rock, and selecting the right spot to drop the shell and break it may come with experience.

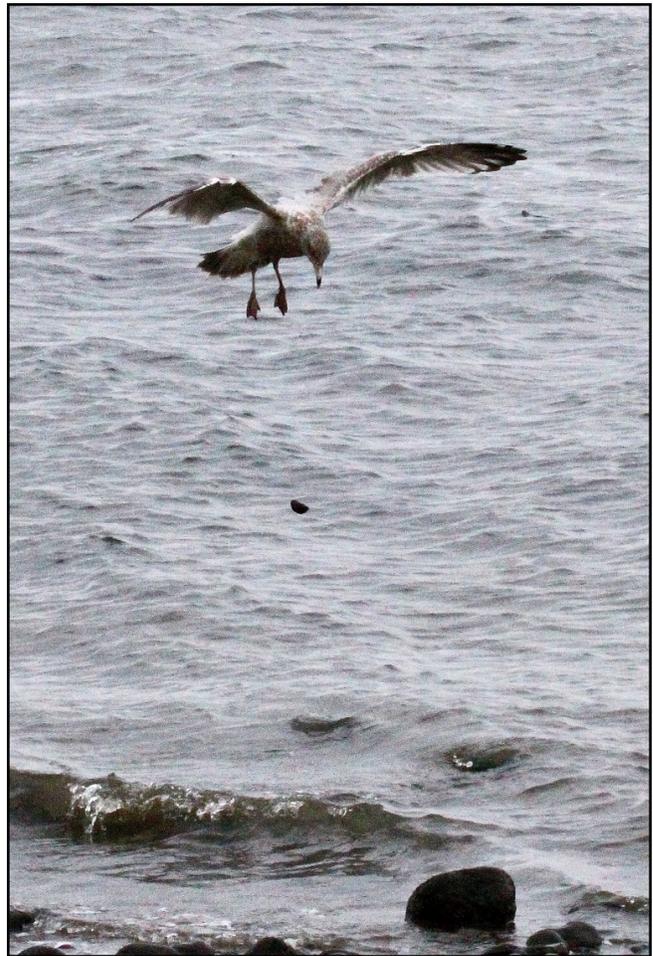
Some photos I took at Tod's Point show immature gulls dropping objects that did not seem to be shells. The immature gulls dropped these objects onto exposed rocks, and some even dropped shells onto sand or grass – certainly not places where the shells would break.

Studies of this behavior in gulls show that it is widespread. These studies include the three listed below as references. Videos of gulls dropping shells on beaches from Vancouver to England can be found on YouTube.

As we drove out of Tod's Point, one last Herring Gull was trying to take off from the road with a huge clam. The gull made one attempt to get airborne but dropped the clam. The clam was so heavy that the gull had to make a long running start to lift off. It struggled into the air and finally dropped its clam. The clam struck the pavement perfectly on its side and broke open. We in the car cheered as the gull and two of its buddies fought over the meat.

References

Clam Dropping Behavior of the Glaucous-winged Gull (*Larus glaucescens*). David P. Barash, Patrick Donovan, and Rinda



PREPARING A MEAL – In Greenwich, Connecticut, Tom Moeller watched Herring Gulls use a remarkable method of feeding. They drop a clam onto rocks to crack the shell open and eat the meat. Above, one drops a clam; below, it reaps the reward. Tom photographed them on his latest visit there in September 2015.



Myrick. *Wilson Bulletin* 87: 60-64 (1975).

Prey Dropped by Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*) on Soft Sediments. Bretton W. Kent. *The Auk* 98: 350-354 (1981).

Shell-Dropping Behavior of Western Gulls (*Larus occidentalis*). John L. Maron. *The Auk* 99: 565-569 (1982).

Birds in the Three Rivers Area

A Wood Thrush Was Tops on Dec.-Jan. 2015-16 List

By Mike Fialkovich, Bird Reports Editor

A white-morph **Snow Goose** was found at Wingfield Pines 1/12 (MJ) and remained at least to mid-February (v.o.).

Waterfowl highlights included 4 **Gadwalls** at Wingfield Pines 1/22 (GM), 3 **Northern Pintails** there for most of January (v.o.) and one in Findlay Twp. 1/9 (MV). Two **Lesser Scaup** and 3 **Canvasback** were at Woods Run on the Ohio River 1/24 (TJ) and one was on the Allegheny River at Sharpsburg 1/30 (AH, PM). A **Ruddy Duck** was at Woods Run 1/24 (TJ). The only **Red-breasted Merganser** report was one on the Allegheny River at Blawnox 1/31 (SG, JJ, TSh, JSh).

A light-morph **Rough-legged Hawk** was found at Imperial 12/19 (MV). **Merlins** continued to winter in the county with reports from Duck Hollow 12/12 (TH), Penn Hills and North Park 12/26 (CBC), and Schenley Park 1/2 (MF) and 1/7 (reported to AH). The **Bald Eagle** nest in Crescent Twp. (the first nest in the county) was noticed to be gone 12/19 (MV), likely the nest or the tree fell during bad weather. Fortunately, a new nest was constructed nearby. A **Northern Harrier** was an unexpected flyover at Schenley Park 12/26 (MHo, MF).

Lingering **Killdeer** were reported 12/4 in Findlay Twp. (MV), where 9 were at a small pond, and others were present in Hampton Twp. 12/26 during the CBC.

We had a minor invasion of gulls at The Point in Pittsburgh, but the few rarities were concentrated during the coldest days of the season. Rare during the winter, 2 **Bonaparte's Gulls** were in that area 1/17 (AH, PM). A first-cycle **Iceland Gull** was present 12/19 (GM) and a second cycle was there 1/23 (ST, GM et al.). A first-cycle **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was present 12/13, and a second-cycle was there 12/17 (BC, ST); an adult, a second-cycle, and a third-cycle were there 12/19 (GM). None were reported again until 1/21 when 2 adults were found (BC). One or 2 adults were at the Imperial Landfill 1/22 (GM), a first record for that location. Two adult **Glaucous Gulls** were present 1/21 (BC), a second-cycle 1/22 and 1/29 (ST et al.), and an adult 1/31 (SG). Two **Great Black-backed Gulls** (an adult and a first-cycle) were

spotted 12/19 (GM). This species was reported regularly 1/21-1/30 with a high count of 7 on 1/22 of various ages (v.o.). A second-cycle was at the Imperial Landfill 1/22 (GM), the second record for that location.

A **Barred Owl** made the Pittsburgh CBC 12/26 in Fox Chapel, and one residing at Boyce-Mayview Park was photographed 1/24 (GM). The adult and immature **Red-headed Woodpeckers** continued from the fall at North Park (v.o.). The immature became increasingly difficult to find as the winter wore on. **Common Raven** and **Fish Crow** reports continued. One raven was seen for the first time in Braddock 12/6, oddly hanging onto the side of a building, possibly extracting grit from mortar between the bricks (MF). Two crows in Hampton Twp. were a first for that location 12/2 (DN).

A **Red-breasted Nuthatch** was reported at Fox Chapel 12/26 (CBC). A **Winter Wren** was at Harrison Hills Park 12/19 (SG), and birds during the CBC 12/26 included 2 in Indiana Twp. and singles at Frick Park and Fox Chapel. A **Hermit Thrush** was present at Deer Lakes Park 12/12 (TH). An amazing winter record, a **Wood Thrush** was a surprise find at Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve 1/3 (AH, PM). The observers were able to photograph it. A total of 3,440 **American Robins** were counted leaving a roost near Wingfield Pines 12/19 (ST).

A few **Gray Catbirds** lingered into the winter. Singles were in a yard in Gibsonia 12/5 (KP), a yard in Forest Hills 12/26 (TB), and at a feeding station in Bethel Park 1/1 through the end of January (JP). One was also found in riverside brush in the city of Pittsburgh 1/21 (SG) where it remained through February. A late **Brown Thrasher** was found during the CBC in Fox Chapel 12/26 (BS), surprisingly not a CBC first for this location.

Uncommon in winter, a few **Eastern Towhees** were present. One visited a feeder in Harmar Twp. 12/12-19 (JV), 3 were at Harrison Hills Park 12/19 (SG, JS, SS, MF), 4 were tallied during the CBC at various locations, and singles were at North Park (GM) and Findlay Twp. (MV) 1/22. Three **Chipping Sparrows**, rare in winter, were photographed at a feeder in Sewickley 1/3 through the month (JT). Two **Field Sparrows**, uncommon here in winter, were found in Indiana Twp. 12/26 (CBC).

Fox Sparrow is also uncommon to rare in winter. One at Deer Lakes Park 12/12 (OL, TH) could have been a late migrant, up to 2 visited a feeder in Pleasant Hills 12/26 through January (MH), and 2 were in Findlay Twp. 1/22. A few **Swamp Sparrows** winter

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NICE FIND – Birding in California, Mike Fialkovich looked carefully at this flock of American White Pelicans and found one that had been wing-tagged. He found out where it was hatched by researching the national bird-banding database.

Tracking a Pelican's First Year of Life

By Mike Fialkovich

During my Three Rivers Birding Club program in February, I showed a photograph of a group of American White Pelicans that I took in southern California last September. They were at Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve near Huntington Beach in Orange County, and one of them was wing-tagged.

I mentioned that I would share information about the bird's origin when I received it. The bird possessed a red wing tag with white lettering attached to its right wing. The tag read "2K9." I submitted the number to the U.S. Geological Survey Bird Banding Lab in Patuxent, Maryland.

It had been tagged on July 23, 2014, near Rupert, Idaho, as a chick unable to fly. When I saw it in California on September 13, 2015, it was nearly a year and two months old.

The Peregrine

Birds in the Three Rivers Area

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in the county every year: 3 were at Wingfield Pines 12/19 (ST) and 3 were in Fox Chapel 12/26 (CBC), both reliable wintering sites.

White-crowned Sparrow is a local winter resident and is most reliable at a farm in Findlay Twp. where 6 were found 1/17 (MV).

Late **Red-winged Blackbirds** lingered in December. A male visited a feeder in Harmar Twp. 12/18-19 (JV), 3 were at North Park and 4 were in Indiana Twp. 12/26 (CBC), 1 was in Findlay Twp. 1/17 (MV), and a flock of 25 visited a feeder in Pine Twp. 1/30 (PL, SL). A **Brown-headed Cowbird** visited a feeder in Pine Twp. 1/11 (PL, SL). A flock of 30 visited a feeder in Natrona Heights 1/13 and 3 remained there 1/18 (PH). Interestingly, reports at several locations in the state around the same time were posted on the PA Birds listserv.

Purple Finch is always reported in only a few locations. Three were tallied in Kilbuck Twp. 12/26 (Pittsburgh CBC), 1 visited a feeder in Natrona Heights 12/28 (PH), 1 was at a feeder at North Park 1/22 (GM) and 2 were there 1/27 (JM). There was a minor invasion of **Pine Siskins**, most seen at feeders in small numbers. Larger flocks were 21 in Indiana Twp. during the CBC (SG) and up to 24 at a feeding station in Sewickley during the season (JT).

Observers: Tony Bledsoe, CBC (Pittsburgh Christmas Bird Count), Ben Coulter, Mike Fialkovich, Steve Gosser, Malcolm Harter, Amy Henrici, Paul Hess, Todd Hooe, Mark Hopey (MHo), Jim Jefferies, Tim Johnson, Matthew Juskowich, Oliver Lindhiem, Pat Lynch, Sherron Lynch, Jeff McDonald, Pat McShea, Geoff Malosh, Dick Nugent, Joe Papp, Kevin Parsons, Brian Shema, Judy Schryer (JSh), Tony Schryer, (TSh) Jack Solomon, Sue Solomon, Julia Tebbets, Shannon Thompson, Jim Valimont, Mark Vass, various observers (v.o.).



A MASTERPIECE – Barred Owls are typically photogenic, but Geoff Malosh offers us an especially remarkable winter portrait of one surrounded by snow on a tree at Boyce-Mayview Park in Allegheny County on January 24, 2016.



WELCOME VISITOR – Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are always uncommon – even rare – visitors to our feeders in winter. This one spent a few weeks at the feeder of Patrick and Mardelle Kopnick in Fawn Township, Allegheny County, in January 2016

Briefly...

Aviary Newsletter: The National Aviary in Pittsburgh has a Flightpaths newsletter covering the Aviary's research. The editor is Steven Latta, director of conservation and field research, and the managing editor is Bob Mulvihill, staff ornithologist. Read the issues online at aviary.org/Flightpaths.

Ecologist's Notebook: This blog by William Hamilton and Deborah Silliman, professors of biology at Penn State University in New Kensington views nature at tinyurl.com/psu-notebook. One of their projects is monitoring bluebird nest boxes at Harrison Hills Park in Natrona Heights, Allegheny County. If you can help, please contact Patrick Kopnick at 724-224-4102.

Check It Out: If you haven't seen Kate St. John's blog "Outside My Window: A Bird Watcher's View of the World," start watching at birdsoutsidemymwindow.org. Besides thorough coverage of Pittsburgh's nesting Peregrine Falcons, Kate focuses wonderfully on our region's natural history.

We Will Miss Her: 3RBC members familiar with the Todd Bird Club in Indiana County knew Georgette Syster as a long-time secretary of the club and a lively participant in the club's many ornithological projects. Georgette died on February 13, 2016.