



# The Peregrine

## Three Rivers Birding Club Newsletter

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

Vol. 15, No. 6, November/December 2016

### We'll "Ooh" and "Aah" at Photos

Are you ready to be dazzled? As we traditionally do, we will close out the year with a "slide slam" in which members show us their favorite photographs – digital of course, no longer slides.

Wednesday, December 7, is the date. 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.

- There are a few rules to make sure that participants have an equal opportunity:
- Photographers must pre-register by emailing Debbie Kalbfleisch at [d.kalbfleisch@hotmail.com](mailto:d.kalbfleisch@hotmail.com) or by calling her at 724-651-5426 by Wednesday, November 30.
- The first 10 photographers to respond will be able to present their show. Because of time limitations, only 10 can be accepted.
- Each photographer will be allowed up to 6 minutes of time. If fewer than 10 photographers pre-register, the presenters' time will be adjusted upward.
- Photos must be contained on a thumb drive and be compatible with Microsoft PowerPoint. No images may be stored and downloaded from the Cloud.

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*THIS HAWK THINKS IT'S AN OWL – We know an owl can turn its head to face backward, but this Red-tailed Hawk was able to do it, too. Tom Moeller, who will present some of his favorites at our "slide slam," photographed this contortionist in August 2016 at Duck Hollow in Allegheny County.*



### Pittsburgh Christmas Count Will Be Held on December 31

The Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania hosts the Pittsburgh Christmas Bird Count (CBC) annually, and it will be held on Saturday, December 31.

Participants tally all the birds they find on that day. The CBC is divided into 13 areas based on geo-political boundaries.

Participation is free, and inexperienced birdwatchers are welcome. Brian Shema is the CBC compiler.

Everyone (including non-participants) is invited to the count compilation dinner at 6:00 PM on Sunday, January 1, at Beechwood Farms Nature Reserve in Fox Chapel. Bring a covered dish, salad, or dessert to feed 10, or make a donation to help cover costs. After dinner, the area leaders will announce their results.

To participate, contact one of the following area leaders:

- **Fox Chapel** – Brian Shema, 412-963-6100; [bshema@aswp.org](mailto:bshema@aswp.org)
- **Franklin Park/Ohio Twp. (N)** – Stacey Widenhofer, 412-991-3657; [stacey.fncc@gmail.com](mailto:stacey.fncc@gmail.com)
- **Hampton Twp.** – Al Werling, 412-487-8581; (no e-mail)
- **Indiana Twp.** – Steve Gosser, 412-855-5220; [smgosser@verizon.net](mailto:smgosser@verizon.net)
- **Kilbuck Twp. & Ohio Twp. (S)** – Paul Brown, 412-963-1979; [pmbrown1944@gmail.com](mailto:pmbrown1944@gmail.com)
- **North Park** – Sheree Daugherty, 412-322-5371; [shereedaugherty@gmail.com](mailto:shereedaugherty@gmail.com)

- **Oakmont & Harmar Twp.** – David Yeany, 814-221-4361; [dyeany@paconserve.org](mailto:dyeany@paconserve.org)
- **O'Hara Twp.** – Steve Thomas, 412-782-4696; [thomassj22@verizon.net](mailto:thomassj22@verizon.net)
- **Penn Hills & Verona** – Mike Smith, 412-526-8360; [skeetor72@yahoo.com](mailto:skeetor72@yahoo.com)
- **Frick & Highland Parks** – Mark VanderVen, 425-273-1786; [nevrednav@gmail.com](mailto:nevrednav@gmail.com)
- **Pittsburgh (rest of city)** – Mike Fialkovich, 412-731-3581; [mpfial@verizon.net](mailto:mpfial@verizon.net)
- **Ross & McCandless Twps.** – Bob Machesney, 412-366-7869; [remach@aol.com](mailto:remach@aol.com)
- **Shaler Twp.** – Joyce Hoffmann, 412-487-0921; [ibird@juno.com](mailto:ibird@juno.com)  
Other counts near Pittsburgh include:
- **South Hills, December 17** – Nancy Page, 412-221-4795.
- **Buffalo Creek Valley (Butler), December 17** – George Reese, 724-353-9649.
- **Buffalo Creek (Washington County), December 18** – Larry Helgerman, [bobolink1989@gmail.com](mailto:bobolink1989@gmail.com).
- **Imperial, December 18** – Bob Mulvihill, 412-522-5729; [Robert.mulvihill@aviary.org](mailto:Robert.mulvihill@aviary.org).
- **South Butler, January 7** – Chris Kubiak, 412-963-6100; [ckubiak@aswp.org](mailto:ckubiak@aswp.org)

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

## President's Message

### Birding as a Form of Play

By Bob VanNewkirk

As a former child, teen, young adult, retired elementary school teacher, and now a proud grandfather, I think I know what play is when I see and do it. Play is usually perceived as an activity to be primarily pursued and enjoyed by kids while adults go about managing their jobs or other responsibilities. But play is not just for kids; it is just as important for people of all ages as a source of relaxation, mental stimulation, and physical activity. Those reasons and others are why I consider birding as a form of play.

According to Dr. Scott G. Eberle, editor of the American Journal of Play, "[Play] is a process, not a thing. It begins with anticipation and along the way you find surprise, pleasure, understanding – as skill and empathy – and strength of mind, body, and spirit." I thoroughly agree with Eberle's rationale. For example:

**Making Connections.** Prior to discovering Chuck Tague's Nature Observer News, I had no idea that there were local birders who led outings and could show me places in the Pittsburgh area and beyond. Attending outings introduced me to a community of like-minded people who are friendly, nature loving, knowledgeable, and who ardently enjoy the pursuit of birds. The ASWP, other local Audubon chapters, and the 3RBC continue to offer many opportunities for me to connect with birders of all ages, school groups, neighbors, authors, naturalists, professional ornithologists, wildlife artists, and professional guides.

**It's an Adventure.** I never get tired of birding locally, but what really elevates my energy level, provides new learning opportunities, and nourishes my spirit is traveling out of state and country. Seeking new birds in their natural settings has led me to travel to 22 states from coast to coast and eight foreign countries on four continents. The thrill of encountering a new species is absolutely more invigorating to me than any amusement park ride. For extra exhilaration, nothing beats a pelagic trip on a windy day to spot seabirds – if you can stomach the ride. Even my non-birding wife said that our trip to the Galapagos Islands was one of our best vacations ever. Upon our return, she demonstrated the dance of the Blue-footed Booby during a family gathering. Now that was a very playful demonstration that got lots of laughter! For extra added excitement and travel, I like to participate in a birding festival. The high expectations for finding wonderful birds with great guides, being with birders from all over, and the sheer energy of kinship is a fantastic experience. Two of my all-time favorites were The Biggest Week in American Birding in northwestern Ohio and The Festival of Cranes at the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in Socorro, New Mexico.

**Mind Games.** As I get older, I have become more forgetful. Locating where I left my car keys and eyeglasses often leaves me scratching my head trying to remember where I had them last. However, I can usually recall a daily outing's lists with hardly missing a bird. Why? It's probably linked to a time when I am relaxed, having fun, and in a playful mood. Learning bird songs, calls, chips, and field marks really challenges my memory. I have better recall if I can apply those ID tools during a bird walk and point them out to others. It seems like I have to relearn warbler songs every spring. Having a well-qualified guide often takes the stress out of needing to put the right name to a newly discovered bird.

**Friendly Competition.** I grew up playing sports and watching collegiate and professional teams compete on television.

## The Peregrine

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### Membership: FREE Student-Youth, \$15 Individual, \$20 Family, \$50 Contributing, \$100 Sustaining

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When I go birding with friends, I like us to guess how many species we might see or what unexpected ones we hope to find. Whoever comes closest to the actual number or finds the "best bird" is the winner. This bit of competition also works well if you set out to surpass a certain number of species such as a Big Year, Christmas Bird Count, Great Backyard Bird Count, Bit Sit, or a new record for a backyard, county, or state yearly list. The idea is to get out of the house, explore what's in your niche of the world, and sharpen your sight to find birds.

**Modern Day Heroes.** My passion for birds has brought about a different focus in my life as reflected in my current heroes, such as Rachel Carson, Berndt Heinrich, Carl Safina, Scott Weidensaul, and Pete Dunne to name a few. Their writings and actions serve as inspiration and sound a clarion call for habitat conservation. It's up to everyone who enjoys and values nature to become advocates to protect all wildlife and their habitats.

Birding has enriched my life in ways I never could have predicted or imagined. Along with camaraderie, there is joy, wonderment, and peacefulness to be found when you carry a pair of binoculars to look for birds. I want to share that sense of wonder with my grandchildren some day when we play in the woods.

## Outings to Come

### Three More Events End a Successful Birding Year

**By Steve Thomas, Outings Director**

**Sunday, October 30 – Picnic at Moraine State Park:** Mark your calendar for the annual 3RBC picnic and bird walk. We will meet at 8:00 AM in the Day Use Area (South Shore) in the first parking lot on the right.

After the morning outing, we will have the pot-luck picnic at a park pavilion near McDanel's Boat Launch. Please bring a dish that will serve 4-6 people. From I-79, take Route 422 east toward Butler and exit at the Moraine State Park exit. At the end of the ramp, turn left and go straight into the park until you see the first major parking area on your right. Allow one hour driving from Pittsburgh.

**Saturday, November 5 – Yellow Creek State Park:** This will be a joint outing of the 3RBC and the Todd Bird Club. Meet Margaret Higbee (724-354-3493) at the park office at 8:00 AM. The office is located on Route 259 just off Route 422 east of Indiana. Allow an hour and 30 minutes to drive from Pittsburgh. Diverse habitats, including a large lake, attract a wide variety of waterbirds and sometimes exciting rarities.

**Sunday, November 20 – Moraine State Park:** We will gather at the Day Use Area (South Shore) in the first parking lot on the right at 8:00 AM. This will be a leaderless outing. From I-79, take Route 422 east toward Butler and exit at the Moraine State Park exit. At the end of the ramp turn left and travel straight into the park until you see the first major parking area on your right. Allow one hour driving from Pittsburgh.

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**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.**



*BRIGHT SPRITE –The American Redstart is one of our liveliest and most delightful warblers, continually flitting, fluttering, and snapping its wings and tail. Steve Gosser got a close look at this one in September 2016 at Harrison Hills Park.*

## Outings Revisited

### Fall Warblers Gave Us a Splendid Show

**Sewickley Heights Park – September 2:** On one of the first chilly mornings of the season, a dozen birders gathered for a joint outing with Fern Hollow Nature Center. Migrants, especially the infamously confusing fall warblers, would be the focus of the hike. Due to the brisk temperatures, we headed straight to some of the more open and sunny areas of the park.

Three Killdeer flew over while we waited to see what was hiding in the shrubbery bordering the field on Butterfly Trail. Eventually a Brown Thrasher poked out of the undergrowth along with Gray Catbirds and Eastern Towhees. A mixed flock of chickadees, a Baltimore Oriole, several Magnolia Warblers, an American Redstart, and a Bay-breasted Warbler ducked in and out of the thick foliage. At the corner where Butterfly Trail meets the field, another wave of warblers appeared, adding Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, and Nashville to our list. A Philadelphia Vireo was included in the mix.

Wood and Swainson's Thrushes were heard in the undergrowth while we scanned the trees for warblers. Plain-looking juvenile Indigo Buntings challenged our identification skills. Cedar Waxwings seemed to be everywhere, feasting on an abundant crop of wild cherries. Cheery groups of American Goldfinches were plentiful, too.

Another mixed flock on the Gravel Path Trail included a Blue-winged Warbler and three vireo species: Warbling, Red-eyed, and another Philadelphia.

Swirling flocks of Chimney Swifts spiraled high above us at Sneed's. No warblers, so we moved on to Walker Park. All was quiet there, so we caravanned to Pontefrac Park where the only addition was a female Scarlet Tanager.

A single Northern Mockingbird was spotted at the Edgeworth Dump, and several Double-crested Cormorants perched on the buoys above Dashields Dam. There were no waterfowl or gulls at the Ohio River. Even more surprisingly, no crows were seen or heard all day! At day's end, we tallied 11 warbler species and 52 total species. **–by leader Sheree Daugherty**

**Harrison Hills Park – September 3:** It was a beautiful late summer morning for this annual fall outing. We had 25 participants, including several newcomers. The walk from the parking lot to the pond was uneventful other than the typical breeding birds. At the pond, there were no ducks or shorebirds, but a family of Indigo Buntings in dull fall plumage gave everyone something to study.

Soon, we had our first migrant warblers, including Black-throated Green, Black-and-white, Blackburnian, and Magnolia. We heard singing Carolina Wrens and Red-eyed Vireos. A strange two-note call repeated over and over had us all confused, until it showed itself as a female Scarlet Tanager. No one could remember ever hearing this call. On the way back to the parking lot, we heard an Eastern Bluebird and, surprisingly, a Red-breasted Nuthatch calling from a spruce tree.

The streamside trail quickly produced some great birds, including a Yellow-throated Vireo heard at the parking lot, a pair of Pileated Woodpeckers, and Hairy Woodpeckers. The cliff trail observation deck produced Turkey Vultures and a Baltimore

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*SCANNING THE MARSH – Leader Jim Valimont and his many participants circle back across the marsh boardwalk after his outing at Harrison Hills Park on September 3. (photograph by Mike Fialkovich)*

## **Outings Revisited**

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Oriole. An Eastern Wood-Pewee hawked insects from several snags close to the deck. Several small flocks of migrants followed the local chickadees. One flock allowed very good views of Black-throated Blue Warblers and Ovenbirds. A Swainson's Thrush was found among a small flock of American Robins.

At the nature center we walked along the road, adding more woodpeckers, another Eastern Wood-Pewee, and several Eastern Bluebirds. We decided to call it a day and head to Eat'n Park for lunch. Our 25 participants totaled 43 species for the day, 10 fewer than last year's outing. We had nine species of warblers and five species of woodpeckers. **–by leader Jim Valimont**

**Sewickley Heights Park – September 9:** Fourteen birders met with high expectations for finding migrants. But the “highs” we encountered during most of the outing were high temperatures, high humidity with a chance of a thunderstorm, and birds playing “High and Seek” – meaning that most of the birds we encountered tended to forage high in the tree canopy.

Birding by ear in the parking area revealed the presence of Blue Jays, American Goldfinches, a Carolina Wren, a Northern Cardinal, American Crows, the chattering call of a Ruby-throated Hummingbird as it zoomed overhead, and a Hooded Warbler. We hoped that this level of activity was a good indicator of bird activity throughout the park.

The butterfly meadow yielded a Northern Flicker, a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, a Red-eyed Vireo, a Chimney Swift, and an American Redstart. As we headed back to the parking lot to make our way to a section of Black Cherry Run, we encountered a flock of robins feeding on berries. Warblers were present, but they flitted about mainly in the tree tops and were difficult to identify. Against the gray sky, these diminutive birds were reduced to silhouettes.

Our first woodpeckers, a Downy and a Red-bellied, a pair of Black-throated Green Warblers, and an Eastern Towhee were identified on the Pipeline Trail. Leaving the trail, we walked the gravel road leading to Spruce Run hoping to find a Red-breasted

Nuthatch that had been reported near there earlier in the week. We had no luck finding it, but we did locate a calling Hairy Woodpecker and heard the staccato pit call of a Wood Thrush.

We retraced our way to the meadow for a second look. This time we had different results. A pair of Brown Thrashers were first heard, and then sighted easily as they perched in the open. A pair of very active Magnolia Warblers darted through an ash tree that was also occupied by a Gray Catbird, a Cedar Waxwing, and an Eastern Towhee. Near the end of the path close to the Chestnut Trail, a Philadelphia Vireo provided quite a thrill for the group.

Hoping to find birds that tend to forage in pasture land, we followed the Bridle Trail. In the fields we spotted a pair of Eastern Bluebirds, a Northern Mockingbird, and an Eastern Phoebe using posts as lookouts for insects. Flocks of starlings were scattered over the fields. One sharp-eyed birder noticed a flycatcher perched on top of the highest snag near the intersection of the Bridle Trail and the first field. The upright posture, dark head, white throat and breast, and dark breast sides creating a vest-like appearance were used to identify an Olive-sided Flycatcher. This flycatcher is only discovered during migration, and was instantly declared “The Bird of the Day.” It was a life bird for many in the group.

Our final addition to the outing list was a Scarlet Tanager discovered on Waterthrush Way as we headed back to our cars. Despite the uncomfortable heat and humidity, we enjoyed finding 35 species and seeing the spectacular display of goldenrod and beautiful tall yellow flowers lining both sides of the Pipeline Trail. **–by leader Bob VanNewkirk**

**Dead Man's Hollow – September 10:** We had a good outing this morning, starting at the Calhoun Road trailhead and following the Witch Hazel Trail through some modified successional forest, then moving into Red Oak-Mixed Hardwood and Dry Oak-Mixed Hardwood Forest on the ridge above the Youghiogheny River. We hiked back down the nose of the ridge to Dead Man's Run, which joined the Ruins Trail. Next, we hiked along the run toward the river, passing through the ruins and onto the Great Allegheny Passage. We went a short distance to the opposite Ruins Trail entrance, followed the trail up the run, and then traced our path back to the Calhoun Trailhead.

We had 35 species total, not that astounding, but we had south winds the previous night, birded only in forested habitat, and it became quite warm by mid-morning. Highlights included double-digit Wood Thrush numbers, a handful of Scarlet Tanagers, a croaking Common Raven, a Gray-cheeked Thrush, and best of all, nine warbler species including a Northern Waterthrush. **–by leader David Yeany**

**Presque Isle State Park – September 18:** Nine birders gathered on a gray and overcast morning at the parking lot known as Vista One. A few Ring-billed Gulls were flying, and Mallards and Wood Ducks loafed in the bay alongside numerous Pied-billed Grebes. An immature Bald Eagle flying over us appeared to be a good omen, although leader Bob VanNewkirk confessed that the winds were not from the north, and the rain from the previous night might not have brought in anything new.

A White-breasted Nuthatch and Blue Jays called as we walked to a wooded area that usually produces good species. We saw a few Chimney Swifts high overhead and watched a Northern Flicker fly in. We were pleased to see a Philadelphia Vireo with a bright yellow breast and an Eastern Wood-Pewee.

We climbed the far bank to the beach and found several Ring-

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## Outings Revisited

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billed Gulls on the sand. At least a hundred Herring Gulls were clustered on the rocks. A few Wood Ducks could be seen from the platform at Leo's Landing, but as we were walking down the road, Patience Fisher announced that she had a bird in a tree and put her scope on it – a Peregrine Falcon!

Bob led us onto a path to the end of the marsh where three Blue-winged Teal were tucked in, and we got a closer look at the Peregrine. As we walked back to our cars, Song Sparrows and American Goldfinches popped up. Two small warblers appeared, chasing each other through the bushes. One was a female or immature Wilson's and the other a Nashville.

It started to sprinkle, and we had light rain on our way to the Ranger Station. A group of Red-winged Blackbirds and a Northern Flicker were sitting in a bare tree next to the small pond. At the feeders, we observed a noisy gang of blackbirds, European Starlings, and House Sparrows. We were thrilled to see a Red-breasted Nuthatch fly in to the feeder, especially since it was a lifer for one of our group!

A Belted Kingfisher flew across the pond as we arrived at the Waterworks. A few Chipping Sparrows foraged next to the parking lot, and we watched a Great Blue Heron fly off with some weeds still clinging to a choice morsel. The Old Gas Well Trail was mostly quiet, with only one Bay-breasted Warbler to be seen.

We turned back and headed to the Long Pond Trail, a usually reliable spot. It did not disappoint. We had a flurry of activity, with several warblers: Northern Parula, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Blackburnian, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, American Redstart, and Common Yellowthroat. A female Scarlet Tanager caused a bit of head-scratching among the newer birders. Some people got a glimpse of an Eastern Phoebe and an Eastern Towhee.

After a picnic lunch at the Perry Monument, we drove to Fry's Landing. The heavens opened up, and there was a brief debate about birding in the deluge. But we are real birders, and we plunged into the forest! The birds certainly didn't seem to care; Bob almost immediately identified a Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and other people began calling out warblers: Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, more Bay-breasted and Blackpolls, Magnolia, and Black-and-white. Another Red-breasted Nuthatch appeared, and a Swainson's Thrush was seen by a few people.

The rain finally let up and several people said goodbye. The rest of us continued onward and were rewarded with a glimpse of a Carolina Wren, a Warbling Vireo, a Swainson's Thrush, and more warblers: Black-throated Blue, Blackpoll, Northern Parula, and Common Yellowthroat. As we emerged out of the soggy woods, we could hear the soft twittering of Cedar Waxwings.

Four of us traveled on to Thompson Bay, but that area was quiet, except for the persistent tapping of a mysterious woodpecker. It was behind a wall of greenery, but it eventually hitched up a small tree and turned out to be a Hairy Woodpecker. A smaller bird distracted us and was identified as a Philadelphia Vireo. We watched nine Double-crested Cormorants fly over the trees in ragged formation.

The Pine Tree Trail was our last stop of the day, and we soon had a bit of activity with a small wave of warblers and other birds. We noted Magnolia and Blackpoll Warblers, as well as a Downy Woodpecker and more Red-breasted Nuthatches. An Eastern Towhee popped in and out of view quickly, while at least four Northern Flickers flashed through the trees. A Swainson's Thrush

teased us with soft, low calls.

We were walking back to our cars when we heard the chatter of a Black-capped Chickadee, our first for the day. In spite of the sudden shower, it was a wonderful day to be out on the trails. We tallied 58 species. –by participant **Debbie Kalbfleisch**

**Frick Park – September 18:** Twenty-one brave souls scoffed at the weather reports for heavy rain, and met Jack and Sue Solomon at Frick Park. Perhaps it was the antidote to the slow birding of summer, or perhaps it was the chance to find something interesting now that we were amid the fall migration.

Despite overcast but dry conditions, the park was eerily quiet, forcing Jack to initiate several tree identification quizzes. After hitting the gravel trails, we were hit with a brief shower.

Then things started picking up. Despite lousy weather conditions, we started picking out warblers. At one point we watched a Kentucky Warbler bathing for several minutes by flopping around on top of the wet leaves of a broad-leaved shrub, perhaps Japanese Knotweed. One birder managed to get a photo of a Cape May Warbler.

We had 24 species, mostly the usual suspects, but including seven species of warblers. For most participants, the Kentucky and Cape May Warblers were the highlights. As the rain started again, we drifted back to the entrance. –by participant **Jeff Cohen**

**Moraine State Park – September 20:** Mike Shaffer and Katie Edmiston, park naturalists, recently issued an invitation to several bird clubs in western Pennsylvania to join them on a bird walk on the South Shore of Lake Arthur. They were particularly pleased when birders showed up from four clubs: Three Rivers Birding Club, Todd Bird Club, Bartramian Audubon Society, and Seneca Rocks Audubon Society – 27 people in all. It helped that they picked a beautiful fall day for their outing.

We met at the first parking lot on the South Shore and it was nice to see old friends and become acquainted with new ones. Killdeer were gathering, and we watched a large group noisily fly off while we waited for late stragglers. A few Chimney Swifts, the last remnants of summer, also flew over.

We chose to walk the long loop of the Sunken Garden Trail from the shore and into the woods. A crowd of Ring-billed Gulls lounged on the far shore, and we picked out six Double-crested Cormorants on the buoys and in the water. A few people managed to find a Green Heron, well hidden among the weeds, and then painstakingly pointed it out to the rest of us.

With such a large number of people, we were pretty well strung out along the trail, and not everyone saw the same birds. Most people saw between 30 and 40 species. It's always interesting to compare notes afterward.

I was at the tail end of the group, and we were fortunate to get a nice wave of warblers and other birds in the woods. We noted Northern Parula, Magnolia, Blackburnian, Hooded, and Common Yellowthroat, as well as Blue-headed and Red-eyed Vireo, Swainson's Thrush, Eastern Towhee, Scarlet Tanager, and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Sometimes it's good to dawdle!

Other birders recorded Tennessee, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, American Redstart, Bay-breasted, and Blackpoll Warblers. Thanks again to Mike Shaffer and Katie Edmiston for arranging a lovely day. –by participant **Debbie Kalbfleisch**

# The Peregrine



*A THREE-STEP BATH – We don't often see a hawk taking a bath, but Tom Moeller was fortunate to watch and photograph this Sharp-shinned Hawk in Squirrel Hill. Tom explains the three-step process in this installment of "Observations": first a splish-splash, then a feather sleek-back, and finally a quick flight toward a tree where it will preen with a special oil.*

## Observations

### Leaving the Bath

By Tom Moeller

I photographed a Sharp-shinned Hawk taking a bath on my neighbor's flat-roofed garage in April and published some on the Internet. My cousin saw the photos and wondered how a bird that was soaking wet could take off from a bath without drying off. Interesting question....

Most birds, including this hawk, fly out of the water to a tree where it will shake and preen its feathers. When the hawk left the roof-top bath, it flew into a tree where I could see it grooming. The birds do fluff up their feathers during a bath to allow the water to get down to their skin. When they are done, as in my second photo, they sleek back their feathers, which forces much of the water out. Then, instead of remaining exposed in the bath, the birds repair to a secluded spot to preen. Watch how quickly most birds fly out of a birdbath after they are finished.

During preening, a bird accesses a special oil in its uropygial gland, located at the base of the tail, and rubs that oil into its feathers with its bill, feet, or head. These oils maintain the insulating and waterproofing qualities of the feathers. It was once thought lack of preening oils helped Anhingas and cormorants stay under water longer to catch fish. Biologists have shown, however, that their feather structure, not lack of oil, lessens buoyancy and lets the wings get wet. That's why these birds sometimes spread their wings to dry in the sun. I remember driving past a Red-tailed Hawk after a heavy downpour, and it had its wings spread like an Anhinga to catch the reemerging sun to help them dry.

Bathing seems to be important to birds for feather maintenance, even for water birds like ducks, geese, and gulls. Experiments depriving captive starlings from bathing made them look unkempt and less assured of their flying abilities. Dust bathing by birds, especially in arid areas, fulfills a similar purpose to water baths, although our House Sparrows are hard-wired to dust bathe even in our wet climate. Dusting and bathing also seem to be useful in removing vermin and excess oils from the feathers. Too much oil can cause the feathers to stick together.

Bathing is important to birds throughout the year even in winter. I have photographed a Mourning Dove "bathing" during a February rain by lifting its wings one at a time to get its body wet. I guess I should get a heater for my birdbath so my backyard birds can keep their feathers in top condition all year!

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## Birding the Amazon Without Breaking the Bank

By Kathleen Siebert

*WOW! – An exciting highlight for Kathleen and Steve Siebert during their recent birding trip to Ecuador was watching Scarlet Macaws up close at Yasuni National Park – the same place birder Nick Athanas took this dazzling picture on a different visit. Macaws and other parrots gather at “clay licks” for two reasons, according to biologists and physiologists who have studied the odd phenomenon. Suggestions are that the parrots eat clay perhaps to neutralize toxins in the body and/or perhaps to augment a sodium-poor diet in their wet tropical environment. (photograph courtesy of Tropical Birding [www.tropicalbirding.com](http://www.tropicalbirding.com))*



There would be no sleep for my husband, Steve, and me on our first night in the Amazon. Docked for the night, our riverboat was anchored to a sturdy bamboo tree, and the nighttime sounds of the rainforest surrounded us. A soft rain on our roof sounded like BBs hitting a tin can, and the high hum of millions of insects penetrated the thin walls of our tiny cabin. At a distance, I recognized the call of a Common Pauraque, and the rasping of cicadas reminded me of summer back home. But the noise that kept us awake had nothing to do with the rain or the cicadas or even a nocturnal bird. The annoying noise came from the cabin next to ours. It was the loud, rhythmic drone of human snoring – thunderous and incessant, and it was the one sound we thought we’d escape by booking passage on a slow boat cruising through one of the most uninhabited, pristine stretches of wilderness on the planet. I checked the bedside alarm clock – 1:00 AM soon turned into 2:00 AM, which soon turned into 3:00 AM and I’d had enough. By 3:15, Steve and I were sitting on the deck in pitch darkness, pouring coffee down our throats.

Welcome to the jungle.

Ecuador’s Amazonia, the region comprising the Amazon Basin, supports one half of all the Earth’s life forms; two thirds of the planet’s river water flows through the basin and into the Amazon River. Snoring aside, Steve and I savored every waking minute on the “Manatee,” which we affectionately called “the rustbucket,” soaking in the breathtaking scenery en route to daily jungle hikes. From comfortable deck chairs, we drifted past endless greenery, spied thatch-roofed houses, and waved back at smiling, barefoot children waving to us from the jungle-shrouded shores. With binoculars, we spotted drowsy red howler monkeys napping on horizontal tree branches and flamboyant Yellow-tailed Caciques careening through the treetops.

On canoe excursions into the tributaries, we got close looks at wildlife – sleeping Long-eared Bats on sticks jutting out of the water, and Ringed and Green Kingfishers hunting from branches hanging over the water. We spotted Sungrebes and Amazonian Umbrellabirds and five types of flycatchers: Sulphury, Boat-billed,

and Social, as well as Tropical Kingbirds and Lesser Kiskadees. Our excellent guide, Raul, pointed out Aningas, Rufescent Tiger-Herons, and Striated Herons, and on an afternoon trip, our boatman managed to sneak up on a group of Hoatzins, one of our target birds. We were in total awe of these bizarre-looking creatures that looked like a cross between a small dinosaur and a turkey. Nicknamed “stinky turkeys” by the locals for their unsanitary nesting habits, Hoatzins sport a punk-like crest and tend to be quite lethargic, clumsily shuffling through vegetation. Struggling to get a good photo of the Hoatzins, we nearly missed a huge tapir that swam in front of our canoe after being spotted by our boatman. Even Raul gasped at the sudden sight of the boar-like mammal as it streaked up the riverbank and disappeared into the forest.

Our daily jungle hikes lasted for hours at a time and allowed us to sample the rich diversity of plants used for medicines all over the world. Trekking through mud and leaves, we took baby steps over makeshift bridges fashioned from fallen trees, while Blue Morpho butterflies floated in front of us. We got a crash course on insects, as well, taking care not to trample trails of leaf cutter ants and ducking under webs made by fist-sized tarantulas. We oohed and ahed over trees, shrubs, and plants in every color of the rainbow and watched a group of White-faced Capuchin monkeys swinging through the canopy while foraging on fruits and nuts. As we walked, we heard the calls of Osprey and watched pairs of Russet-backed Oropendulas zoom a few feet over our heads. These large brownish songbirds have black bills and golden tails, and their loud “chak!” calls ricocheted through the forest as they passed overhead. On a late afternoon hike just before dusk, we stood motionless as darkness descended and watched bats swoop down in front of us while a chorus of frogs warmed up for their nighttime symphony. Before heading back to our canoe, we watched a pair of Black-fronted Nunbirds in a singing contest, perched side by side in a snag overlooking the tangled shore.

The highlight, though, of any trip to the Amazon can be described in three words: “parrot clay licks.” These exposed clay repositories are located all along the riverbank and provide an

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## Birding the Amazon

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important digestive aid to the birds. We visited two of them on day three, and were greeted at the first lick by the ear-splitting screams of hundreds of Yellow-crowned Amazons, already gorging themselves on clay. We stared in amazement at the wonderful chaos as the colorful birds took turns feeding, then split off into pairs in the kapok trees to preen each other. We enjoyed four species of parrots during the 20-minute show, then all at once hundreds of the large green birds took off, shrieking and squawking, their wings flapping in unison.

We next visited a new observation platform a couple of minutes down the river to view the birdlife of the forest canopy. A cobblestone walkway led to the tower's steep stairway, and ultimately, a 360-degree view of pristine jungle. We stayed about an hour, but it would be easy to spend an entire day at the top of the tower – the sheer number of birds was overwhelming. Magnificent Blue-and-yellow Macaws flashed by us at eye level, Ivory-billed Aracaris sat atop 150-foot kapok trees, and Swallow Tanagers warbled and whistled while foraging through the canopy. In Raul's scope, we studied a Bat Falcon and a Plumbeous Kite perched in a snag, while a pair of Crested Owls sat shoulder to shoulder snoozing. Before heading back down the stairway, we watched a Greater Yellow-headed Vulture and a Swallow-tailed Kite nearly crash into each other as they patrolled the skies.

As the morning flew by, the big event was yet to come. Raul got us front row seats in a pavilion-like blind at a second clay lick just minutes before a group of about 20 people arrived from one of the jungle lodges nearby. Huddled together with binos and cameras in hand, we waited in hushed silence for the show to begin. Before we could see them, we heard the unmistakable "rrraah!" of a macaw, and finally, a pair of Scarlet Macaws flew down in front of the blind and began preening and vocalizing to everyone's delight. We were all entranced by the sight of these gorgeous red, green, and yellow parrots, and happily watched them for 20 minutes, but something was keeping the other parrots away from the lick. Was a predator nearby? Then, suddenly, a pair of Cobalt-winged Parakeets flew in, then four more flew in, then 20 more flew in and before we knew it, the lick and mineral-impregnated soil was covered with Cobalt-winged Parakeets! Once again, the noisy chattering hurt our ears as we watched Scarlet-shouldered Parrotlets and Orange-cheeked Parrots descend as well. The wonderful chaos lasted at least 15 minutes until once again, without warning, the screeching birds took off in a cloud and disappeared into the forest.

After just three nights, the boat ride back to Coca for our flight home came too fast. We had only scratched the surface of what an adventure into the Amazon could show and teach us. The sights, the sounds, and the smells of the Ecuadorian rainforest are forever ingrained in my memory. What's more, I need only hear the sound of somebody snoring to take me back to that magical experience!

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(Editor's note: Kathleen supplements her article with a spectacular video of the spectacle they witnessed at the clay lick. View it on 3RBC's Facebook.)

## Two Redpolls Can Stay on Your Life List for Now

By Paul Hess

As with weather forecasts, predicting what will happen to our bird checklists is not as easy as it may seem. In the May/June 2016 issue of *The Peregrine*, I headlined an article "Our Two Redpoll 'Species' will Likely Become One."

It meant that the American Ornithologists Union (AOU), the "official" arbiter of bird species' status in North America, would likely merge the Common Redpoll and the Hoary Redpoll into a single species. Birders who base their life list on the American Birding Association's *ABA Checklist of Birds of the Continental United States and Canada* would have had to cross out the rarely seen Hoary Redpoll from their ABA life list.

I had "inside information" about what would happen in July, but at the last minute the AOU decided to delay a decision until next year. So, for the ABA life-listers among you who have been lucky enough to see a rare Hoary Redpoll (unfortunately, I'm not one), you can keep listing the species at least until July 2017.

Meanwhile, there is welcome news for listers who have traveled in both coastal and interior regions of the western U.S. The Western Scrub-Jay has been split into two separate species, a coastal one named the California Scrub-Jay and an interior one named the Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay.

The *Sibley Guide to Birds* and the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* show differences between these two scrub-jays. In the National Geographic guide, a long black line separates the new species' ranges.

The scrub-jay split demonstrates how new scientific research enables distinguishing closely related kinds of birds as different species by genetic features, plumage appearances, geographic ranges, plus the extent of interbreeding, which in these two scrub-jays is extremely limited.

Meanwhile, check out the new issue of the American Birding Association's *Birder's Guide to Listing & Taxonomy* for a long list of species that might possibly split into as many as four species or lumped into a single species. The issue is available online even to those who are not ABA members. Click on "Table of Contents" at [tinyurl.com/Species-changes](http://tinyurl.com/Species-changes) to see what additions or losses could be in store for your life list. How's this for an example: the White-breasted Nuthatch could be split into as many as four species!

## Check Out the PSO Pileated

Are you a member of the Pennsylvania Society of Ornithology? If not, you are missing out on worthwhile opportunities to learn about our state's birds. Even if you aren't a member, you can learn about it in the society's newsletter, the PSO Pileated, at [pabirds.org](http://pabirds.org).

3RBC members participate in each issue: Margaret Higbee is the editor, PSO President Mike Fialkovich writes a front-page essay, and Paul Hess contributes a quiz and a column titled "Ornithological Literature Notes" about new avian research in Pennsylvania as well as Pennsylvanians' research elsewhere.

# The Peregrine



*A MARVELOUS FIRST RECORD – Allegheny County added Virginia Rail to the list of its confirmed breeding birds when an adult was discovered feeding a chick at Wingfield Pines in June 2016. Above, one of the parents attends to a fluffy black chick, and at right, a parent steps lively to deliver an important meal. Two chicks were seen in July. (photographs by Geoff Malosh)*

## Birds in the Three Rivers Area

### June-July 2016 Brought a New Breeding Record

**By Mike Fialkovich, Bird Reports Editor**

A late **Red-breasted Merganser** was at Dashields Dam 6/5 (MV). Present since May, a **Common Loon** lingered on the Allegheny River at Sharpsburg 7/20 (JH). In an eBird report of a **Black-crowned Night-Heron** at North Park 7/28 (BP), the observer described it well. The **Osprey** nest at Neville Island produced three chicks this year (PB, MV).

There was exciting rail news. **Virginia Rails** were confirmed breeding in Allegheny County for the first time. Birds had been present at Imperial during previous breeding seasons and suspected of breeding, but were never confirmed. Several were heard this spring at Wingfield Pines, and in June an adult was observed feeding a chick (DW, ST, GM, and many others). Wingfield Pines is an Allegheny Land Trust mitigation wetland in Upper St. Clair, where acid mine drainage is treated in a series of ponds. The birds nested in the cleanest pond. Trails weave through the area, and it's a popular place for walking dogs, running, and enjoying open space. The birds were often right on one of the trails that bisects the marsh, feeding the chick earthworms. Later, two juveniles were seen repeatedly crossing the trail 7/9 (MF) and at least one was seen through July (FK and others). A **Sora** was heard calling at the site well into June, but breeding was never confirmed (DW, ST).

Southbound shorebirds began to appear in mid-July. All sightings were from Imperial: 2 **Lesser Yellowlegs** 7/10 (MV), a **Solitary Sandpiper** 7/14 (GM), a **Semipalmated Sandpiper** 7/15 (GM), a **Least Sandpiper** 7/10 (MV), 3 on 7/14 (GM), and 2 on 7/16 (MF). A **Western Sandpiper** stopped at Imperial 7/14, providing the sixth county record. All records of this species have been from Imperial. An **American Woodcock** was a nice summer find at North Park 6/12 (DP).

The **Herring Gull** colony is alive and well on the Highland Park Bridge. A total of 91 adults and 38 juveniles were counted 7/4 (SK). A chick was in a nest at Dashields Dam 6/2 (MV). Two **Forster's Terns** at Dashields Dam 6/19 were unusual given the late date (MV).

The only **Black-billed Cuckoo** reported was at Churchill 6/6 (HK), **Yellow-billed Cuckoos** were widely noted. **Common Nighthawks** were reported at several locations in the Allegheny River Valley in June (SK, MF, STh, SuT). One was in Bridgeville in the first week of June (RT). **Willow Flycatchers** were heard calling at Imperial this summer despite continued development there (MF).

A **Common Raven** was at Imperial 7/14 (GM). Although they are still in the area, I'm receiving fewer reports recently. The nest at Imperial was not used this year. A **Blue Jay** captured and killed a House Sparrow in Monroeville 6/29 (MF). It decapitated the bird, ate part of the head and flew off with it. The headless body was left at the site of the attack.

A **Purple Martin** in Plum 6/4 (PM) was a surprise because they don't nest in that area. Perhaps it was a scout. They do nest fairly close to the Natrona Dam along the Allegheny River. The new colony at Harrison Hills Park did well this year, although a Black Rat Snake took a few young. The colony's monitors installed netting to thwart future predation.

Ten **Bank Swallows** were observed at a quarry along Route 51 in Stowe Twp. 6/26 (MV) where they were confirmed breeding during the atlas. This is currently the only known breeding location in the county. Two **Cliff Swallow** chicks were in a nest at North Park 7/4 (OM), the only known breeding site in the county, which was discovered a few years ago. An individual bird was at Imperial 7/10 (MV).

There were two reports of **Brown Creeper**, indicating possible breeding, or at least birds on territory, a rare occurrence here. One was heard singing at Walker Park in Sewickley 6/25 (GM) and one was in Allison Park 7/27 (reported to BM). The last summer report was in June 2012.

# The Peregrine

## Birds in the Three Rivers

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A **Bewick's Wren** was reported at Boston 7/15 (JP) but was not seen again. Quite a surprise in Natrona Heights, a **Hermit Thrush** was heard singing at sunset 7/3 (PH).

A male **Black-and-white Warbler** was seen at Harrison Hills Park 6/22 (MF), a known breeding location. A pair of **Chestnut-sided Warblers** was discovered breeding in North Park 6/15 (DP) and other observers later saw birds carrying food. This species has not been known to breed in the county for many years. The last nesting occurred in 2004, according to GM. A **Kentucky Warbler** was singing at Harrison Hills Park 6/22 (MF) and they were also present at another regular breeding site, Sewickely Heights Park (GM and many others). Two **Yellow-breasted Chats** were singing at North Park in June (DP, GM, MF). A large area where **Prairie Warblers** nest at Imperial has been wiped out as construction of industrial parks continues.

**Savannah** and **Grasshopper Sparrows** continue at Imperial amid the increasing development. A juvenile **Purple Finch** was at Pine Twp. 6/13, a pair was there 6/16, a female 6/19, and a juvenile again 6/22 (PL, SL). This is the only location in the county in recent years with breeding Purple Finches.

*Observers: Paul Brown, Mike Fialkovich, Jim Hausman, Paul Hess, Fred Kachmarik, Hayley Kile, Scott Kinzey, Pat Lynch, Sherron Lynch, Pat McShea, Geoff Malosh, Oscar Miller, Bob Mulvihill, Jim Pemberton, Brady Porter, David Poortinga, Steve Thomas (STh), Sue Thomas (SuT), Shannon Thompson, Ryan Tomazin, Mark Vass, Dave Wilton.*



*STATUESQUE BEAUTY – Steve Gosser considers American Avocets his favorite shorebirds, and who would disagree that they are one of nature's great examples of artistry. Steve photographed this one at Conneaut Harbor, Ohio, in August 2016*



*STANDING AT ATTENTION – Is this Northern Harrier's stare a matter of curiosity, concern, or warning? Whatever the case, it posed at remarkably close range for Steve Gosser in July 2016 at the Piney Tract in Clarion County. He confirmed successful nesting there, one of very few Pennsylvania localities where they breed.*

## Briefly...

**Correction:** Matt Juskowich discovered the rare Long-billed Dowitcher in Crawford County in March 2016. The discoverer was incorrectly named in the caption on page 12 of the July/August *Peregrine*.

**Check out 3RBC's Facebook:** Jack Solomon, our founding president, urges members to check out and like us on Facebook. Notices of last-minute outing cancellations, coming events, and other timely information will be posted.

**New column in The Peregrine:** The last issue and this one include a new feature: an illustrated column by Tom Moeller explaining interesting aspects of bird behavior – an educational look at what birds do. Tom also provides references for readers who would like to know more.

**Welcome to a new blog:** Steve Gosser, one of our club's favorite photographers, has a new website featuring a remarkable gallery of photos. They include many pictures of the American Avocet and the Northern Harrier on this page. Take a look at [gosserphotos.com/blog](http://gosserphotos.com/blog).

**An honor for our speaker:** Jean Iron from Canada, who presented a great program on shorebird identification for 3RBC in April 2012, has received the 2016 Distinguished Ornithologist Award from the Ontario Field Ornithologists organization. She is known far beyond Ontario for her research. See Jean's remarkable photos at [www.jeaniron.ca](http://www.jeaniron.ca).