



# The Peregrine

## Three Rivers Birding Club Newsletter

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

Vol. 20, No.3 May/June 2021



*A Black Kite cruises through the heat waves of a brush fire in Australia, looking for a meal. (photo by Robert Gosford)*

### Discover “Firehawks” in Our June 2 Program

We’ve had many marvelous programs during 3RBC’s two decades, but our meeting on Wednesday, June 2, will rank high among them. We’ll learn about “Firehawks” in Australia – raptors that have learned to use torches of fire to obtain their food.

Pennsylvania’s own Mark Bonta, a birder, geographer, conservationist, and wildlife tour leader will tell us the amazing story. It takes place in Australia’s tropical north, where Black Kites, Whistling Kites, and Brown Falcons have long known that Australia’s typical grassland wildfires send small rodent prey scattering and making them easy to catch.

Now what can these raptors do in an amazing example of evolutionary education? They snatch burning sticks from the typical fires, carry them away, and drop the sticks onto other dry grasslands to create more wildfires – and, thus, more easy meals.

Mark is known worldwide for his pioneering research in many fields. For a look at his immense variety of activities, see [markbonta.academia.edu](http://markbonta.academia.edu). The Research page includes a link to his important scientific paper about the Firehawks.

His roots are on a mountaintop in central Pennsylvania, and he has traversed more than 40 countries on 6 continents. Mark has also aided conservation efforts in the Philippines, Australia, Honduras, Mexico, and the U.S. In addition, he leads nature tours to many areas around the world.

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



### Memorable Meeting

On page 2, our President Sheree Daugherty looks back fondly at our meetings during the pre-COVID era.

One favorite was when Julie Zickefoose fed a tiny Orchard Oriole nestling during her program. Tom Moeller gives us a pre-meeting look at the cutie (left). Bob Mulvihill shows Julie and his son Anthony feeding it after the meeting (right).



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

## President's Message

### Here's a Warm Look Back at Our Pre-COVID Years

By Sheree Daugherty

Zoom meetings have been a wonderful way to stay in touch during the COVID pandemic. Without this technology, 3RBC would not have been able to hold its regular meetings. Our first virtual meeting was held in August 2020, when Tessa Rhinehart presented "Eavesdropping on Birds."

Though I'm glad that we have the Zoom option, much is lost without meeting in person. Those personal conversations before and after the program were a good way to exchange information and build friendships; and we cannot have door prize drawings, or offer free magazines. Oh, and I miss the cookies!

If outings are the club's *raison d'être*, meetings are its heart and soul. Looking back at nearly 20 years of programs brings warm memories and exceptional experiences. 3RBC has offered members an impressive and diverse assortment of programs by local presenters and nationally known birders, authors, and artists.

Having a live bird at a program is always fun. The National Aviary brought an African Penguin and taught us about the perils this species faces in the wild. We had a rare opportunity for a close look at Martha, a Great Horned Owl, when the Animal Rescue League visited in 2015.

Who could forget the tiny rescued Orchard Oriole chick that Julie Zickefoose brought? The oriole was not a part of her program, but it stole the show. Julie's presentation had to be interrupted to keep up with the helpless orphan's feeding schedule.

Woodcarver Larry Barth didn't bring a live bird; his sculptures were the next best thing. Winner of many world championships, he showed us how he created his incredibly realistic sculptures of birds and their habitats.

Birders love to travel the world to bird. The next best thing to actually being there is to enjoy a presentation featuring birding hotspots. We've been fortunate to have many such programs that took us throughout the United States and across the globe.

Alaska has been a favorite destination, and the topic of three diverse programs. Roger and Margaret Higbee took us on a road trip all the way to Barrow! Lukas Padegimas shared his season of shorebird research in the tundra of Alaska's Arctic. Geoff Malosh wowed us with his photographic artistry of our largest state.

Greg Miller, noted birder featured in the film and book *The Big Year*, shared his story, too. We all anticipated the release of the movie to see Jack Black play the role of Greg.

What's more, we've explored exotic locales. Noah Strycker took us to almost every continent. It was a preview of his book, *Birding Without Borders: An Obsession, a Quest, and the Biggest Year in the World*, his story of his Big Year journey in 2015.

Other presenters told about Iceland, Ecuador, the Galapagos, Panama, Canada, Australia, Southeast Asia, Israel, and Spain.

We didn't have to go far from home for many fascinating presentations by 3RBC members each year in our popular Slide Slams, which feature their bird photographs from the past year.

It has also been our privilege to host an impressive list of authors. Scott Weidensaul, Kenn and Kimberly Kaufman, Jon Dunn, Tom Stephenson, Noah Strycker, and Katie Fallon gave wonderful presentations. Kevin Karlson and Cameron Cox came to us courtesy of the Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania.

I must confess that there have been a few near-disasters. There are often technical problems setting up before meetings, but things are usually straightened out before the meeting starts, and members

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are blissfully unaware of the pre-meeting frenzy. A presenter once canceled four hours before show time due to a health emergency!

One meeting mishap, however, will go down in club history. In December 2011, nationally known birder and author Jon Dunn was scheduled to do a program about sparrows. While enjoying a dinner with Jon before the meeting, then-president Jim Valimont received a call from a club member at the Phipps Garden Center with bad news. Unknown to us, our space had been double-booked and a banquet was set up in our meeting room! Long-time member Claire Staples offered her basement for the meeting. Someone was posted at the Garden Center to let arriving members know about the mix-up, and to direct them to Claire's nearby home. Somehow we pulled it off. Claire and I cleared out the furniture from her basement room, Mike Fialkovich miraculously had a slide projector in his car, and almost enough chairs magically appeared. That evening 90+ sardine-packed people enjoyed Jon's program!

It takes teamwork to put together programs, and we have many talented, dedicated members who year after year successfully pull it all together. Though Zoom meetings are in many ways easier, I'm looking forward to the sometimes chaotic process of meeting in person again. Let's hope that it is soon!



## Looking Hopefully Ahead

(Editor's note: Just as Sheree Daugherty reminisces on page 2 about our club's enjoyable in-person events, she wants us to look forward to the future. Our Outings Director Steve Thomas does, too. Here are their outlooks.)

**Sheree:** When will we resume in-person meetings? Given the uncertainties of the COVID pandemic, and in the interest of doing everything possible to insure the safety of our members, 3RBC will not be holding in-person meetings in 2021.

We expect the meetings we all enjoy to resume in 2022. Renovations to the club's customary meeting venue, the Phipps Garden Center, continue to be delayed, and projections are that the space will not be available to the club until sometime in 2022.

So, when we do begin in-person meetings, they will be held at the Phipps Botany Hall facility in Oakland.

Meetings in 2022 will probably be a mix of in-person and Zoom. The Zoom format, while lacking the personal touch, has the advantage of allowing us to schedule speakers who are unable to travel to Pittsburgh.

Updates will be posted in *The Peregrine*, on our website, and on our Facebook page.

**Steve:** We hope to resume our bird outings this fall. We are considering doing walks with some stipulations in place, such as following any CDC recommended guidelines that may be in place such as masking and social distancing.

To implement the requirements prior to the outing, attendees will need to contact the leader by email or by phone so that the leader(s) will know how many to expect. There may be limitations on the number of participants depending on the outing location.

These, too, will be posted in *The Peregrine*, on our website, and on our Facebook page.



*WINTER MEGA-RARITY – Can you imagine seeing a Tennessee Warbler in Allegheny County in mid-winter? One showed up in Morningside in February 2021. (photo by John Vassallo)*

## A Tennessee Warbler Here in February? Yes!

**By John Vassallo**

After using his birthday money to add some feeders to our backyard collection in Morningside, my 8-year-old son, Samuel, told me that a small, olive bird was on his new suet feeder on the morning of February 4th. He saw it on the 9th, and showed me a photo he had taken of it on the 10th.

It was a wintering warbler, and not a Yellow-rumped! It looked like a Tennessee, which we thought to be rare. Taking a few good photos and a closer look, we saw that its undertail coverts were not yellowish like a less rare wintering Orange-crowned Warbler, but sure enough, white like a Tennessee!

After studying winter records of Tennessee Warblers on eBird, I realized how rare this bird's location was. Not only had no Tennessee been reported in Pennsylvania past mid-January (three historical records before the week of 1/22), reports of a Tennessee Warbler occurred in only a handful of states through mid-February.

Historic reports on eBird show sightings only in Florida and California through February, which makes us wonder if this is the northernmost Tennessee Warbler in late February or March ever reported. Either way, while its other members of this species normally spend the winters 2,000 miles south in South and Central America or Southern Mexico, we were thrilled to have such a pretty visitor light up our snowy, gray February!

Whether it was injured in a window strike or left behind for another reason, we had hoped to see it survive the single-digit temperatures that were forecast for mid-to-late February.

My wife and daughters joined the action and faithfully provided a mix of crushed peanuts and dried meal worms, along with new suet cakes that kept it coming to our feeders about every 20 minutes from 7:30 to noon each morning, and less frequently in the afternoon.

We were excited to see this warbler make it to warmer days, although its visits became less frequent due to an increase in food sources and habitat after the snow melt. While we expected this greenish-yellow friend to leave us and join its fellow warblers as they pass northward through Pennsylvania in May, we are thankful for getting to see this special warbler right outside our window at such a unique time of year.



*UNUSUAL OWL – Margaret Higbee sent us this photo of a leucistic Barred Owl, taken by Pam Illig near Ebensburg in Cambria County on January 31, 2021. The pale color results from abnormal deficiency in production of the normal brown pigment.*

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## Observations

### Let's Take a Close Look at Our Common Grackles

By Tom Moeller

People say that the robin is a sign of spring, but we have Canadian robins in our area throughout the winter. The Common Grackle is more a true harbinger of spring. Grackles are not everybody's favorite birds, but their appearance here in large numbers in early March is more a herald of the end of winter than the robin.

When Roger Tory Peterson wrote his classic book *A Field Guide to the Birds* in 1934, he was the first author to tell us that ornithologists had named three different Common Grackle subspecies:

--First was the subspecies now called the "Florida Grackle" (scientifically named *Quiscalus quisucla quisucla*), which occurs on the southeastern U.S. coast and Florida.

--Second was our western Pennsylvania subspecies called the "Bronzed Grackle" (scientifically named *Q. q. versicolor*) to emphasize its distinct bronze-colored back feathers.

--Finally came the subspecies called the "Purple Grackle" whose range is east of the Appalachian Mountains, including eastern Pennsylvania (scientifically named *Q. q. stonei*). It was officially classified as a subspecies just in time for Peterson to include it in his historic 1934 guide.

For eBird users, the "Purple" and "Florida" subspecies are now combined for reporting because the two look alike and can't be distinguished from each other by observers in the field.

The males of all subspecies sport bluish/purple glossy head feathers contrasting with their bright yellow eyes.

The two Purple subspecies show a purple sheen on the body and wing feathers in sunlight, which may appear as multicolored with blue, violet, gold, bronze, or green iridescence. It populates the area from southern New England down the East Coast to Florida. They remain east of the Alleghenies.

The Bronzed subspecies, which shows a bronze sheen on its body and wing feathers, populates the area between the Alleghenies (our area) and the Rocky Mountains from southern Canada down to the Gulf Coast. The bronzed grackles are the only migratory grackles, leaving their northern limits in the fall for warmer regions in the southeast. Florida Common Grackles, which show green iridescence on their backs, occupy areas of the state inland from the coast, leaving seaside areas to the larger Boat-tailed Grackles. Females of all subspecies are duller and smaller versions of their male counterparts.

How does that long tail (half the length of its body) work in flight? The birds fold up their tails into a V shape as they fly, using the tail almost as a rudder to steer through the air. Stokes (see References) says this is done during breeding season by males possibly as an attraction to females. The V shape is most often seen at the beginning and the end of a flight, although it can be seen in straight flight, too.

Grackles do not have much of a song. The best they can do is make a loud rusty-gate squawk "(readle-ree)" or a loud "chack" call. In antagonistic encounters the males may use a "chitip" call. Males and females often communicate with a softer "see" whistle.

Common Grackles use natural remedies for one of their ills -- lice and other parasites. Grackles will "ant"; that is, lie down near an ant colony and let ants crawl onto their feathers, where they deposit formic acid, an insect repellent. Grackles are also known to



OUR "BRONZED" GRACKLE – Tom Moeller shows us our western Pennsylvania Common Grackle subspecies named the "Bronzed" Grackle because of its bronze-colored back. Tom photographed it in his Squirrel Hill yard on April 4, 2021.

dab themselves with marigold blossoms or chokecherry juice, two more natural insect repellents.

This year (March 3, 2021) the first Common Grackle to arrive at our house was a lone male. Grackles are gregarious birds gathering in large flocks during winter, often with other blackbirds. Our lonely male seemed lost without some "buddies." We know some grackles may come back to the same location – years ago we saw a grackle with a white tail in our neighborhood. Whether the tail was leucistic or had replacement feathers from an unexpected loss, we did not know. When the same bird reappeared the following spring, we knew two things: a) the tail feathers were leucistic; otherwise, during the grackle's normal molt in autumn the white replacement tail feathers would have been replaced with normal dark feathers, and b) grackles seem to come back to the same area upon their migratory return.

In the next few days more Common Grackles arrived to join our single male, and the posturing began. Two, three, or four birds would arrive in the yard. One or more might stick its beak straight up into the air, signifying either its dominate position or the fact that another bird was too close. Another aggressive posture would be a puffing up of all the body and tail feathers followed by a squeaky squawk. Gatherings at the top of a leafless tree in spring would include those 'ruff-outs' with squeaky calls, "chack" calls, tail flicking, and bill-tilts into the air. All these gestures would be for establishing a pecking order, and with females involved, mate selection. The mixed group may take off in group flights winnowing down over days to mating pairs.

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EASTERN "PURPLE" GRACKLE – East from the Appalachians to the north and central Atlantic Coast is this subspecies with no bronze color. Steve Walter photographed it at Oakland Lake in Queens, New York, on April 29, 2010.

## Observations

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I noticed that the grackle flocks in my neighborhood suddenly disappeared a few days into April this year (2021). No squawks or chacks in the treetops. Only a few grackles visited my feeders, but all were eerily subdued. Seemed as if the "winnowing down" of the large flocks from late March had occurred, and mating pairs of grackles were settling down to the quiet business of building nests and laying eggs.

A mating pair may make some attempts at housekeeping with both carrying long strands of grass about. Several attempts to build a nest may occur, but the female grackle will usually build the nest with no help from the male. She takes about 11 days. Long grass strands surround a mud cup which is lined with finer grasses, rootlets, string or cloth, and/or feathers. This social bird often nests in colonies in pine groves. A large pine in our neighborhood must be home for grackle nests because we see fledglings and juveniles in our yard almost every year. The female will lay 4-5 eggs usually and incubate them herself. The male may watch over her, or more likely go off philandering with other female grackles. If he stays or not, the male has little to do with caring for the nestlings that may hatch in about 12 days. However, the male does help feed insects to the fledglings after they leave the nest.

The nestlings remain under the care of the female, especially brooding, for 10-14 days. The male may also tend to the nestlings. Fledglings are all blackish brown with only a short tail. The area around their eyes does not yet contain feathers with a gray, featherless stripe continuing past their eyes on the sides of their heads. They remain near the nest for a few days, fed by both parents. As the fledgling grows into a juvenile, the feathers fill in and the coloring becomes more a chocolate brown. The juvenile will molt into adult plumage during its first autumn.

Common Grackles are omnivorous – eating anything: seeds, grains, cracked corn, peanuts, cottage cheese, or even cooked potatoes. If fed bread or any bakery item, grackles will take it to a bird bath, puddle, or other water area and dunk the bread into the water to soften it up, making it easier to eat. A nastier side of grackles comes out during nesting season: they may take eggs

or nestlings from other species. They are known to kill and eat smaller birds, most often House Sparrows. Because they fly in large groups with other blackbirds outside of the nesting season, such flocks may descend upon agricultural areas eating insects but also damaging grain crops and budding corn plants – a boon and a curse to farmers.

Large groups of grackles may begin to form in late summer. On September 18, 2011, one such group descended on our back yard. At least 70 birds were in our yard, on our neighbor's garage, and on another neighbor's roof. There were adult and juvenile Common Grackles and starlings mixed in – a true blackbird flock.

Dennis (see References) wrote in 1994 that Common Grackle numbers were increasing at that time. However, the North American Breeding Bird Survey has shown a 58% decline in their numbers up to 2014. Although they were "abundant and widespread," there was still some concern about their drop in numbers. In 2016 Partners in Flight called the grackles a "Common Species in Steep Decline." The large mixed flocks of blackbirds raiding crops have been met by farmers with deadly countermeasures, one major cause of the decline in grackle numbers.

As buds on the trees turn to leaves in the spring, listen for the melodies of the cardinal, the House Finch, or the Song Sparrow, but also expect the discordant squawks and chats of Common Grackles higher up in the trees uttering their version of a mating call.

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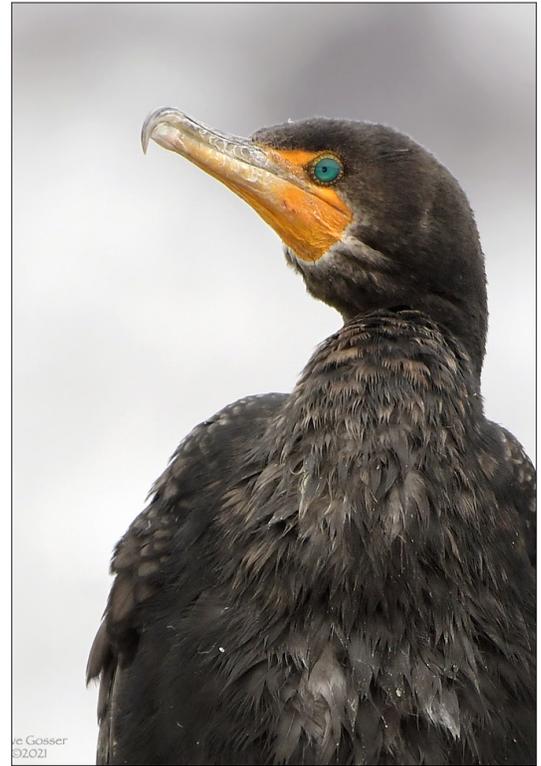
Tom's online gallery this time depicts what we might call a Common Grackle's life history of behavior. He has watched these grackles exceptionally carefully.

## Waterbirds Spice the Winter

Mike Fialkovich's report on page 7 lists December and January waterbird highlights. More came from February to April.

Clockwise from right at the Pittsburgh Point are a Double-crested Cormorant by Steve Gosser, Redheads by Mike Fialkovich, a Canvasback by Steve, a Long-tailed Duck and a White-winged Scoter on the Allegheny River at Tarentum by Dave Brooke, and a Glaucous Gull and Ring-billed Gull at the Point by Steve.

Look for details in Mike's future "Birds in the Three Rivers Area."



## Birds in the Three Rivers Area

### Dec.-Jan. 2020-2021 Was an Especially Good Winter

By Mike Fialkovich, Bird Reports Editor

Late **Tundra Swans** were reported in December. A flock was heard flying over Beechwood Farms 12/2 (BSh). During the Pittsburgh Christmas Bird Count 12/26, flocks in flight were noted at several locations: 44 over Sheraden Park in the West End of Pittsburgh (OM, JG), 38 over McKees Rocks (OM, JG), 95 over Hampton Twp. (BPo), and least 60 over McCandless Township (SG). In January an immature Tundra Swan was found in a field in Findlay Twp. 1/8 (MV) where it continued to 1/15 (various observers).

A blue-morph **Snow Goose** was on the Allegheny River at Tarentum 1/17-23 (ABo, various observers).

A **Gadwall** was at Imperial 12/19-1/24 (MV, various observers). An **American Wigeon** was at Imperial 12/19-1/24 (MV, various observers). Five **Northern Shovelers** were at Imperial 12/3-18 (RB, various observers) where 1 remained until 1/24. A male **Northern Pintail** was at North Park 12/22-1/26 (eBird, various observers), and 1 was at Brunots Island 1/26 (AP).

All three scoter species were here during the winter, a rare event for Allegheny County. A **Surf Scoter** and 2 **Black Scoters** on the Ohio River at Leetsdale continued from November and were last reported 12/4 (various observers.) A female or immature Surf Scoter was at The Point in Pittsburgh 12/9 (ABi). Females were also found at Tarentum 12/14 (ABo) and Sewickley 12/22 (MV). An adult male and 2 female **White-winged Scoters** were at The Point in Pittsburgh 12/14 (ROR, ABi), and an immature male was at Aspinwall 12/25 (AP). Three female-plumaged Black Scoters were at Blawnox 12/26-12/30 with 2 remaining until 12/31 (AP, various observers). A female plumaged Black Scoter was just downriver at the Highland Park Bridge 1/28-30 (ON, MD, various observers).

A **Long-tailed Duck** was reported at Oakmont 1/13 (RB). A **Ruddy Duck** was at The Point 12/26 (AP) and 2 were in Lawrenceville 1/30 (LN, RM).

**Killdeer** lingered into December with 1 at Imperial 12/3 (RB) and 3 at Duck Hollow 12/11 (CJ). A flock was at South Park 12/7-1/5 with a high count of 26 on 12/7 (JF, various observers). A **Wilson's Snipe** spent December and January at Imperial (MV, various observers).

A **Lesser Black-backed Gull** was there 1/26 through the end of the month and 2 were there 1/29 (BC). A Lesser Black-backed at the Emsworth Dam 1/27-29 (likely one of the birds seen just upriver at Pittsburgh) was nearly a full adult but showed pink legs, which led to a discussion regarding its identification (AP and others). Other than the leg color, the bird appeared to be a Lesser Black-backed Gull. The conclusion was that it was a Lesser Black-backed with oddly colored legs, which a small percentage of individuals show.

A **Common Loon** was at Brunots Island 12/26 (OM, JG), a nice addition to the Pittsburgh Christmas Bird Count list.

An immature **Black-crowned Night-Heron** was photographed at Duck Hollow 12/13 (CJ). This is only the third winter record in the county that I'm aware of. One was reported on the Pittsburgh CBC in December 1990 (age not specified) and an immature was at McKees Rocks in January 2002.

**Black Vulture** sightings continued from the fall in Franklin Park with a single bird until 1/2 (various observers). Three were at Beechwood Farms 1/20 (LFH), 2 were there 1/21 (eBird), 1 was in Jefferson Borough at Peter's Creek 1/26 (JF), and 2 were in Bethel Park 1/26 (JP) Two were perched on a water tower with **Turkey Vultures** in Fox Chapel 1/30 (AH), one of which had a red wing tag with the number H73 -- the same bird that was photographed in that general area the previous spring. Turkey Vultures were reported in small numbers regularly through the period.

Up to 2 **Short-eared Owls** were at Imperial 12/31-1/2 (various observers).

A **Merlin** was at Dashields Dam 12/4 (MV). Up to 2 continued at Schenley Park from last season (various observers); 1 was in Allegheny Cemetery in Lawrenceville 12/23 (CB, AB), 1 was in Verona in January (SK) and possibly the same bird was in nearby Oakmont 12/6 (RB) and 12/29 (eBird with photo). One was in Homewood Cemetery during January (various observers).

A high count of 30 **Fish Crows** came from Squirrel Hill 1/7 (MKu).

A late **Ruby-crowned Kinglet** was at Hartwood Acres 12/11 (DYe), 1 visited a suet feeder in Franklin Park 2/6 (OM), and 1 was at Duck Hollow 12/31- 2/14 (LK, TRh, DBc, AP). Ruby-crowned Kinglets do not typically winter in the area.

An extremely late (or overwintering) **Swainson's Thrush** was photographed in a backyard in Squirrel Hill 12/2 (JC). A number of **Hermit Thrush** reports are in eBird for the period. An **American Pipit** was at Janoski's Farm in Findlay Twp. 12/1 (LF, JP, TV).

**Evening Grosbeak** reports continued from November. The most reliable site was North Park, where they were regularly observed feeding on the seeds of Boxelder and at a nearby bird feeder. The maximum count was 17. One was in Marshall Twp. 12/1 (JHz), a female was in West Deer Twp. 12/17 (LC), and 4 were at Harrison Hills Park 12/19 (PH). Two **Common Redpolls** were at Imperial 12/1 (AP) and 1 was nearby in Findlay Twp. that day (AP), 3 were at North Park feeding in a field of goldenrod 12/12 (OL, JVA, SV), and 12 were in Bethel Park 1/9-11 (MJ, various observers). **Pine Siskins** were reported in small numbers from various locations during the season; there were too many to report here.

A **Lapland Longspur** was found at Janoski's Farm in Findlay Twp. 12/1 (AP).

A late **Chipping Sparrow** visited a feeder in Pine Twp. 12/28 (PL, SL). **Field Sparrows** are local in winter. There were several reports including 5 at West Mifflin 12/10 and 1 there 1/5 (JF), 1 at Harrison Hills Park 12/19 (OL, MF, JV), 2 there 1/26 (ON), 2 at Hartwood Acres 12/11 (DYe), 2 at North Park 12/12 (LN, RM) and 1/29 (ON), and 1 at Boyce Park in Plum 1/10 (EH). **Fox Sparrow** is rare here after fall migration. Interestingly, 2 were found at two locations on 12/25: 1 in Indiana Twp. (DYe) and 1 in Upper St. Clair (JM). An out-of-season **Lincoln's Sparrow** visited a feeder in Pine Twp. 1/23 (PL, SL). **White-crowned Sparrows** are rare in winter, but there were several reports. Singles were at Indiana Twp. (DYe) and Allegheny Cemetery (NL) 12/26, providing nice additions to the Pittsburgh CBC list; 1 was at Imperial 1/3 (TRh) and 6 were photographed there 1/10 (DBe). Local in winter, a **Swamp Sparrow** was observed by many during Evening Grosbeak searches in December and January in a small patch of cattails at North Park. A **Dark-eyed "Oregon" Junco** visited a feeder in Indiana Twp. intermittently from 1/1 through the end of January (DYe).

A **Baltimore Oriole** was spotted at a feeder in Oakland 12/19 where it remained through January (FI). It was offered a variety of

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## Birds in the Three Rivers

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fruits and jellies during its stay.

Blackbirds are uncommon to rare here in winter. Three **Red-winged Blackbirds** were at Chatham College in Squirrel Hill 12/26 (MKu). A flock of 20-30 visited a feeder regularly in Pleasant Hills in January (MH). Eight **Brown-headed Cowbirds** were at Beechwood Farms 12/18 (BSh), 1 was in Plum 12/18 (AH, PM), 4 visited a feeder in Harmar Twp. 12/24 (JV), and 3 visited a feeder in Pine Twp. 12/28 (PL, SL). There were two **Rusty Blackbird** reports which are rare here in winter: 1 in a backyard in Upper St. Clair 12/1 (JM) and another in Pine Twp. 12/16 (PL, SL). **Common Grackle** reports included 1 in Harmar Twp. 12/11 (JV), 4 at Chatham College in Squirrel Hill 12/26, 5 there 1/6 (MKu), and 10 in Natrona Heights 12/31 (PH).

A female **Scarlet Tanager** was another surprise out-of-season visitor to a feeder in the West End area of Pittsburgh 1/25-26 (CM). It was photographed and seen for only those two days.

*Observers: David Bennett (DBe), Angela Biederman (ABi), Al Borek (AB), Carole Borek, Al Bowers (ABo), Ron Burkert, Jack Chaillet, Ben Coulter; Linda Croskey, Michael David, Leslie Ferree, Mike Fialkovich, John Flannigan, Steve Gosser, Jim Gray, Eric Hall, Malcolm Harter, Louis Freeland-Hayes (LFH), Janet Heintz (JHz), Amy Henrici, Paul Hess, Frank Izaguirre, Chuck Jones, Lisa Kaufman, Scott Kinzey, Malcolm Kurtz (MKu), Nick Liadis, Oliver Lindhiem, Pat Lynch, Sherron Lynch, Carol McCullough, Jeff McDonald, Pat McShea, Oscar Miller, Ralph Musthaler, Lauren Nagoda, Oscar Nigam, Ryan O'Rourke (ROR), Joe Papp, Aidan Place, Brady Porter (BPo), Tessa Rhinehart (TRh), Brian Shema (BSh), Jim Valimont, Mark Vass, John Vassallo (JVA), Samuel Vassallo, Tammi Ventura, David Yeany II (DYe).*



*SURPRISE AT HOME – Rusty Blackbirds are uncommon migrants in our area, and to see one in our yard is extraordinary. As Mike Fialkovich reports above, Pat and Sherron Lynch discovered one at their Pine Twp. yard in Allegheny County in mid-December 2020. Next, a migrating male and female showed up together three months later. Sherron photographed this male on March 11.*

## Notes About Our Birders: a New Peregrine Feature

*(Editor's note: From time to time I receive messages from members about experiences that I feel are worth mentioning in our newsletter. The following are a few openers. Please don't hesitate to write to [phess@salsgiver.com](mailto:phess@salsgiver.com) if you have a sighting or any bird-related experience that our members might like to know about.)*

**NOTABLE DISCOVERY.** From Jack Solomon: "It has been a good year for rarities at Estero Llano Grande State Park in South Texas, but our best was on March 8, 2021. That's when 3RBC ace birder Susie Solomon and I were at a feeder there when she said, "There's a grassquit in the brush." It came out, and we recognized it as Texas's 7th record of Yellow-faced Grassquit. We quickly got several nearby birders on it, two of whom were very well known and highly regarded as capable. It stuck around briefly, then flew away, much to the disappointment of a number of birders who got the news and started arriving."

**... AND ANOTHER ONE.** Roger and Margaret Higbee discovered a Townsend's Solitaire in Delaware during a visit in April. This species is a rare wanderer eastward from the far West.

**PHOTO AWARD.** One of our club's excellent photographers, Dave Brooke, won first place in the "People" category in 2020 for his remarkable shot of a Peregrine Falcon during the "Festival of the Cranes" at Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico. See [friendsofbosquedelapache.org/photo-contest](http://friendsofbosquedelapache.org/photo-contest).

**SOMETHING TO PONDER.** Here's a socially relevant article about birding that Frank Moone suggests is worth reading: [tinyurl.com/fw5jxphc](http://tinyurl.com/fw5jxphc). Our webmaster Tom Moeller has also posted it on our 3RBC Facebook page.

**A SAW-WHET RETURNS.** From Hannah Floyd, who told us in the March/April issue of *The Peregrine* about a remarkable experience with an owl and a cat in her Colorado yard: "I am writing to let you know that I spotted the Northern Saw-whet Owl again during the blizzard on March 14. I was shaking snow off our nearly-collapsed junipers, when I looked up to find the owl peering right back at me! Talking with my dad, we speculate that the owl has been roosting in our backyard for the entire winter in the safety of our thick juniper trees. I am very excited that we have an owl in our backyard."

**PAEAN TO THE PILEATED:** Be sure to check 3RBC's homepage and read Frank Izaguirre's extraordinary article and photos saluting the Pileated Woodpecker. It's based on Frank's experiences in Pittsburgh's Frick Park. Titled "Celebrating the Stumpbreaker of Squirrel Hill," it was published in the January 2021 issue of the American Birding Association's *Birding* magazine.

**"BROWN MORPH" SCREECH-OWL?** A brown Eastern Screech-Owl, unlike the familiar "red" or "gray" color morph birds, recently attracted attention at Pittsburgh's Frick Park. Is it a truly distinct "morph" like a pink and a white Reddish Egret, or just an intermediate variation? Your editor hopes to suggest an answer from experts in an upcoming issue of *The Peregrine*.