

**Putnam Highlands Audubon
Society Newsletter**

Volume 118, No. 1 Winter 2018

Putnam Highlands Audubon Society

P.O. Box 292, Cold Spring, NY 10516

www.putnamhighlandsaudubon.org



PROTECT THE EAGLE NEST!

Please join Riverkeeper and other local environmental groups in protecting the bald eagle nest.

A federal appeals court has denied a motion for a stay of construction on the Valley Lateral Pipeline.

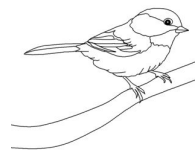
Unfortunately, a bald eagle nest located within the pipeline's right-of-way is in danger of disturbance, as tree clearing by the Millennium Pipeline Company could begin at any time. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has the authority to protect our national bird. We need you to take action and share this message widely.

*PUTNAM HIGHLANDS AUDUBON
SOCIETY: CONNECTING PEOPLE
WITH NATURE*

The mission of the Putnam Highlands Audubon Society (PHAS) is to preserve and maintain the lands and waters that have been entrusted to our stewardship; to inform and educate the public on issues involving birds, wildlife, and the environment; and to encourage membership in the chapter and participation in its activities.

Construction of the pipeline threatens bodies of water such as the Wallkill River Watershed in Orange County

and would fuel a massive new fracked-gas power plant at a time when New York is moving toward a clean-energy future.



Numerous recent photographs and videos by Protect Orange County indicate that the eagle nest is *not* abandoned, as Millennium falsely claims.

Under the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, our national bird is guarded from harassment and disturbance, but only if the law is applied and enforced. Tell the Fish and Wildlife Service's eagle coordinator, Tom Wittig, to send a biologist to document and verify the presence of bald eagles and their nest near the pipeline route.

Thomas Wittig, Eagle Coordinator
413/253-8577

Thomas_Wittig@fws.gov

PHAS WINTER BIRD SEED SALE

Connie Mayer-Bakall

The early snows have attracted lots of diverse bird species to feeders. If you watch them carefully, you can almost get to know each bird individually.

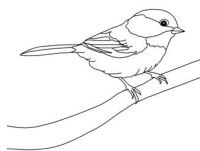
With loss of habitat and so many invasive plants that don't provide food for wildlife, bird feeders have become an important source of food for our overwintering birds. Woodpeckers, chickadees, finches, tufted titmice, nuthatches, blue jays, cardinals, song sparrows, and doves are all clamoring for seed at the feeders.

We hope you will support this fundraiser, which benefits our feathered friends as well as our many PHAS programs!

Orders must be sent in by **January 9**. They can be picked up at the Taconic

Outdoor Education Center on **Saturday, January 13**, from 9 A.M. to noon. Experienced birders will be on hand to answer any questions you may have.

Order forms can be found online at the PHAS website:
www.putnamhighlandsaudubon.org.



FOUNDRY COVE TRIP

Ryan J. Bass

PHAS was pleased to sponsor the "Third Saturdays" trip to observe the sights and sounds of local and migrant birds. On November 18 approximately thirty members of the community connected with nature in a walk at the West Point Foundry Preserve led by Ryan Bass and assisted by board members Lew Kingsley, Adele Stern, and Perry Pitt.

In total, sixty-six birds were seen or heard, representing twenty-three distinct species. Without question, the

highlight was a peregrine falcon that flew past the group with prey gripped in its talons. The large falcon landed in a tree across the marsh, and participants were treated to extended views through a spotting scope.

The peregrine falcon is one of nature's elite hunting machines. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a peregrine in a steep dive can reach speeds of 200 mph, making it the fastest animal on the planet.

Unfortunately, the population of these birds declined steeply until 1972, when DDT, a popular insecticide that hindered nesting success, was banned. Since then, the peregrine falcon, like other birds at the top of the food chain (notably the bald eagle), has recovered dramatically. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), the peregrine now has a stable worldwide population and is listed as "Least Concern." Recent breeding records have been confirmed in Storm King State Park, where a pair of peregrines have built a cliffside nest or "eyrie."

The species account from the trip was recorded on eBird, a "Citizen Science" project hosted by Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology. Since its inception in 2002, eBird has gathered over 400 million contemporary and historical user-submitted sighting records worldwide. Biologists use these data to further their understanding of migratory patterns, climate change, and conservation priorities.

Submissions to the public record are invaluable for establishing a baseline account of breeding and migratory stopover records of endangered or threatened species that may one day be used to further local conservation efforts.



Photo by Jillian Fitzgerald

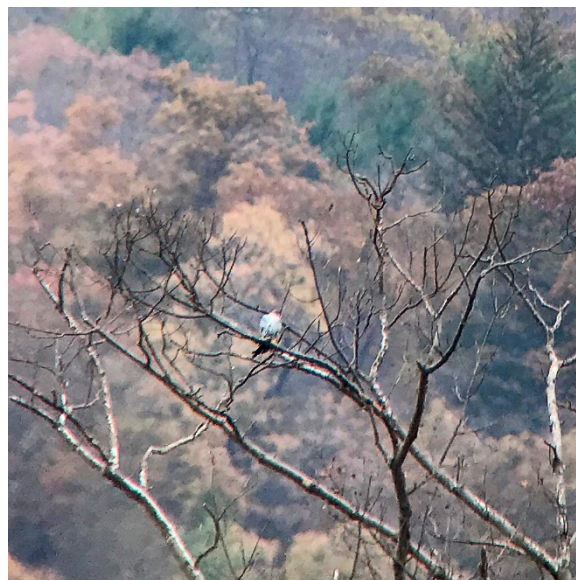
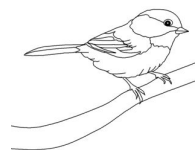


Photo of peregrine falcon by Ryan J. Bass



PEEKSKILL BIRD COUNT

Perry Pitt

December 16, 2017

Tom Mullane, Scott Silver, and I met at 8 A.M. on a cold, windy morning to help with the Westchester Christmas Bird Count (CBC). Parking at the Paddlesport facility near Annsville Circle, we started for the river's edge and noted six Canada geese overhead. Twenty-eight more followed as we made our way to the shoreline. We counted two mallards, sixteen ring-

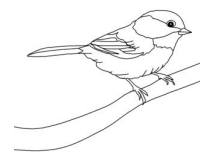
billed gulls, six hooded mergansers, three crows, and ten common mergansers. There was also a raft of forty-two ring-necked ducks and hooded mergansers. Two downy and one red-bellied woodpecker looked on.

We carpooled downriver to Mariandale Retreat and there encountered a large raft of hundreds of ducks in the Hudson River. John Hannan, a birder for the CBC, joined us and identified two redheads, a bufflehead, 20 scaups, 280 canvasbacks, and 300 ruddy ducks in the raft. Two common goldeneyes and some ring-billed and herring gulls flew nearby. Twenty Canada geese flew overhead.

We walked the grounds and saw forty goldfinches, two red-bellied woodpeckers, two downy woodpeckers, two blue jays, twelve crows, ten chickadees, five tufted titmice, two white-breasted nuthatches, two red-tailed hawks, two immature and one mature bald eagle, twenty-four starlings and grackles, two mockingbirds, ten song sparrows, ten white-throated sparrows, forty juncos,

and four cardinals. Before we arrived at Mariandale, John had seen a winter wren, a ruby-crowned kinglet, house finches, a raven, and twenty fish crows.

Finally, we saw four red-tailed hawks from inside a nearby diner while we were thawing out and double-checking our numbers.



FIELD TRIPS

Saturday, January 20

Ryan Bass and Pete Salmansohn will lead a special birding trip to southern Ulster County and the Shawangunk Grassland National Wildlife Refuge, where the unusual habitat is known to attract short-eared owls and northern harrier hawks. We will carpool and caravan from Cold Spring at 3:00 P.M. for the 45-minute drive, then walk out to the grassy, shrubby habitat in search of these uncommon and inspiring birds. Check the PHAS website for more details.

Saturday, February 17, 10:00-11:30 A.M. This field trip will visit local hotspots along the Hudson River in search of wintering bald eagles. Check the website for details.

EVENTS AND PROGRAMS

Sunday, January 28, 2 P.M. Join local hero Malachy Cleary at the Butterfield Library for an intriguing program describing his decades-long efforts to restore a colony of purple martins to the area. These large members of the swallow family are uncommon, and their colonies are far and few between. Mal has finally achieved success at Glynwood Farm, where fifty pairs of martins nested last summer.

Saturday, February 3, 2 P.M. Join local ecologist Dr. Ed McGowan at the Desmond-Fish Library for his observations and research focusing on the reptiles and amphibians of this part of the Hudson River valley. Ed will share some very interesting records from the 1880s and the 1920s, and compare those observations to the

kinds of frogs, snakes, and other critters that are present today.

DATES TO REMEMBER

Saturday, January 13: winter birdseed sale

Saturday, April 14: PHAS annual dinner

All members of PHAS are welcome to attend meetings of the Board of Governors. Board meetings are held at Hubbard Lodge (or at the Red Line Diner in Fishkill on snow days). They're a good way to learn about what PHAS is doing, the problems we face, and the interesting wildlife in our region. The next three board meetings will be held on the following dates (all on Saturday at 9 A.M. at Hubbard Lodge):

January 20

February 10

March 10

For more information, e-mail Connie Mayer-Bakall at concoyote@aol.com.



Can you identify this bird? (answer on p. 14)

Q: What did the chickpea say to the doctor?

A: I fal-a-fel!

THE SCREECH OWL CALLS

Ryan J. Bass

During the Halloween season there is nothing more haunting than the ethereal whinny of an eastern screech owl. On a crisp autumn night, the spooky call of this diminutive owl can make your hair stand on end.

A small owl with traditional ear tufts, it is a master of disguise, blending in quite handsomely with its surroundings. Even for a trained observer, these owls are quite difficult to find, although they often hide in

plain sight. Typically, a birder would need to enlist the help of his or her feathered friends to find an eastern screech-owl. When a "screech" is heard by a songbird, mob mentality will soon ensue as the birds try to drive the predator away or perhaps make its hiding place known to others.

Having heard a screech owl the night before, the next day I heard a commotion in my yard. A group of blue jays, black-capped chickadees, and tufted titmice were bombarding a phantom in the hemlocks. I went to investigate and discovered an eastern screech owl visibly upset that the mob had interrupted its daytime slumber. To maintain a safe distance and prevent further disturbance, I used a spotting scope to observe the mob scene. Hovering an iPhone over the scope's eyepiece captured the accompanying photo in a technique known as digiscoping.

The hysteria eventually ended and the birds went about their business, but those blue jays always keep a watchful eye on things, don't they?

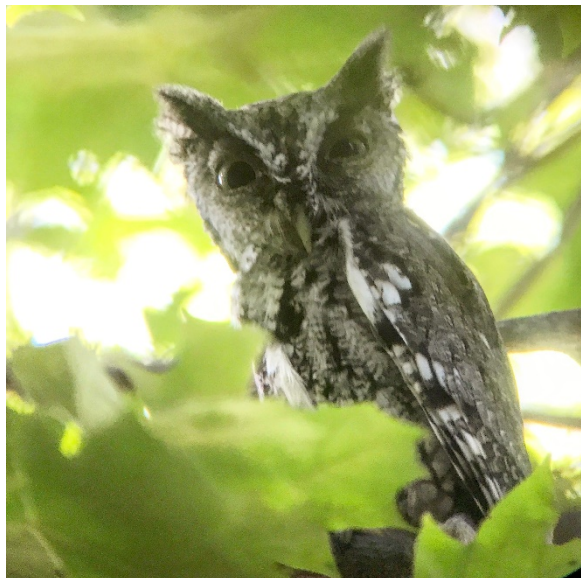


Photo by Ryan J. Bass



BIRDING IN ICELAND

Ellyn Varela-Burstein

Autumn is not the usual time for a trip to Iceland. Most people go in summer, when the birding is astounding as numerous species, including arctic terns and puffins, come to nest, breed, and rear their young. Winter is considered a good time to spend Christmas in Iceland and during the long, dark nights scan the skies for the Aurora Borealis. My husband I were there in late autumn, when the days grow shorter and the

nesting birds are gone. But that doesn't mean we were unable to add to our life list!

On our first day in Reykjavik, groggy from our overnight flight and too early to check into our hotel, we wandered the streets looking for breakfast and a hot cup of coffee to recharge our batteries. What we found in a small park in the heart of the old town were trees atwitter with birds. We had found a flock of redwings that were also looking for breakfast. They were so well camouflaged that it took us a moment to find and identify them. We were off to a good start.



Photo by Ellyn Varela-Burstein

Throughout our trip we saw ravens everywhere. The raven is considered a propitious bird in Iceland, where it is associated with Odin the All-Father. We saw them soaring above great waterfalls and perched atop rocky bluffs. They were everywhere, usually singly and riding the wind, a magnificent sight. I felt as if they were the guardian spirits of the land.

Floating in coves and bays were eiders. While they were not new to us, we appreciated their ability to withstand the frigid water. We watched a pair grooming and foraging for food on a tiny tidal flat as the tide receded. They had managed to shelter from the fierce wind and didn't notice us as we stood and watched them for quite a while. We, on the other hand, froze!

Most exciting to me were the whooper swans. Throughout our trip we saw them in flocks large and small. Occasionally we would see a wedge of swans flying overhead; their long

necks in motion as they flew reminded me of herons in flight. These were life-list birds for us, and their grace and beauty both on the water and in flight made them especially prized.



Photo by Ellyn Varela-Burstein

Last on our list were the immature black-headed gulls. At first they had us baffled, but we tracked them down through our fold-out list of common birds of Iceland, plus the Internet, and took pride in figuring out what they were. Birding isn't just for experts; relative novices can have fun too, and the thrill of a successful identification can make a trip all the more memorable. Working to identify them means that now I'll always be able to recognize an immature black-headed gull!



FIFTY WORDS FOR SNOW

Dan North

They say the Eskimos have fifty words for snow. Linguists have argued whether the number fifty is too high or too low, but they agree on the broad principle that language reflects what people need to know about their environment. Falconers have their jesses; horse people have their hames; the Sami people of northern Scandinavia and Russia, who rely on their herds for their livelihood, have hundreds of words for reindeer. And the Eskimos say *pukak* for powder snow, *matsaaruti* for wet snow, *uqilokoq* for softly falling snow, *pieqnartooq* for good sled-driving snow, and so on.

I looked up the above after reading an article in the British *Guardian Weekly*. The article reports that the Oxford Junior Dictionary has eliminated words like *ash*, *beech*, and

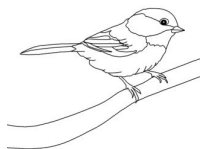
catkin, which name objects in the natural world, and replaced them with new words and phrases such as *chatroom*, *broadband*, and *cut and paste*. “It would be hard to find a more striking example of our alienation from the natural world, and how we are denying children a relationship with wild things,” says the *Guardian* reporter. A protest letter from several major British writers to the Oxford University Press says that kids should be able to learn about the electronic world without ignoring nature. The letter notes that “a dandelion becomes invisible and unimportant if we are allowed to forget its name. Its world, and ours, is tragically diminished.”

Another quick research trip produced a wealth of names for dandelions, proof of the rich experience that awaits anyone who pays attention outdoors. There’s lion’s teeth (the French, noticing the plant’s jagged-toothed leaves, originally named the plant *dent de lion*). And blowball or puffball (referring to the dandelion’s fluffy white seed head). And wild endive (dandelion leaves, picked

before the plant flowers) make a tasty and nutritious salad. Estonians call dandelions butter flowers after their yellow multifloreted blossoms. And among the many other English names for dandelion are Irish daisy, monkshead, and cankerwort.



If our kids spent more time outdoors, maybe they'd come up with some new dandelion nomenclature. This might inspire them: Because dandelion roots, ground for coffee or tonics, are a strong diuretic, the plant has been called piss-a-bed. And some Italians call dandelions *pisacan* (dog piss) because the plant often grows at the edge of pavements.



CY, THE BIRD GUY

To send questions to Cy, the Bird Guy, go to www.putnamhighlandsaudubon.org and enter “Cy, the Bird Guy” in the Contact Us box.

Dear Cy,

Yesterday my wife and I decided to take advantage of a lovely early-December day and went for a walk along the edge of the pond by our house. While we were there we saw a male wood duck perched on a log and behaving strangely. He was puffing himself up, spreading out his wings, and basically showing off his feathers. My wife thinks he was doing a display for a female wood duck, but isn't it too early for a courtship display? I know ducks around here only nest in the spring, right? Please let me know if it is me, or if this poor duck has got the season wrong!

Seasonally Surprised in Chappaqua

Cy, the Bird Guy, says:

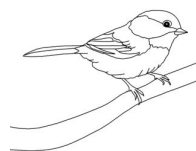
*Dear Seasonally Surprised,
As it happens, neither of you are wrong! Your wife was certainly correct in interpreting this behavior as a courtship display. It is also true that the ducks and geese in our area nest and raise their young in the warm days of springtime. But what may come as a surprise is that for many species of waterfowl it is in the late autumn and early winter that pair bonds are formed for the coming year.*



Throughout the early part of the cold-weather season, male wood ducks in swamps and other wetland areas are in beautiful breeding plumage, spreading out their wings and turning their heads to best advantage in an attempt to attract and cement a bond with a female that will last throughout

the winter and into the spring. At that time, female wood ducks (hens) will nest in trees several yards above the water, and the males will warn off any other ducks while she incubates the eggs. It is certainly true that the warm days of spring are the time for raising chicks, but the cold of early winter is the time to form the pairs that result in those chicks. So be sure to head back out there when it warms up, and keep an eye out for those chicks to come!

Cy (the bird guy)



FALL VAGRANT

Ryan J. Bass

When fall migration is in its final innings, birders rejoice in November as an "anything goes" kind of month. Not only is it one of the best months to spot rare vagrants far from their normal range, but birds show up in the darnedest places.

On November 8, a typical weekday, I exited Grand Central Terminal in Manhattan at 7:45 A.M. on my daily commute from Garrison. As if my coffee had been switched to decaf, I didn't believe what I saw next.

Perched atop a black Lexus sedan on 48th Street and Park Avenue was a Virginia rail, an elusive bird of freshwater marshes.



Photo by Ryan J. Bass

If one is lucky, one might find this bird at Constitution Marsh or Manitou Point Preserve, but certainly not in the concrete jungle of midtown Manhattan! Unfortunately, it most likely suffered a collision with a nearby skyscraper, disoriented by the reflections from its windows, or perhaps got lost in the lights of the city glowing the night before.

Concerned for the bird's welfare, I posted a message to an online forum of New York City birders, hoping that the bird could be rescued and moved to more suitable habitat. One of the forum's dedicated birders, Annie, reported to the scene and coaxed the bird into a canvas bag for transport to the Wild Bird Fund, an Upper West Side licensed wildlife rehabber. En route, the Virginia rail escaped custody, flying to a perch on the roof of a box truck. Determined, the intrepid Annie borrowed a ladder from a nearby hotel for another rescue attempt. The bird flew high into the sky, with strong wingbeats, up and over JP Morgan's Park Avenue headquarters, and out of sight. We don't know how this story ends, but we trust that the bird regained the strength to continue its journey south.

Just when you thought you've seen everything on the streets of Manhattan!



The Last Word of a Bluebird

(As told to a child)

As I went out a Crow
 In a low voice said, "Oh,
 I was looking for you.
 How do you do?
 I just came to tell you
 To tell Lesley (will you?)
 That her little Bluebird
 Wanted me to bring word
 That the north wind last night
 That made the stars bright
 And made ice on the trough
 Almost made him cough
 His tail feathers off.
 He just had to fly
 But he sent her Good-by,
 And said to be good,
 And wear her red hood,
 And look for the skunk tracks
 In the snow with an ax –
 And do everything!
 And perhaps in the spring
 He would come back and sing."

--Robert Frost



Photos by Kaaren Neraak

The bird pictured on page 7 is a snow goose.

THE MARTY MCGUIRE AUDUBON SCHOLARSHIP

The Marty McGuire Audubon Scholarship is available to college students from the PHAS area who are interested in nature. For details, go to www.putnamhighlandsaudubon.org/scholarships.

Q: What did the loon say to the gull who came to visit?

A: I want to be aloooooon . . .

DID YOU KNOW?

- Dolphins can discriminate between objects made from wax, rubber, or plastic. They can also tell the difference between identical-looking brass and copper discs.
- Octopuses are dexterous enough to unscrew tops from jars.
- A giant tortoise recently died at the documented age of 255.

PHAS BOARD OF GOVERNORS

President: Connie Mayer-Bakall

Vice-President: Perry Pitt

Treasurer: Pete Conway

Secretary: Ellyn Varela-Burstein

Directors:

Ryan J. Bass

Max Garfinkle

Mark Hall

Lew Kingsley

Lisa Mechaley

Tom Mullane

Margaret O'Sullivan

Jerome Rubino

Pete Salmansohn

Rebecca Schultz

Scott C. Silver

Adele Stern

***PHAS COMMITTEES AND
CONTACTS***

Marty McGuire Scholarship Fund:
Ralph Odell (rodell1108@gmail.com)

President: Connie Mayer-Bakall
(concoyote@aol.com)

Newsletter: Carolyn Doggett-Smith
(carolyndsmith44@aol.com)

Website: Tom Mullane
(phas.tom@gmail.com)

Events and programs: Adele Stern
(ajstern1@gmail.com)

Birdseed sale: Paul Kuznia
(swixblue@hotmail.com)

Birdathon: Ian Kingsley
(ibkingsl@gmail.com) and Scott Silver
(ssilver@wcs.org)

Science/research: Scott Silver and Max
Garfinkle (garfinklem@pipc.org)

Sanctuaries: Perry Pitt
(perrypitt@yahoo.com) and Max
Garfinkle

Conservation: Connie Mayer-Bakall

Education: Pete Salmansohn
(puffpete@gmail.com)

Nominating: Connie Mayer-Bakall,
Adele Stern, and Paul Kuznia