

**In This Issue:**

Page 2 **Flamingos,  
On the Record**

Page 3 **Local CBCs**

Page 4 **Merlin and Me**

Page 5 **Conservation Corner,  
New Policy**

Page 6 **Calendar**



Above, *White Wagtail*  
Below: *a lingering Ruby-throated  
Hummingbird.*  
Photo credits: Bob Keener



**President's Corner**

by Valerie B. Barnes

It's officially fall, and birds are coming through. Enjoy these lovely days and cool nights. Our visiting flamingos are gone; one flew away and the other died en route to a different rehabilitation place. It was sad to see them go, but what a glorious time it was to have them visit!

This winter's finch forecast is available. See [https://finchnetwork.org/winter-finch-forecast-2023-2024?mc\\_cid=e9ddf5df38&mc\\_cid=42119ad7ac](https://finchnetwork.org/winter-finch-forecast-2023-2024?mc_cid=e9ddf5df38&mc_cid=42119ad7ac).

The Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) held a public meeting on October 18 to give the public an opportunity to voice their ideas about DCNR's plans to repurpose the South Mountain Golf Course to house the Michaux Resource Management Center (district headquarters and visitor center). A large crowd (~200+) attended, mostly opposing the idea because they enjoy playing golf there. If you have ideas about repurposing the golf course, please send written comments to Roy Brubaker, Forest District Manager, Michaux State Forest ([robrubaker@pa.gov](mailto:robrubaker@pa.gov)). You may also want to share your thoughts with your PA State Senator, PA House Representative, and DCNR Secretary Cindy Adams Dunn ([cindydunn@pa.gov](mailto:cindydunn@pa.gov)).

Youth contest entries were submitted at the October 9 meeting. Awards for the best bird photos and lists of bird species observed this year will be made at the November meeting.

National Audubon suggests that photographers avoid using playback (recorded bird sound) to draw birds closer. The advice applies equally to all birders. The [article](#) states that "as handy as using playback can be, it's also becoming clear that it could have a negative impact on the very birds we aim to celebrate." These are some of the circumstances when playback should be avoided:

- Where it is illegal (e.g., national wildlife refuges and national parks)
- When it harms nesting birds and nestlings (e.g., during nesting season)
- When it poses danger to at-risk species (always)
- Where others might use playback (repeated playback makes it worse)
- When it can impede research (give the researchers a better chance of completing their objectives)

So, the next time you are thinking about using sound to lure a bird to you, please reconsider. Nonetheless, that app on your phone is still a terrific way to help you learn bird sounds. 😊 Check out the new "Posts & News" [section](#) on our website. We'll periodically post regional news of interest. We will also post names of new or returning members.

## Graceful Giants: American Flamingos Unveiled

by John Carter

A singular birding moment that I will forever hold close to my heart as a testament to life's beautiful surprises touched my life the day two American Flamingos became the birding spotlight for Franklin County, Pennsylvania.

On September 7, 2023, I escaped for a lunchtime bird outing in hopes of finding fall migrant shorebirds at local ponds. When approaching the country pond on Long Lane, little did I know that this would be the most unparalleled experience in my life of bird watching, discovering the first recorded American Flamingos in Pennsylvania.

Near the end of August 2023, Hurricane Idalia stirred across the Gulf of Mexico, pushing flocks of American Flamingos from the Caribbean into Florida and well beyond. American Flamingos started showing up in many other states in response to this cyclone, creating a Flamingo mania.

I was as jittery as a caffeinated squirrel, and the enthusiasm bubbled over like a shaken soda can. As I stood alone along the farmland road admiring a once-in-a-lifetime species discovery, I knew this was an unprecedented event that other bird and nature lovers would marvel over. Just as the flamingos flocked to this hidden oasis in the Cumberland Valley, so would a mass of people from near and far. The news spread like wildfire through the communication channels. Fortunately, the landowners were accommodating and gracious in welcoming people to observe these majestic splendors.

The birds had daily surveillance of behaviors and interactions. The state police would help manage the crowds of people so safety and respect would follow suit to help establish appropriate observation etiquette. Another extraordinary, mega-rare visitor, a Brown Booby, would fly over and be documented on September 14.

As nature goes, not everything concludes with a happy ending. On September 11 the subadult flamingo was attacked by a resident Common Snapping Turtle, causing a substantial injury to the leg. The bird was quickly and safely captured and then transported by the PA Game Commission to the Raven Ridge Wildlife Center in Washington Boro, PA. The injured bird was making strides in its recovery; however, it perished en route to the next stage of its recovery.



*The Graceful Giants*

Photo credit: John Carter

The adult flamingo would remain at Long Lane Pond for another 8 days, giving opportunities for bird chasers, nature lovers, and just curious individuals a chance to see this once-in-a-lifetime birding opportunity in the wild. The adult flamingo departed the pond, soaring away on the evening of September 19.

It was such a joy to see the smiles and excitement of others taking in their encounter with the American Flamingos. I ventured to the pond seven different times and was beyond grateful to share my binoculars and spotting scope with outside visitors so they could have a close-up view. It was also special to connect and meet with several members of the Conococheague Audubon Society while admiring our pink wanderers.

For more information: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/american-flamingo> and <https://abcbirds.org/bird/american-flamingo/>

## On the Record

by Sue Greer

Our two field trips in September yielded 15 species of warblers! Nine participants observed 14 warbler species in the Heisey Orchard / Michaux State Forest area. The rarer among those seen were the Nashville, Cape May, Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, and Canada Warblers. Seven new species were also recorded: Black Vulture, Solitary and Stilt Sandpipers, Greater Yellowlegs, Black-billed Cuckoo, Common Nighthawk, and Cliff Swallow.

A first for the Cumberland Valley Rail Trail field trip was a Blackburnian Warbler. It was spotted by 17-year-old Ian Hess and seen by all eight participants. Among the rarer sightings for this trip were a Great Blue Heron (for the third time) and an Eastern Bluebird (for the second time).



# Local Christmas Bird Counts

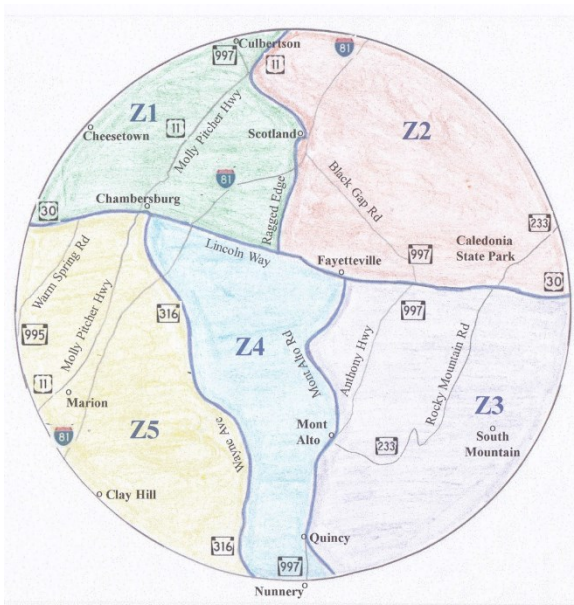
by Valerie B. Barnes

There are two local CBCs: The 64<sup>th</sup> Chambersburg area Christmas Bird Count is on Saturday, December 16, 2023 and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Buchanan Trail Franklin/Fulton Counties CBC is on Thursday, December 14, 2023. Christmas Bird Counts help Audubon to assess the health of bird populations and guide conservation action. You can start counting just after midnight on the count day; owls sometimes sound off in the wee hours of the morning. We need volunteers to count every bird for these projects. Each CBC is conducted in a designated 15-mile diameter circle. Zone Captains / Area Leaders organize volunteers in different sections of the circles.

Valerie Barnes is the compiler for the Chambersburg area CBC; 717-352-4397 or [BarnesVa4@comcast.net](mailto:BarnesVa4@comcast.net). Vern Gauthier is the compiler for the Buchanan Trail CBC that is in the western part of Franklin County and the eastern part of Fulton County; 717-385-9526, [verngauthier14@gmail.com](mailto:verngauthier14@gmail.com).

If you are new to the count this year or have a new phone number or email address, please contact the compiler. If you live inside the circle and want to start counting birds at your feeders for the first time, contact the compiler. If you've participated before, your Zone Captain / Area Leader should contact you, probably after Thanksgiving. If he or she doesn't, feel free to contact the compiler and she/he will help you make the connection.

Chambersburg Area CBC Circle



Buchanan Trail CBC Circle



Forms used by observers for the Chambersburg area CBC will be available from the Zone Captains or download from our website, along with a detailed map of the circle. The files will be accessible from the December 16 calendar page for the [Chambersburg Area CBC event](#)

Forms used by observers for the Buchanan Trail Franklin/Fulton CBC will be provided by Vern Gauthier to Area Leaders and Feeder Counters. Vern requests that all new participants contact him by November 26.

Please help! The length of time you count is up to you. The Christmas Bird Count is fun and you never know what you might see. Make it a family affair! Note that if the weather forecast calls for really bad weather, we may try to reschedule the count; your Zone Captain / Area Leader will contact you if that happens.

There will be no tally dinner this year. Zone Captains / Area Leaders will still collect results and provide them to the compiler.

National Audubon asks for donations to support the CBC. If you would like to donate toward the expense of the count, donations may be given to any Zone Captain, Area Leader, compiler, or the treasurer. Please make your check out to CAS and note it is a donation for the CBC; mail to CAS, PO Box 20, Fayetteville, PA 17222. Audubon appreciates your support.

## Merlin and Me

by Ron George

An Eastern Towhee is going off like a spring-loaded alarm clock: “TooWEET!” The notes of an Indigo Bunting are slipping and sliding up and down, around, and back again. I scan the hillside that has been patiently reforesting itself with maple, oak, and sassafras saplings. Somewhere in there, a Common Yellowthroat is repeatedly-eatedly calling. Through all this, I just barely hear a raspy squawk and a few soft tut-tut-tuts. There it goes again. It’s something different, something I don’t recognize right away, something I haven’t heard lately along this roadside in Michaux State Forest. Could be a funky Catbird, I suppose. Maybe it’s a Cuckoo making a sound that I don’t know. The new growth makes it hard to see anything, so I reach for the famous sound-ID-ing wizard, Merlin.

I haven’t been using Merlin for long, but since I’ve started using it, I’ve come to see its value and its issues. After all, learning to ID birds by call isn’t easy. For years, the only way I could learn a call was to see and hear the bird simultaneously. Even then I didn’t always remember. Sure, the mnemonic devices can help, but they’re not precise. After all, one person’s “witchety witchety” is another person’s “tea kettle tea kettle.” I even tried to develop my own memory aid. I thought I could use one thing I do know to learn something I didn’t. I was going to match bird calls to Beatles’ lyrics. I figured there’s got to be a bird song to match “Coo Coo Cajoo,” right? Sadly, I still haven’t found one. On the other hand, I did memorize the Black-throated Green Warbler, “Baby, you can drive my car,” but that was my only win.

In the dark ages before smartphones, I tried using the Peterson birdsong CD to learn all those birds that I could hear but couldn’t see. However, my brain wasn’t up to the task of hearing the call in the field, committing it to memory, playing the song on the CD hours later, and trying to decide if they matched. That’s why smartphones helped a lot. I could hear the bird and then listen to the call immediately after. I started to learn more and more calls that way. I probably learned more in five years than I had learned in the previous fifteen. It was a great feeling. I didn’t have to see every bird to know what it was or at least to know if I should spend time looking for it. And the best thing was that I was learning, and to me that’s the joy of it—

seeing or hearing a bird and recognizing it, knowing it. That’s what makes it challenging and fun.

A few years ago, I started to hear rumors of this amazing app that could identify birds *for* me. Casual acquaintances would mention it whenever the topic of birds came up, which often happens if you’re around me. In the woods, passing strangers would stop to ask what I was looking at. When they discovered I was interested in birds, they would innocently inquire, “Have you heard of this app?” Sometimes I would brush them off, “Shucks, I don’t need Merlin,” implying that I already knew it all. The beautiful part: They didn’t know I was lying.

Before long, everywhere I went birding, someone was using Merlin. They would call out birds before I even had a chance to identify them myself. Of course, some of them I couldn’t identify anyway; I needed the help. So, I finally downloaded the app. I was ready for Merlin. Or was I?

As soon as I launched Merlin, I saw the button for “Sound ID.” To be honest, it’s the only button I have pushed so far. I pressed the microphone icon and a list of birds started to pop up. Cool! As it listed the birds, most were among the usual suspects that I know well, but I noticed that I wasn’t hearing everything that Merlin was. My poor hearing was limiting the birds I was able to identify; that was a bummer, especially when Merlin was piling up warblers that I was totally missing. It was very cool but rather frustrating at the same time. Then my battery died. Note to self: get new phone—and new ears— if possible!

Overall, it was doing a good job matching bird calls. That’s all it does really. Although the button says, “Sound ID,” the birds are listed as “best match.” The final ID is up to me. However, I noticed that other people were letting Merlin do it all; if Merlin said it was a “best match,” that was good enough for them. This is a little concerning because Merlin isn’t perfect. In fact, I discovered that any time I was out of cell-tower range, Merlin would go off the rails. Not knowing my location, Merlin started spitting out all sorts of birds: Lark Sparrow (hmm ...), *Western Meadowlark* (Yeah, right!), *Sierra Mountain Finch* (huh?). Interestingly, those wild guesses all disappeared from the list once I had cell reception and Merlin realized where I was. For proof, I made sure to take a screenshot of Merlin’s next wild guess: *Eurasian Eagle Owl!*

Though it was mostly accurate and often helpful, I was wary of relying on Merlin. Then I noticed that when there were a lot of birds calling, I was watching the birds pop up on my phone when I should have been watching for them to pop up in front of me. I told the folks at the Beginning Birder Workshop that the main tools of birding are their eyes, their ears, and their ability to pay close attention, yet here I was splitting my attention between my phone and the real world. That's when I understood the problem with Merlin. The issue isn't how well it identifies birds; it's pretty good, though not perfect. The issue is what it does to birders, how it seems to give them answers and short-circuits the learning process. It's like the difference between watching game seven of the Stanley Cup Finals versus checking the final score online. It's quick and easy, but where's the fun in that?

Of course, I still use Merlin, but selectively. When I hear and see birds that I know, I leave Merlin alone. When I really don't know what I'm hearing, I ask Merlin. If a bird flashes on the screen just once, I pretty much ignore it. If I get multiple hits, I pay closer attention to that call. Sometimes it reminds me of a bird I forgot I knew. Sometimes I check a recorded sample to see if I agree with Merlin. When I'm not entirely confident about a call that I think I know, I ask Merlin to see if *it* agrees with *me*. In any case, I either learn something new or reinforce something I have learned before.

Back along that roadside in Michaux, the raspy squawk is still going, a little louder now. I press the "Sound ID" button. The noisy nearby birds appear first: Eastern Towhee, Catbird, Common Yellowthroat. In a brief moment of quiet, I hear my mystery bird. I glance down at the phone, "Yellow-breasted Chat." Yes! Again and yet again, it shows up on the screen. Merlin seems pretty confident, and I suspect it's right. I scan the trees for a while, walk a little farther down the road, get a little closer, and finally spot the bird.

Even from a distance, the yellow breast is glowing among dark pine boughs. As I watch in my binoculars, I can see the throat throbbing out the querulous calls. Merlin gets the assist, and I'm a little better prepared the next time I hear one. With practice, I'm getting better at getting the most out of Merlin. As long as it helps me learn without distracting me, I call that a win. In the end, I can't say how you should use Merlin, but I can say that whether you use it or not, you should go birding!

## CONSERVATION

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by John Greer

This month's focus in our effort to fight plastic pollution is *Reduce* and *Recycle*.

The best way to limit the amount of plastic that ends up in the environment is to reduce our use of plastic in the first place.

Find ways to reduce your own level of plastic consumption. Ask yourself, "Do I need it?" "Can I use something else?" Most importantly, "Is it packaged in something other than plastic?"

By reducing our own plastic consumption, we will actively and directly reduce the amount of plastic that makes it into the environment.

- TIPS:** 1) Reduce your plastic consumption by buying products in cans or glass.  
2) Recycle your cans and glass.

## A New CAS Policy by Valerie B. Barnes

At their September 25, 2023 joint meeting, the Executive Committee and Board of Directors approved this **anti-harassment/anti-discrimination policy** statement:

Conococheague Audubon Society (CAS) is committed to providing a welcoming environment and positive experience for all members and participants. Working together, we promote conservation of wildlife and the natural environment with a focus on birds. These goals are best achieved in an atmosphere of inclusion and respect; therefore, CAS does not tolerate discrimination or harassment in any form. We respect the individuality of each member of our organization and participants in our activities, and we are committed to maintaining an environment free of any kind of discrimination or harassment, including that based on race, color, religion, sex, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, national or ethnic origin, politics, or veteran status. Incidents of harassment or discrimination can be reported in writing to any CAS officer or board member. The board will determine the best approach to resolve such situations while also respecting the privacy of all involved.

**MEETINGS – Free**, held at Fellowship Hall, St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church, 2695 Luther Drive, Chambersburg, PA 17202.  
**FIELD TRIPS – Free**, most take place on Saturdays. Contact the leader; arrive early.

**November 9, Thursday at CAMS South** **FILM**  
7:00 PM *Nature's Fear Factor*, PBS. A bold experiment to bring rare and fierce African Wild Dogs back to Gorongosa National Park in Mozambique reveals how predators – and the fear they trigger – play a surprising and crucial role in keeping wild ecosystems healthy. Door prizes.

**Nov. 13, Monday** **MEETING**  
7:00 PM Youth Contest Winners announced tonight. *Kittatinny Ridge Conservation Landscape Project*, by Jeanne Ortiz. Arranged by John Greer.

**Dec. 11, Monday** **MEETING**  
7:00 PM *Project Snowstorm*, by Steve Huy. Arranged by Lisa Coombs.

**Winter** **FIELD TRIP**  
Sign up by Dec. 11 for **possible visit** to Gettysburg Battlefield for SHORT-EARED OWLS (name, contact information). **Bob Kochert**, 717-263-3692, will advise as to sightings. Meet at Norlo Park Community Center.

**Dec. 14, Thursday** **CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT**  
All day, Franklin/Fulton Counties (PABT). **Vern Gauthier**, 717-385-9526, [verngauthier14@gmail.com](mailto:verngauthier14@gmail.com).

**Dec. 16, Saturday** **CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT**  
All day, Chambersburg area (PACH). **Valerie Barnes**, 717-352-4397.

**Dec. 27, Wednesday** **CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT**  
All day, York Springs area. **Tim Johnson**, 717-409-4805, [tj359@sbcglobal.net](mailto:tj359@sbcglobal.net).

CAS WEBSITE: <https://conococheagueaudubon.org/>

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**Send all mailing changes to [conaudubon@outlook.com](mailto:conaudubon@outlook.com).**

COPY DEADLINE : DECEMBER 15 FOR JANUARY 2024 NEWSLETTER

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