



In This Issue:

Page 2 Conservation Corner:
Adopt a Highway, Birding
Places

Page 3 Deformed Bills

Page 4 Birding Blitz, Elections

Page 5 Birding with SOAR

Page 6-7 You Never Know

Page 8 Calendar

President's Corner: Annual Report Highlights

by Valerie B Barnes

Conococheague Audubon Society (CAS) submits a report annually to National Audubon Society (NAS). The report fulfills our requirement to be a chapter in good standing and triggers NAS to deposit a modest fixed stipend into our checking account. Here are some highlights from the 2024 report:

◆ 119 volunteers provided 3,754 hours of effort to support the chapter. This includes attendance at meetings; participation in field trips, work days, and Christmas Bird Counts; Bluebird Trail monitoring; and community outreach.

◆ 2,503 people (we don't know how many unique individuals) participated in our activities. Activities included general meetings, nature films, preparation and distribution of newsletters, maintaining website, field trips, bird counts/surveys, garden maintenance and event, beginning birders' workshop, 8 community outreach events, contests for youth, charitable contributions to other organizations, highway cleanup, 4 direct interactions with school-age children, 20 presentations about birds, and monitoring bluebird trail.

◆ We engaged with about 38 partners, ranging from Guilford Township (Norlo Park Garden) to the Franklin County Visitor's Bureau (they print material for us and we support their outreach events), Community Cloud Forest Conservation (we donate to this organization in Guatemala), Greencastle-Antrim School District, Penn National Golf Club and Inn (houses the Bluebird Trail), St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church (where we hold meetings), Caledonia State Park (workshop location) and many others.

◆ Our priority goals for 2024 were to make better connections with school-age children and maintain a high level of outreach. With our new connections with Greencastle-Antrim school children and the many outreach events and bird talks, we believe we made good progress on both

In 2025 we are trying to continue our connections with local schools. Hence, our recent donation of 30 pairs of binoculars to Tayamentasachta Environmental Center, which is adjacent to the Greencastle-Antrim School District campus. We provided funding for a scholarship to a Chambersburg Area School District graduating senior. And we are more actively encouraging more Audubon and community members to participate in our activities. Bring a friend!

President's Corner, continued on page 5



Attracted to suet and meal worms, the Pine Warbler comes in to the feeding area throughout the day.
Photo credit: Bob Keener



Above, Eurasian Collared-Dove
Photo credit: Dale Gearhart

CONSERVATION

O
R
N
E
R



by John Greer

Adopt-A-Highway Clean-Up Day

On March 8, 2025, 9 dedicated volunteers from Conococheague Audubon and I cleaned up a major portion of our adopted highway, Route 997. Working east from Scotland toward I-81, we collected 37 large bags of trash for PennDOT. Many thanks for their hard work go to Anne St. John, Greg von Schmid, Sharon and Larry Williams, Vanessa and Joe Miller, Rhetta Martin, Sue Greer, and Morgan Hooser. We also appreciate the donation by Waste Connections of the very helpful “grabbers” and other items. Be on the lookout for the next clean-up date in the fall!

Birding Lesser Known Nearby Conservation Spaces

My wife, Sue, and I researched nearby spaces for their birding potential, places that have been placed into conservation protection. The land trust *We Conserve Pennsylvania* was very helpful in providing a list of protected areas in Franklin County and the surrounding counties. If you would like a map of these areas, about 700 in all, and a spreadsheet showing each area by owner, please contact me.

We narrowed this list down to spaces owned by nearby land trusts, and we visited a number of them to assess their birding potential. Two stood out: Letort Spring Garden Preserve near Carlisle, and Wittlinger Nature Preserve near Boiling Springs. Some of you may be familiar with them; we counted them as “lesser known” because our club has not conducted trips there recently. Here are the details.

Letort Spring Garden Preserve

Where: 1110 South Spring Garden Street, Carlisle PA 17013

Who: Central PA Conservancy

Website: <https://centralpaconservancy.org/letort-spring-garden-preserve/>

What: Upland and wetland habitats with two raised observation platforms and multiple short trails with flat, easy walking

Facilities: None, unless possibly in the barn when open

eBird: All years: 164 species (including 24 species of warblers and 5 of vireos in May); 2024: 48 species

Directions from PA 997/I-81 Park N Ride (30 minutes): I-81 North to Exit 47 (PA 34/Hanover St) Then turn right onto PA 34 South, turn left onto Bonnybrook Road, turn left onto South Spring Garden Street. Parking lot is on the left

Wittlinger Nature Preserve

Where: 2 Mountain Road, Boiling Springs PA 17007

Who: Wildlands Conservancy

Website: <https://trails.dcnr.pa.gov/trails/trail/trailview?trailkey=358>

What: 50-acre preserve of wetlands on both sides of Yellow Breeches Creek with a one-mile loop and flat, easy walking

Facilities: Available at the parking lot

eBird: All years: 116 species; 2024: 62 species, mostly in the spring

Directions from PA 997/I-81 Park N Ride (35 minutes): I-81 North to Exit 48 (PA 74S)

Take PA 74 South to right onto Westminster Drive. Make a left onto Forge Road. Continue on Front Street to Race; make a left onto Race, cross bridge. Turn left; then right into parking lot. Access to the preserve is from the rear of the public pool.

We hope you enjoy these places.

More Cardinals Display Deformed Bills

by Jim Hook

We thought in February 2023 that Baldy was a once-in-a-lifetime bird with his elongated beak and bald head. Turns out his deformity may not be so rare. In fact, he appears to be a victim in the bird version of an emerging epidemic. Now, two years after the appearance of Baldy, two similarly afflicted Northern Cardinals are at our feeding station. Both the male and the female display extended upper beaks and feathers are missing on their heads.

They appear to have Avian Keratin Disorder (AKD), a systemic condition likely caused by a virus. Keratin is known as the fibrous protein in human fingernails. AKD is characterized by beak overgrowth, sometimes to the extent that a bird's mandibles cross. Infected birds also may have abnormalities in their claws, feathers and skin. Feathers are often disheveled.

The first cases appeared in the late 1990s among Black-capped Chickadees in Alaska. Researchers have estimated that more than six percent of the Alaskan chickadee population had the disorder in 1999 to 2008. The research team, led by Colleen Handel of the U.S. Geological Survey, documented the condition in 2,160 Black-capped Chickadees and 435 birds of 29 other species in Alaska.

They reported in a 2010 issue of *The Auk* that



Baldy, suffering from AKD.

Photo credit: Jim Hook



A female cardinal seen this month near Shippensburg displays overgrown beak, a sign of Avian Keratin Disorder.

Photo by Jim Hook

AKD was “the largest epizootic of gross abnormalities ever recorded among wild bird populations.” They warned, “The sudden appearance of a large cluster of animals with gross abnormalities may signal a significant change in an ecosystem.”

Another team of researchers in 2016 linked AKD to a virus present in all the birds they tested. Previously, the occasional beak deformity was attributed to trauma, nutritional deficiency, or infection. A study from 1959 demonstrated that high temperatures can bring on the deformity.

Meanwhile, our long-beaked visitors scoop up sunflower seed by turning their heads sideways or flapping at the suet feeder. Bird lovers from Alaska to Florida have been asking on social media, “What’s wrong with this bird at my feeder?” Scientists are still working on an answer. The USGS has an [online reporting form](https://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/landbirds/beak_deformity/observerreport.php) (https://alaska.usgs.gov/science/biology/landbirds/beak_deformity/observerreport.php) so observers can report sightings.

(Baldy was the subject of “The Case of the Bald Cardinal” in the May 2023 issue of *Naturally*.)

Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology Announces Fifth Annual Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation

by Karter Witmer, with Franklin County material added by Vern Gauthier

The Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology (PSO) proudly announces that its Fifth Annual Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation will occur from June 6 -16, 2025, and support three projects across the Commonwealth.

Birders are invited to join the Blitz by forming a team, raising funds, and competing in various competition categories to document birds wherever they are during the Blitz period. Teams enlist their friends to support their efforts with a donation; all donations are distributed to conservation partners based on the needs of their projects. Bird-lovers of all ages and skill levels are invited to visit www.breedingbirdblitz.org to learn more about the event, to form and register a team, or to make a donation. **Registration is open now!**

Currently there are 2 teams registered that will be birding in Franklin County during all or part of the Breeding Bird Blitz. It is the second year for the **Chambersburg Chats** that is comprised of the field crew working at Letterkenny. Last year's Team Captain was Will Krohn, and this year it is captained by Grace Muench. The Chats will be birding exclusively in Franklin County. The **Crazed Cuckoos** will be returning for a fifth year, spending 2 of its days birding in Franklin, 2 in Cumberland, 2 in Fulton, 2 in Perry, and one in Snyder Counties. Team members include Bill Oyler, Tracy Mosebey, Vern Gauthier, Tiffany Willow, and Jessie Sauder. You can support either team's efforts with a donation at www.breedingbirdblitz.org/donate-teams. You can also donate by check, making it out to: PSO, with the team's name in the memo line. Mail it to: PSO, 2469 Hammertown Rd. Narvon, PA 17555.

The 2025 Blitz aims to raise \$25,000 to support the following bird conservation projects:

Manada Conservancy, Dauphin County: Swatara Creek Preserve expansion and Bird Habitat Enhancement project.

Pymatuning Lake Association, Crawford County: Invasive plant removal, visitor

education, and fishing line receptacles.

Lycoming Audubon Society, Lycoming County: Purchasing native plant species, mitigating invasive species, and implementing educational signs.

[Note: edited because of space limitations.]



Testing the airbrakes? A Goldfinch prepares to land at a feeder full of House Finches near Shippensburg.

Photo by Jim Hook

Elections 2025

by Valerie B. Barnes

Recently, 47 members cast ballots to elect Mike Fagan and Jeff Schmaltz as new Directors. We welcome Mike and Jeff to the leadership ranks of Conococheague Audubon. We bid a fond farewell to outgoing Directors Dave Ebbitt and Anne St. John, and we thank them for their service on the Board and look forward to their continued engagement and support.

Birding with SOAR

by Lisa Coombs

Long before I moved to Pennsylvania in 2018 the SOAR group was birding at Renfrew in Waynesboro on the first and third Saturday of every month. Under the aegis of The Institute at Renfrew, SOAR (Studying Ornithology at Renfrew) was the first birding group I joined in PA, and I've grown to know and respect the core group. Birding with them is a treat and I look forward to our walks.

Around 2020, The Institute began to look for another home and SOAR began to look for other places to bird, becoming Studying Ornithology Around the Region. We eventually chose a different site for each month. Since then, these sites have become familiar and we anticipate seeing the "resident" birds, as well as hoping for something new.

Among these new sites is Antietam Meadow, across Highway 16 from Renfrew, tucked behind the car dealership, accessible only off Country Club Road. It's a small site but consistently provides sightings of multiple woodpecker species. The meadow also boasts a huge dead tree along the East Branch of Antietam Creek where we've seen upwards of 20 Turkey and Black Vultures roosting.

Conococheague Institute, on Bain Road, is a beautiful site with a rich history that offers hands-on learning. They have developed a series of trails on the property that we take full advantage of, walking around wetlands, through woods, and along the perimeter of a large field. The one bird we always see here is the Red-headed Woodpecker, but we were also lucky enough to catch a pair of Baltimore Orioles building a nest one year.

Pine Hill Recreation Area on Mentzer Gap Road has offered us views of Eastern Meadowlarks, Pileated Woodpeckers and Eastern Towhees. The park has several baseball diamonds and a skateboard park, but also features a series of trails though a wooded, slightly hilly area.

The Institute, now known as Buttonwood Nature Center has a new 40-acre site housing their offices and a learning center that will soon be open to the public. SOAR has been lucky enough to have been permitted to start identifying species of birds that use the site including Wood Ducks, Brown Creepers, and Rusty Blackbirds.

If you're looking for a new birding opportunity, with a very friendly group of people, consider SOAR. Information on where they'll be next is available at <https://buttonwoodnaturecenter.org>.

Thank You!

by Valerie B Barnes

It may not be November, but it is a time of Thanksgiving. Conococheague Audubon Society functions because of members like you who step up and help out. So I give thanks to all of you who put in the extra time and effort to get things done. We schedule more than 10 field trips every season, maintain and show off the Norlo Park Native Plants Garden, pick up trash along a stretch of Route 997, participate in multiple Christmas Bird Counts, donate to other conservation-minded organizations, and conduct a workshop for beginning birders. We give talks about birds, show free nature films, present bird-related programs, and engage the public at many outreach events.

So thank you to Lisa, Donna, Terri, Bob, Debby, Jim, Dave, Jody, Anne, Greg, Larry, Sharon, John, Bill, Linda, Rhett, Eric, John, Sue, Vern, Tim, Bob, Josh, Susan, Larry, Helen, Janet, Dave, Lynn, Dorian, Ruth, Ed, Jane, Conway, Bill, Marguerite, Dale, Patti, Jeff, Sue, Mike, Cinda, Barb, John, Ron, Tracy, Leah, Jim, Darlene, Linda, Joe, Vanessa, Carl, SueAnn, Cindy, Lucy, and all the others who participate in our activities. We need you and we value you.

In these times of polarization, our love of birds brings us together, Who among us doesn't smile when a Tufted Titmouse pops in to grab a seed at a feeder? An Eastern Towhee's "drink your tea" reminds us that we can remember some bird sounds. And those pesky warblers that flit around high in the treetops may give us a pain in the neck as we crane to see more of them so we can figure out just who is up there, but it's a good pain.

May you enjoy spring and all the birds that are making the days lively. Thank you for your continued commitment to Conococheague Audubon!

President's Corner, continued from page 1.

Conococheague Audubon is doing well, thanks to all the efforts of its members. We are especially grateful to those who repeatedly step up to take responsibility when we ask for volunteers.

Without you, we would be lost. Thank you!

You Never Know

by Ron George

It's early March. As usual, I'm wandering in the woods with my binoculars and thinking about spring. The wind is still thinking about winter, but the frogs know better. They're out for the first time that I've heard, and though I can't see them, their sound reassures me that winter is all but over. An Eastern Phoebe sallies from a snag along the stream, returns to its perch, and recites its raspy call to welcome the season. In south-central Pennsylvania, a few Phoebes might stay through the winter, but I only hear them calling once the weather has turned. So, forget robins—for me, the real harbinger of spring is the Eastern Phoebe.

As I walk the streamside road in the warm sun and chill breeze, I see signs of spring all around. Woodpeckers are drumming. A Barred Owl is calling in the midafternoon. A lovely, light, and lyrical note



Field Sparrow on the fence.

Photo credit: Ron George

emanates from a wooded thicket on the other side of the road. Instantly, my birding partner recognizes the Winter Wren. Winter Wrens tend to nest farther north or in higher elevations, so I don't often hear their song. This one probably won't be sticking around, but it's already warming up its voice for the coming season.

A sudden fluttery splashing on the stream alerts me to a small group of Common Mergansers that has been startled by our approach. I see stunning white flashes as they fly off downstream. Another first-of-the-year bird. I tip my hat, "Good to see you again. Safe travels." As I continue on my way, I pass lingering White-throated Sparrows and Dark-

eyed Juncos. Red-winged Blackbirds are uncoiling their wiry warbles, and Grackles are grackling in the treetops. Overhead a Rusty Blackbird squeaks like a rusty spring, but aren't we all a little rusty at the start of spring?

The summer birds are returning to a landscape that looks more like winter than spring—though those maple blossoms puffing out of the uppermost branches might say otherwise. Seeing all those first-of-the-year birds is one of the joys of birding. They aren't lifers or rare birds. They are usual, and I appreciate their predictability. They remind me of the great turning wheel of time, the cycle of the seasons that seems to bring us back to where we were but, in truth, only reminds us of where we've been and where we're going. That's a valuable service, and as I walk, I welcome them back, one and all.

On the return leg of my bird walk, the activity seems to be slowing. The birds are quieting, but out of the silence, I hear something ahead of me that I do not recognize, a sort of burry grunt—grrrrrrrp, grrrrrrrp, grrrrrrrp. A frog or maybe a toad? But the froggy bogs are further up the road; this sound seems to be coming from the stream. As I near the source of the sound, I scan the water as best I can through the dense underbrush between me and the water. I search in vain for a clear view and have to settle for a narrow opening between, below, over, and through a tangle of vines and low branches—a tiny porthole window onto the water.

Even with this limited view, I am delighted by what I see. It's not a life bird or a rare species, but it's something I have never seen before—a yearly ritual that I have never come across. Out on the water, a half dozen or more male Hooded Mergansers are putting on a show for a couple females (and for each other, I suppose). These decorative ducks are swimming this way and that. They unfurl their spectacular white hoods to full mast, occasionally shaking the quivering mass of feathers atop their head. Their neck feathers are puffed out like great Shakespearean neck ruffles. One tilts his head until it touches his back. Grrrrrrrrrrrp. One lowers his head, takes a brief run at the competition, then goes back to display mode. Grrrrrrrrrrrp.

They pass up and down stream through my narrow field of view, giving me brief glimpses of their behavior. I smile at the good fortune of finding myself in the right place at the right time to witness this rite of spring. As I watch, it slowly dawns on me that I'm not the only one who has been attracted by this spectacle. Across the stream, a White-tailed Deer is standing on the bank, ears perked, eyes wide in a quizzical stare. The deer paws the



Golden-crowned Kinglet

Photo credit: Ron George

ground anxiously, and I laugh as I realize that the mergansers sound a lot like the noise hunters make with those plastic grunt calls. Watched by a curious birder and a more curious deer, the Hooded Mergansers continue their ritual, passing farther upstream.

As much as I believe that birding isn't always about seeing something new or unusual, I am, like most birders, always excited to see what I haven't seen before, even if it's a familiar bird behaving in a way I haven't observed before. It could be an unexpected number of birds, like ninety Broad-winged hawks arriving at dusk to roost in our resi-



A Wood Duck checks out the photographer during his short stopover on a tiny tributary of the Conodoguinet Creek in Hopewell Township, Cumberland County.

Photo by Jim Hook.

dential neighborhood or an out-of-the-ordinary occurrence like an ice-covered Turkey Vulture falling from a tree into the snow (don't worry, it flew off a while later). It could be a battle royale between male Mallards splashing furiously and making so much noise that they don't even realize that the prized female has snuck away, swimming downstream nearly submerged. It could be a female Wood Duck splashing along the water's surface and leading a hungry mink downstream away from her ducklings, leaving me gob-smacked and talking to myself, "Never saw that before."

All these surprising sightings and the possibility of new and different sightings bring me out birding as often as I can. I don't expect to see something new every time, and I definitely can't count on it. In fact, I'm not even disappointed when I see the usual birds doing their usual things.

I sometimes feel like one of those trained rats they used in psychology experiments. Give them a food pellet every time they press a button, and they will press it whenever they want to eat. Train them to know that they only get a reward if they press the button three times, and they'll quit after the third try whether they get one or not. But make it random—sometimes they get a pellet on the third try or the twelfth or the 27th or sometimes none no matter how many times they press it—and they will never stop pushing that button because you never know when it might pay off.

It's the same with birding: you never know what you will see (or hear) or when or where you will see (or hear) it. You might think you know, but you can't know for sure. Maybe you'll see something new and astounding today or, if not today, tomorrow, or maybe the day after that or the day after that. You just never know when or where you will see something worth seeing. It might even be something you have never seen before, but to see anything, you first have to look. This is why I keep wandering the world with binoculars.

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.

Year-round

BIRD WALKS

SOAR (Studying Ornithology Around the Region) walks, 8:00 AM first and third Saturdays; various locations in Franklin County.

Larry and Sharon Williams, 717-655-7414; see <https://buttonwoodnaturecenter.org> for schedule. 717-762-0373

April 26, May 10 Saturdays

WORK DAY

9:30 AM Work at NORLO PARK native garden. Bring garden tools and gloves. **Josh Donaldson**, 717-264-6920.

May 3, Saturday

FIELD TRIP

7:00 AM Horse Valley for SPRING MIGRANTS. Meet at North Pointe Center, US 11 north of Chambersburg. Bring lunch and binoculars. **Valerie Barnes**, 717-352-4397 or **Donna Hocker**, 717-491-2171.

May 8, Thursday

FIELD TRIP

6:30 AM Stillhouse Hollow, Heisey Road Orchard, and some local farms for SPRING MIGRANTS. Leave from 5207 Heisey Road, Shippensburg. Bring scopes, binoculars, and lunch. **Bob Keener**, 717-658-8765 .

May 8, Thursday

FIELD TRIP

5:00 PM Edenville area for WHIP-POOR-WILLS and BOBO-LINKS. Leave from Sunnyway Foods parking lot, 49 Warm Spring Road, Chambersburg. Bring scopes and binoculars. **Eric and Rhetta Martin**, 717-597-8675.

May 9, Friday

FIELD TRIP

6:00 PM Lehman property for SPRING MIGRANTS. Meet at 750 Tallow Hill Road, Chambersburg, to walk around a pond, meadows and woods. **Larry Lehman**, 717-263-7203.

May 12, Monday

MEETING

7:00 PM *PA Third Bird Atlas Update, One Year into the 5 Year Project*, by John Carter. Arranged by Val Barnes.

May 17, Saturday

FIELD TRIP

7:00 AM Fort McCord area for SPRING ARRIVALS/ MIGRANTS. Meet at North Pointe Center, US 11 north of Chambersburg. Some walking. Bring lunch and binoculars. **Bill Oylar**, 717-360-5191.

Check our website for updates and maps to all locations:

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

Newsletter Editor - Jane Bussard (717-401-3210)
janenbussard47@gmail.com

Send all newsletter articles and photos to the editor.

Send all mailing changes to conaudubon@outlook.com.

COPY DEADLINE AUGUST 15 FOR SEPTEMBER 2025 NEWSLETTER

CONOCOCHIEGUE AUDUBON OFFICERS:

| | |
|---------------------------------|----------------|
| President | Valerie Barnes |
| Vice President | Lisa Coombs |
| Recording Secretary | Debby Hook |
| Corresponding Secretary | Valerie Barnes |
| Treasurer | Donna Hocker |
| Immediate Past President | Terri Kochert |

BOARD OF DIRECTORS:

John Carter, Mike Fagan, Jim Hook, Jeff Schmaltz, Larry Williams, Sharon Williams

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Conococheague Audubon
P.O. Box 20
Fayetteville, PA 17222