

# NATURALLY

THE CONOCOCHIEAGUE AUDUBON SOCIETY

Naturally

NEWSLETTER OF THE CONOCOCHIEAGUE AUDUBON SOCIETY

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## President's Corner

by Valerie B Barnes

Last week we had our first real snowfall. It was lovely outside, with the ground white and branches draped with snow as well. Birds are happily visiting feeders in the yard. As we enter the first days of winter, days are certainly shorter and colder!

We continue to seek **volunteers** for several positions: Conservation Chair, Hospitality Chair, Film Chair, Vice President, and Treasurer. Please contact [Valerie Barnes](#) to offer your services. We need you! Many thanks to Ron George for agreeing to be the next President!

Our next **regular meeting** is our annual potluck dinner and members' slide show. It takes place at 6:00 PM on Monday, January 12, 2026, at St Luke's. Please plan to join us for good food and fellowship. Members typically contribute one dinner item and/or a dessert. Coffee, tea, and pots/jugs of water will be provided. Bring your own table setting, including a napkin, flatware, plate, bowl, and mug/cup. Let's try to avoid plastic and disposable items! If you have a few photos you wish to share, please bring them on a USB thumb drive. Bring a friend; all are welcome! Our regular meetings occur at [St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church](#) (off Route 997, near Scotland exit off I-81) at 2695 Luther Dr, Chambersburg, PA 17202.

We had a good turnout for our first free nature film last month. The next one is January 29 - *Islands of Wonder: Borneo*. Please join us. The film will be shown at 7 PM at Chambersburg Area Middle School South, 1151 E. McKinley St., Chambersburg. Door prizes will be awarded at the end of the program, including one free pair of binoculars for a youth. Donations welcome.

**SOAR Bird Walks** will take place on the first and third Saturdays (3 and 17 January). See the [calendar](#) on our website for field trips.

We are starting a new project: feeding birds near the Visitors' Center at Caledonia State Park. Please contact Cinda Liggon to volunteer; [cliggon56@gmail.com](mailto:cliggon56@gmail.com) or 717-860-1471. Seed will be provided.

Thanks to all who have made a donation. If you haven't yet, please send your check to Conococheague Audubon Society, PO Box 20, Fayetteville, PA 17222. Good birding!

Conococheague Audubon Society  
PRESENTS A FREE NATURE FILM

"Islands of Wonder: Borneo"  
A PBS Nature Film



THURSDAY, JANUARY 29, 2026

|| FILM BEGINS - 7PM ||

Chambersburg Area Middle School South  
1151 E. McKinley St.,  
Chambersburg, PA, 17201

\* \* \* \* \*

Door Prizes  
Donations Welcome!

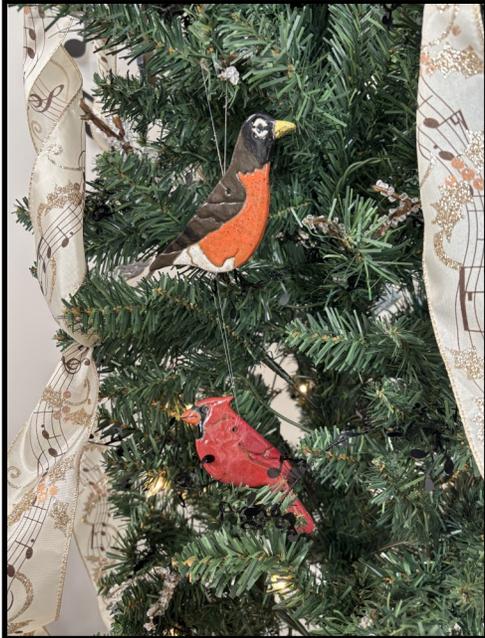


Tufted Titmouse  
Photo credit: Jim Hook

## Festival of Trees

by Debby Hook

Anne St. John took the lead again this year for our chapter's entry in the Franklin County Visitors Bureau's seventh annual "Festival of Trees," a silent auction fundraiser for Franklin County Breast Care



*Our 2025 CAS Christmas tree entered in the Festival of Trees in Chambersburg.*

Photo credit: Anne St. John

Alliance.

Dozens of decorated holiday trees and wreaths were displayed from November 22 through December 6 in the Franklin County 11/30 Visitors Center on the square in Chambersburg.

Our tree featured a variety of handcrafted songbirds, stamped in clay by Anne and painted in realistic colors with help from Marguerite Fries, Debby Hook and Terri Kochert. Anne then fired the pieces with a shimmering glaze.

In addition to the songbirds, our tree displayed other elements of this year's festival theme "There's a Song in the Air." A ribbon imprinted with musical notes cascaded from a large treetop bow, and a garland of musical notes wound among the lighted branches. A tiny recording of singing birds, hidden in the background, completed the effect of walking through a musical forest.

The 3,646 votes by visitors for their favorite wreath or tree raised \$866 for the local Breast Care Alliance. The most votes went to Conococheague Audubon for tree and Knights Templar for wreath.

## The Last Bird of the Day

by Ron George

After a few hours in the field, looking for birds, enjoying the fall colors, and being buffeted by a brisk autumn breeze, I'm glad to get back into the car. I feel like a kid crawling under an electric blanket after a long day of sledding. It's a relief just to be out of the wind, out of the cool air, sealed off from the elements.

It didn't seem that cold when my birding buddy and I were spotting Purple Finches in the honeysuckle and puzzling over the muffled "ki-ki-ki-ki" that turned out to be a distant Cooper's Hawk. Still, the cold eventually starts to seep in—despite the low sun glinting in the corner of my eye all afternoon. Earlier, the glare from the sun had reduced the lone Swamp Sparrow to a colorless silhouette devoid of its varied hues and diagnostic field marks; however, at that same time, the sun was warming the inside of my car to toasty perfection.

The sun will set soon and take the cozy atmosphere with it, so I preemptively flip on the seat warmer. I stop my eBird track and throw the car in gear. As I drive, we take an end-of-the-day inventory of birding highlights, imagining that we're done birding. In truth, my eBird track may have stopped, but there's no off-switch on the mind of a birder.

As I navigate the twists and turns of my preferred backroad route, I pass a farm and scan the corn stubble. Nearer the silo, I notice a murmur of European Starlings flashing with that amazing synchronicity that makes it easy to forgive them for being an introduced species. If my high school driving instructor had caught me birding while driving, he would have smacked me with the mini baseball bat that he carried for just such occasions, and he would have been right. Distracted driving is bad; you shouldn't bird while driving. And yet . . . a pair of Mourning Doves flies over; I see and identify them whether I want to or not. Overhead, the utility wires zip past, and I can't *not* look for a Red-tailed Hawk or American Kestrel.

Cruising a lonely country road with one eye on the sky doesn't seem that bad, but before I know it, I am among the late-day traffic buzzing down Route 11. With more and faster traffic, I focus on the road ahead. The sun is nearly set, and I am done birding for sure, definitely, no doubt, cross my heart and all that. In fact, I'm not even scanning the utility lines when I pass beneath a hulking dark bird on a wire. Even out of the corner of my eye, I can tell that it's too big to be a Kestrel and too fat-



*A hulking dark bird on a wire*

Photo credit: Ron George

headed to be a Red-tail. We simultaneously exclaim, “Is that an owl?!”

Without looking back, I flip on my turn signal (safety first!) and ease into the left-turn lane. Having executed a quick U-turn in an empty parking lot, I wait until I see a bigger break between cars than I really need. Now, I can drive slowly without impeding traffic. I find the bird again and locate a convenient pull-off just across the road. I park at a perfect angle for observing the bird, a Barred Owl on a wire.

I reach for my camera in the back seat. Across the road, the owl stares into the deep weedy edge of an open field where, during the summer, corn grows beneath looming billboards. Cars whiz by, moving at a velocity that seems gentle when you’re gliding down the road in your heated seat but feels relentlessly intense when you’re standing next to the



*The Barred Owl continues its studies*

Photo credit: Ron George

road trying to hold still to take a photo. Zoom, zoom, zoom. Cars, pickups, and panel trucks pass northbound and southbound—bound somewhere for sure. But the owl isn’t going anywhere. The unmoving owl is unperturbed and seems not to notice the traffic. The onslaught of sound is unpleasant for me, and I don’t have the refined hearing of an owl. The bird shows no sign of annoyance as it continues its studies.

I take a few photos. The owl doesn’t move. I watch through my binoculars. The owl doesn’t move. I scour my memory and can’t recall that I ever saw an owl on a utility line. The owl doesn’t move. I fixate on those dark eyes, so black that light cannot escape their surface, and I contemplate the singularity that must exist somewhere at the center. As I ponder this, the bird drops from the wire like an omen, disappears among the tall weeds, then spreads its prodigious wings, and surges back into the air. It comes to rest on a “no parking” sign. I know that I’ve never seen that before.



*Barred Owl parks illegally*

Photo credit: Ron George

By the time I decide it’s time to go—time to leave the owl to its own world and return to mine, the late-day light is waning. I adjust my shutter speed as low as I dare, propping the camera on the roof of the car to avoid any slight shake that might blur the image. As the autofocus resolves, I am certain that this is the last bird of the day. Click.

## Bird Snob?

by Valerie B Barnes

So. One is supposed to love all one's children equally, showing no favoritism. Is the same true for birds? I must admit, not for me. Does that make me a bad person? A prejudiced one? A bird snob?

Well, here are some examples... I am *not* fond of **European Starlings**. This probably stems from the



Photo downloaded from <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/how-do-starling->

spectacular in breeding plumage, and their murmuration flying is astounding. How can thousands of birds fly in close formation without running into each other? But, still, they are non-native and there are too many of them.

I am *not* a fan of **Brown-headed Cowbirds**, either. It's unfair to the smaller Chipping Sparrow when a Cowbird egg deposited in its nest results in a (relatively) massive baby that the Sparrow feels compelled to feed.



*Brown-headed Cowbird*  
Photo Credit: Aud\_APA-2019\_Brown-headed-



*Northern Cassowary*

My brother visits every Christmas. Last year he gave me a life-sized cardboard stand-up **Northern Cassowary** because he always wants to see one in my backyard. We call him Carlton. What can I say... he's special!

The first time I saw an **Indigo Bunting**, I thought it was a bright blue butterfly. What an amazing color! The sun hit it just right, and it was iridescent. I wish I could remember the song from spring to spring, though...



*Indigo Bunting*  
Photo Credit: David R Cooney, Jr



*Cedar Waxwing*  
Photo Credit: David R Cooney, Jr.

I love **Cedar Waxwings**. That is one classy species. The delicate tan shading is always perfect. That tail dipped in yellow paint. That eye mask makes her/him look as if she's/he's going out on the town with her/his honey.

Nothing beats a **Wood Duck** for plumage. So many colors, exquisitely arranged. I could go on



*Wood Duck*  
Photo Credit: David R Cooney, Jr.

and on. Thinking about one species takes my mind down memory lane to another. How can anyone resist the energy of a Tufted Titmouse? The cuteness of a Red-breasted Nuthatch? The majesty of a Bald Eagle? Am I a bird snob? Indeed, and a proud one!

# Purple Finch vs. House Finch

by Jim Hook

Each November I must learn again. Is that a Purple Finch or a House Finch at my feeder? Is it a disheveled local grump or a sophisticate from the wild North?

At a glance I try to identify the migrants. A Purple Finch appears more elegant than the disheveled House Finch. A Purple Finch has a dark, well-defined ear patch. To me its overall appearance also seems more streamlined. (I don't know why field guides say Purple Finches are stockier and have shorter tails than House Finches.)



*House and Purple Finch males*  
Photo credit: Jim Hook

I check the belly sides of the birds for a crisp, dark streaking on the female and an absence of dark brown streaks on the male. Yes, the Purple Finches are here for a two-week visit, longer if I'm lucky.

Then I confirm my suspicion with closer inspection:

**Beak:** A House Finch appears "grumpy" with its curved upper mandible. Its bill also seems stubbier next to a Purple Finch's triangular bill.



*House Finch Female*  
Photo credit: Jim Hook



*Purple Finch female*  
Photo credit: Jim Hook

**Head:** A female Purple Finch has on her "makeup," a crisp white eyebrow and dark whisker.

**Tail:** A Purple Finch has a deeper notch at the end of a shorter tail.

**Color:** Be careful here. The red patches on a male House Finch are typically on the orange side of red, sometimes all the way to yellow. A male Purple Finch is colored cranberry that streaks along the side of its white belly and shades its dark wings.

Both finches are primarily seed eaters. House Finches are thought to have displaced many Purple Finches in the East since they were released from New York pet shops in 1940. The species spread to the Great Plains within 50 years. House Finches migrate less than 125 miles while Purple Finches breed in the north, nearly to Hudson Bay.

This fall about a dozen House Finches hogged my feeder most of the day. A male Purple Finch visited and departed in the dim light before rush hour. Occasionally a female Purple Finch bullied her way in, then ate unmolested.

I wonder if my putting out sunflower seeds gives the odd visitors a boost or strengthens their competitors.

**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

**January 3, 2026, Sat CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT**

All day, Newville area. **Vern Gauthier**, 717-385-9526, [verngauthier14@gmail.com](mailto:verngauthier14@gmail.com).

**January 12, Monday MEETING**

**6:00 PM** Covered dish dinner and members' photo show. All are welcome.

**January 29, Thursday at CAMS South**

**FILM**

7:00 PM *Islands of Wonder: Borneo*, PBS. A journey from Borneo's rich coral reefs, through lush jungles to its mountainous heart, reveals it is no paradise, and the struggles for survival are the secret to a greater variety of life than found on almost any other island, from orangutans to sun bears and flying snakes. Door prizes.

**February 9, Monday MEETING**

7:00 PM *Notes from PA Atlas Observing*, by Doug Powless. Arranged by Val Barnes.

**February 20 - 22, Fri. – Sun. FIELD TRIP**

Blackwater NWR, Maryland, auto tour for WATERFOWL. Leave from Martins' home at 9:00 AM Friday. Bring scopes, binoculars, and lunch. Make your own motel arrangements. **Eric and Rhetta Martin**, 717-597-8675, home or 223-205-7910, Rhetta.

**March 5, Thursday at CAMS South FILM**

7:00 PM *Watching Warblers*, Michael & Judy Fleth. This film explores the lives of the 39 warbler species that nest in Eastern North America. Door prizes.

**March 7, Saturday FIELD TRIP**

8:00 AM Middle Creek WMA, Lancaster County auto tour for WATERFOWL. Meet at the Park & Ride, Scotland Exit 20, I-81 northbound. Bring scopes, binoculars, and lunch. **Eric and Rhetta Martin**, 717-597-8675.

Check our website for updates and maps to all locations:

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

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