

Birding Howard County, Maryland

Joanne K. Solem

Second Edition

NOT AVAILABLE IN HARD COPY

The Howard County Bird Club

A Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS)

Birding Howard County, Maryland

THE BIRDING YEAR IN HOWARD COUNTY



January



February



March



April



May



June



July



August



September



October



November



December

- Begin the new year by becoming a weather watcher. Track the movement of major fronts and weather systems; check wind speed and direction, as well as precipitation and temperature changes. Watching the weather beyond Maryland's boundaries can be helpful in anticipating unusual concentrations of birds, migration triggers, or the potential for unusual species as the result of winds or storm systems.
- During most winters, ponds freeze so that wintering waterfowl will be concentrated in a few locations-usually on the larger lakes and reservoirs. Open water may be visible from Brighton Dam where large numbers of Common Mergansers and a few Red-breasted Mergansers gather annually. Centennial Park usually has a good-sized hole in the ice kept open by hundreds of Canada Geese and lesser numbers of other waterfowl. Snow Geese, especially the white phase, will be easily spotted, but the blue phase takes a more careful search (occasionally white domesticated geese appear). One or more Cackling Geese may also be present, but make that identification with caution because small Canadas are resident. Other expected waterfowl are American Wigeon, Canvasback, Ring-necked Duck, Bufflehead, and Ruddy Duck. The species mix may vary considerably within a few days and may include grebes and coots as well as ducks and geese. When most open water in the county freezes, a few diving ducks may remain on deep quarry ponds or in the few remaining patches of ice-free water.
- Bald Eagles remain until freeze-up. Triadelphia Reservoir usually has the highest concentration depending on the amount of open water. Now that there are three known active nests in the county (along with several others in adjacent counties) an eagle sighting is a real possibility at any time of the year.
- By the end of January, Red-shouldered and Red-tailed hawks are engaged in courtship. Be on the lookout for talon-grappling, closed-wing dives, and other aerial displays over nesting territories.
- Watch for the very occasional Rough-legged Hawk which hunts like a Northern Harrier by quartering low over fields in open country. This species is not reported every year.
- Resident raptors are augmented by wintering migrants. A drive along US 29 and I-70 usually reveals perched buteos. Although American Kestrel populations have dropped dramatically during the last two decades, in winter it is possible to spot a few perched on utility lines or hovering over fields. Most Northern Harriers are seen west of MD 32, although sometimes one winters in farm fields along Folly Quarter Road. Accipiters are widespread and can frequently be found in the vicinity of feeders. Sharp-shinned Hawks were once the expected winter accipiter; however, the sharp rise in the number of nesting Cooper's Hawks in the last decade means that sighting either species is equally possible.
- Lakes, reservoirs, and shopping center parking lots attract gulls. Centennial Lake, Wilde Lake, Lake Elkhorn, and Lake Kittamaquindi, as well as either reservoir, may host a dozen to 50 or more Ring-billed Gulls with at least a few Herring Gulls. An occasional Great Black-backed Gull or, even more infrequently, one of the white-winged gulls may make an appearance. For this county, a Lesser Black-backed Gull is a special bird. Since the demise of an active county landfill, the most consistent location at which to spot unusual gulls is Brighton Dam overlooking the southern end of Triadelphia Reservoir. Early morning and mid to late afternoon are the most productive times.
- Search for Long-eared and Northern Saw-whet owls in pine stands of appropriate height, density, and location. While looking for these infrequently found species, you may locate other species of roosting owls.
- Most species of woodpeckers can be seen or heard in floodplain and upland deciduous woods, although Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers are few. Wintering Red-headed Woodpeckers are rare.
- After a light snow (which makes the search easier), look for Horned Larks and American Pipits on manured fields, short-grass areas with poor turf, or any fields with exposed ground. Scan flocks carefully for the much more unusual Lapland Longspur or Snow Bunting.
- In the winter woods, look and listen for loosely associated flocks of woodpeckers, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, White-breasted Nuthatches, and Carolina Wrens. Patience may produce a Brown Creeper, a Golden-crowned Kinglet, or a Yellow-rumped Warbler.
- Carolina Chickadees and Tufted Titmice are singing by the middle of the month. During winter and early spring, these species, as well as Downy Woodpeckers, may be found occasionally in weed patches feeding on the contents of goldenrod galls.

J a n u a r y

- Check weedy edges and tangles for sparrows. A few Fox Sparrows usually winter in thickets. White-crowned, American Tree, and Savannah sparrows are among the less common species that can be found in open situations. White-crowned Sparrows are partial to patches of Multiflora Rose in these open locations.
- Lapland Longspurs are frequently found in fields that had been planted in corn. They prefer extensive open fields without fences and hedgerows and are often found in association with American Pipits and Horned Larks.
- In the winter, Dickcissels frequently associate with House Sparrows so check the abundant flocks at Lake Elkhorn and Lake Kittamaqundi carefully. A Dickcissel was seen from December 9, 1999 to January 19, 2000 at Lake Elkhorn in a House Sparrow flock.
- Search flocks of blackbirds for the rarely seen Yellow-headed Blackbird. Most sightings are of immature birds.
- Keep feeders filled and watch carefully for irruptive northern species that may wander through. Purple Finches may come regularly for days or even weeks, or they may appear briefly and never be seen for the rest of the winter. Pine Siskins favor thistle (nyger) seed as do Common Redpolls, although those two species are seen much more infrequently than Purple Finches. When Red-breasted Nuthatches invade, they will sometimes visit feeders, most consistently those with some nearby pines. Evening Grosbeaks are now rare wanderers here. When they do visit, it is almost always one or two birds instead of the flocks that were reported 30 years ago.

- Depending on the weather, ducks may begin migrating any time after the middle of the month. Watch lakes and reservoirs regularly as soon as the ice begins to melt. On any given day, species may be different from the previous day or from those on a nearby body of water. There are times this month and next when each of the Columbia lakes and Centennial Lake is likely to have at least one species not found on any of the others.
- Northern Pintails are early migrants; most of the few birds seen each year are found in late February and early March.
- Redheads have become increasingly rare in the county. Search lakes and ponds from mid-February until late March.
- Killdeer may return in numbers after the middle of the month; some years they are not widespread until March.
- From late February until early May, watch for Wilson's Snipe in wet, muddy, grassy areas and along pond edges. A few usually winter here.
- American Woodcock first appear in the middle of the month, usually after a thaw. Their courtship flights at dusk and dawn can be seen consistently until near the end of April, sporadically into May.
- Continue to check gull flocks for species other than Ring-billed or Herring.
- Great Horned Owls are incubating. Look for twiggy nests in the main crotch or secondary crotches of mature deciduous trees. Most often they use a hawk's nest, occasionally that of a crow or even a squirrel. Look for "horns" or "ears" sticking above the edge of the nest. This species is often easier to find in March when the female may be sitting higher after the eggs have hatched.
- Erect new bluebird boxes by the middle of the month. Make sure old boxes are in good repair and a predator guard is present below each box.
- American Robin flocks begin to appear after mid-month.
- Migrant Fox Sparrows move in if there is a thaw. This species is most frequently seen from late February through the third week of March in thickets and brushy areas. Occasionally, they are spotted under feeders scratching in their distinctive two-footed style.
- It is normal for bird numbers to drop in late winter, but that may not be obvious when a large mixed blackbird flock descends on a yard. Some may continue to visit feeders well into April or even May. Rusty Blackbirds are generally not present in such groups; rarely, a Yellow-headed Blackbird may associate with a flock.
- Singing Red-winged Blackbirds are a welcome sign of spring.
- House Finches start singing in mid-February.
- The best time to spot Common Redpolls (which are uncommon here) is mid-January to early March. Most sightings occur at feeders.

February

- Pay special attention to the sky from now until the middle of May. While water birds may be the most prominent flyovers this month, other migrants may be spotted at almost any time of the day. This is especially true later in the spring.
- Tundra Swan flights tend to be concentrated, sometimes as early as late February or the first week of March, often the second or third week of this month. Day or night, they usually can be heard long before they are seen. It is a treat to see and hear a flock of these long-necked white birds against a blue sky, as they lead spring northward.
- Weather changes in late winter and early spring are often dramatic. Check lakes and reservoirs within 24 hours of the passage of a front while water birds may still be present waiting out the severe weather and adverse winds. By the time temperatures moderate and winds die, migrants often have moved on. Occasionally, skies will be clear locally but there will be snow or sleet over the Great Lakes, causing waterfowl to drop onto local lakes waiting out unfavorable conditions before proceeding north. Weekdays (when there are few boats on the reservoirs and lakes) are usually the most rewarding. Although reservoirs should not be ignored, many migrant ducks (including divers) will be found on relatively small ponds or on the county's four large lakes. The majority of waterfowl pass through this month and into the next. Numbers drop after the first week of April; a very few birds may linger into May.
- Check for scoters from late March through mid-April on reservoirs and large lakes. Most appear during heavy rainstorms, especially when the rain is accompanied by high winds. Most do not stay more than a single day.
- Cock Ring-necked Pheasants are vocal this month early in the morning. Unfortunately, the county's pheasant population has dropped dramatically in the last few decades. The most recent breeding bird atlas did not confirm nesting for this species, although they were recorded in nine blocks. Within the last few years, pheasants have been sighted along roads in the vicinity of Warfields Pond Park and Western Regional Park.
- The last week of March and first week of April normally produce peak numbers of Horned Grebes. Although they may appear on any large body of water, they have been most consistent on Triadelphia Reservoir, Lake Elkhorn, and Centennial Lake.
- The earliest Great Egrets begin to appear around the middle of March.
- Cattle Egrets used to start showing up in April; the earliest record is mid-March. During the last decade they have become so scarce that they have not been reported each year; many years there is a single record only.
- Black-crowned Night-Herons may begin appearing this month. Watch for them at any of the large county lakes or on the reservoirs in early morning and again at dusk. Wilde Lake and Lake Kittamaqundi are the two most consistent locations with Lake Elkhorn a good third option. During the middle of the day, a bird can sometimes be found roosting in trees (particularly willows) along shorelines.
- Red-shouldered and Red-tailed hawks continue February's courtship and nesting activity. Migrants are also passing through.
- American Coots should be found on local lakes from mid-March through most of April.
- Wilson's Snipe numbers jump and sometimes peak near the end of the month.
- American Woodcock courtship at dusk and dawn is most vigorous from now until late April in clearings or in fallow fields not far from a stream valley or a moist woodland thicket. Migrants have been present in recent years at Warfields Pond Park. The Middle Patuxent Environmental Area, which once was a reliable site, has seen a drop in population as fallow farm fields have given way to more advanced stages of succession. The tract is being actively managed for woodcock to enhance both migrant and breeding populations. Perhaps, within a few years, the species will again be reliable there.
- Ring-billed and Herring gulls are still in evidence, mostly near water, sometimes in fields or on parking lots.
- Barred Owls start to call more frequently, especially just before dawn (5:00 a.m.-6:00 a.m.) and from dusk to about 10:00 p.m.
- Northern Flickers and other woodpeckers are noisily engaged in courtship. Prime drumming sites may be houses as well as dead trees. Woodpeckers are protected by state and federal law so any methods used to discourage them cannot endanger them. The majority of locally breeding woodpeckers are choosing nest sites and beginning to excavate.

M a r c h

- A few Eastern Phoebes may winter, but migrants begin to appear the first half of March; the peak is late this month and early next.
- Both American and Fish crows are nest building. Watch for them carrying nesting material. Various species of pines are favorite nest sites. Both of these normally vocal species are quiet in the vicinity of their nests.
- Horned Larks are paired, courting, and beginning to nest. School grounds with poor turf and farm fields with bare earth are good places to listen and look for them. Although this species has become increasingly difficult to find, Western Regional Park and its environs is a reliable site, especially the fields on the south side of Carrs Mill Road (opposite the park entrance). Underwood Road, near the junction of MD 99, has often produced this species along with pipits. They can be seen and heard from the road. This is private property so do not go into the fields!
- The Purple Martin vanguard should arrive during the last half of the month; the first Tree, Rough-winged, and Barn swallows arrive in early to mid-March although the majority wait until late March or April.
- Chickadees, nuthatches, and titmice begin to choose and excavate nest sites in late March. March and April are good times to observe the courtship and nest-building behavior of these cavity-nesting species.
- Most American Robin flocks have broken up by late in the month; territorial song is increasing.
- Brown Thrashers begin to arrive in late March and early April.
- American Pipits are moving through this month and next. The major migration is from the middle of March to mid-April. Plowed or manured fields are prime localities. Scan fields carefully, they are hard to spot. Horned Larks may be present in the same fields.
- Flocks of Cedar Waxwings may descend on hawthorn, crabapple, or American holly trees and strip them of their remaining softened fruit. Some years this species will be scarce until late April or even May.
- Listen for the lazy trill of the Pine Warbler in pine stands beginning the last half of the month. A few may arrive earlier, especially if the winter has been mild.
- Eastern Towhees should return in numbers from mid to late March.
- Migrating American Tree Sparrows may sometimes be seen about the first week of the month. Be especially careful about identifying any after the third week of March as few linger into April.
- Look for the first Chipping Sparrows at feeders in late March; their long trill can be heard in most suburban locations.
- Seek Savannah Sparrows from mid-March to early May in sparsely vegetated expanses with nearby weed patches or in weedy fields.
- Fox Sparrows are found in greatest numbers from late February through mid-March. Almost all disappear by the end of the month.
- Song Sparrow migration is usually heaviest the first half of the month. Swamp Sparrows move in large numbers from late March through much of April.
- The bell-like trill of the Dark-eyed Junco is now heard, especially near feeders where they congregate.
- Predicting the location of Rusty Blackbirds is difficult, especially with a dwindling population. Watch and listen for them during most of this month and next in swampy, floodplain woods with standing water and along muddy pond edges. Peak migration is usually from the last week of March through mid-April. Among the places where they have been consistently observed are Gwynn Acres Path, the Middle Patuxent Environmental Area, Centennial Park, and Lake Elkhorn.
- About the middle of the month, American Goldfinch plumage begins to change. People who feed thistle (nyger) are able to watch the gradual development of the male's bright colors.

- April is a month to watch lakes and reservoirs on a daily basis; migrants can drop in, rest briefly, and depart. The more miserable the weather, the more likely stray migrant waterfowl, shorebirds, and terns will show up. Birding in cold, driving rain is no fun, but the possibility of finding something unusual or truly rare is a powerful goad to the dedicated field birder. Early in the month, days with northwest winds are sometimes dismissed as too early for most passerines and too late for much waterfowl. It is true that a day spent in the cold wind may produce nothing. On the other hand, the first 10 days of April, under less than ideal conditions, have produced a major waterfowl fallout on Triadelphia Reservoir, an American Bittern at West Friendship Park, a Black Scoter at Centennial Park, and a Short-eared Owl at Alpha Ridge Landfill.
- April is a transitional month. Although many birders are used to starting near dawn to catch peak feeding activity and movement, this is a month when almost any time of the day can be productive. If there has been a significant change in cloud cover, temperature, or wind direction during the day (showers in the morning, clearing by afternoon), the late afternoon/evening hours may be more successful than the morning. Terns, gulls, and swallows may appear over lakes; smaller passerines may suddenly become active; and raptors may be seen soaring. If rain or a cold front is forecast to move in during the day, try to take advantage of early sunshine and favorable winds. After the winds have shifted to the northwest and are blowing steadily, there is a chance that migrating waterfowl will drop onto local lakes and reservoirs until the winds diminish.
- Blue-winged Teal are usually passing through during April. Check the shallow end of Centennial Lake regularly.
- Long-tailed Ducks may drop onto the larger lakes and reservoirs during late March and early April, especially during periods of stormy weather.
- This is the month to look for Red-throated Loons. Though the heaviest state Red-throated Loon movement occurs in March, most of this county's few records are in April from Triadelphia Reservoir.
- Common Loons migrate well into May and are occasional to regular on county lakes as well as on the reservoirs. Throughout this month and part of May, many singles and flocks fly over, mostly from dawn until 10:00 a.m.
- Most Pied-billed Grebes and the majority of mergansers leave by the end of April.
- Migrating Double-crested Cormorants will be passing through all of this month well into May. Early to mid-morning is the peak time.
- American Bitterns should be looked for all month until mid-May. Meadowbrook Park, with its large patches of cattails, has proven attractive to this species. They have also been seen at a cattail-covered pond at the intersection of Race Road and Hanover Road.
- The first week of April may see the return of early Green Herons, although the third week is more likely to see a surge in numbers.
- Most spring Glossy Ibis records are from the first week of April through the first week of May.
- Although the earliest Ospreys begin to drift through in March, many more move this month with migration continuing well into May.
- Check main forks of large deciduous trees before the leaves have reached full size for nesting Red-shouldered and Red-tailed hawks. Red-shouldered Hawks, which are a common stream or river valley nester, sometimes may be seen carrying identifiable prey items such as snakes, frogs, and small rodents.
- Northward-moving Broad-winged Hawks are most visible from the middle of the month into early May.
- Although Soras have been observed as early as the first week of April and as late as the third week of May, late April to mid-May appears to be the peak migration period. Muddy edges of islands at Centennial Park and pond edges with adjacent wetlands at Meadowbrook Park offer accessible places to watch and listen for this elusive species.
- Shorebirds (other than Killdeer, Wilson's Snipe, and American Woodcock which arrived earlier) begin appearing in numbers after the middle of the month. Check muddy areas around the western islands at Centennial Park from late March until the vegetation grows up. The pond at the entrance to Western Regional Park has proven productive unless rainfall has filled it completely. Browns Bridge mudflats are usually covered at this season. Shallow pond and river

**A
p
r
i
l**

edges anywhere in the county may produce a few birds. Wet spots in fields, especially on turf farms where the sod has been stripped, may also be suitable habitat. Shorebirds should be found in good numbers throughout the first part of May; few are noted after mid-May.

- Bonaparte's Gulls and Caspian Terns can be seen sporadically this month and into May resting on or flying over the county's larger lakes and reservoirs. Wilde Lake, for reasons known only to the Bonaparte's, was the favored lake for these gulls for many years. The last few years have broken that pattern so that Centennial and Triadelphia Reservoir are the current favorites. Caspian Terns, although sometimes reported as early as the first week of April, are more often seen later in the month and are likely at any of the central lakes or the reservoirs.
- There is a resurgence of Barred Owl calling in late April and May, sometimes during daylight hours.
- By late April, watch at dawn or dusk for early Common Nighthawks. Most migrate in May.
- Occasionally, someone reports a Whip-poor-will calling at dusk or dawn. These are migrants, normally present only a single night. Nesting in the county is probably confined to a few areas in or near Patuxent River State Park; currently there is no location that can be pinpointed with certainty.
- Chimney Swifts begin to filter in around the middle of the month; numbers are often small until closer to the beginning of May.
- There are a few Ruby-throated Hummingbird records in early April, but more appear from mid-month on. Most come through in early to mid-May.
- Look for Red-headed Woodpeckers late this month and most of May. Areas of mature oaks and hickories with little or no understory and numerous dead trees are primary nesting habitats; in migration they can turn up in almost any mature deciduous woods.
- In most years, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers can be spotted during the entire month.
- Eastern Kingbirds begin arriving the last 10 days of the month. Great Crested Flycatchers usually begin to appear the last week of April or the first week of May with arrival continuing into late May.
- Most Blue-headed Vireos migrate through the last third of April and the first week of May; numbers taper off rapidly after that. Alpha Ridge Park has been a dependable place to find them.
- White-eyed Vireos begin appearing the last third of the month.
- The number of swallows over lakes and reservoirs rises this month. There may be a few days when hundred of swallows of several species may be present over local lakes. Barn Swallows nest under the deck at Centennial Park and under the bridge at the east end of Lake Elkhorn. Rough-winged Swallows normally nest in riverbanks; however, they have been seen attempting to nest in bridge drains including those at the west end of the lake at Centennial Park.
- Most years nesting Cliff Swallows return to Brighton Dam by mid-April. A significant colony also exists at Sykesville under the MD 32 bridge over the Patapsco River.
- Continue to listen and look for Red-breasted Nuthatches until the first few days of May. Areas of pines at Pigtail and Big Branch are possible locations.
- House Wrens can arrive anytime this month; most records are after the first week.
- Marsh Wrens should be sought the last week of April and the first three weeks of May in any wetland habitat containing even a few cattails or areas of soft rush.
- By mid-April the high, thin song of Ruby-crowned Kinglets can be heard. Most of the Golden-crowned Kinglets (the common winter kinglet) have now moved on.
- Blue-gray Gnatcatchers begin nest building as soon as they arrive. The beautifully constructed compact nest looks like a knot on a horizontal branch. Nests are often easy to locate because the birds usually choose an open-branched tree like black walnut and build before leaves have emerged completely.
- With favorable weather, Eastern Bluebirds may begin nest building the first half of the month.
- Heaviest Hermit Thrush migration is the first half of the month, with the Wood Thrush and sometimes Veery making appearances the last third of the month.
- The earliest Gray Catbirds show up by the third week of April, peak numbers do not occur until the first 10 days of May.
- The last third of the month may produce early records for some warblers, but only small numbers are present except for a few typically early species. The earliest warblers are Pine (in

March) and Palm followed by Yellow-throated Warbler and Louisiana Waterthrush during early to mid-April. By the last half of the month, watch for Common Yellowthroat, Northern Parula Warbler, Ovenbird, and American Redstart, as well as Yellow, Black-and-white, Prairie, Prothonotary, and Hooded warblers.

- Although Prothonotary Warblers have been recorded from mid-April through May, the peak period is the last 10 days of April and the first week of May.
- Rockburn Branch Park and Pigtail are good places to hear singing Pine Warblers.
- To find Yellow-throated Warblers, try Marriottsville Road east along the river (especially the first half mile) and west to the tunnel; sometimes it is not even necessary to leave the parking lot! Another location where they have been regularly recorded is in the vicinity of Henryton Road at the river. Both the parking area at the dead end and the path west along the Patapsco River are worth investigating. A few times they have arrived in late March, more often it is early to mid-April. This species and Louisiana Waterthrushes both sing loudly and exuberantly in the Patapsco River floodplain before the trees have leafed out. From a distance, it is possible to mistake one species for the other as the songs have similarities. Seek out the Yellow-throated Warbler high in large sycamores along the river; waterthrushes are more likely to be bobbing along the muddy edge of the river or perched on a relatively low branch.
- Generally, the most productive areas for songbird migrants in late April and early May are places not far from water which contain flowering oaks, hickories, box elders, and willows. Southern and eastern locations such as Schooley Mill Park, Rockburn Branch Park, the Avalon/Orange Grove section of Patapsco Valley State Park, and trails near Savage are good options. Sometimes northern areas, such as Daniels or Henryton, can be rewarding despite slow leaf development; on the other hand, they can be devoid of migrants on a clear, chilly morning. By the second week of May, central and northern locations have the edge so that the Middle Patuxent Environmental Area, Patuxent River State Park, and northern park sections along the Patapsco River may be the most rewarding. Early morning birding during the chilly days of early April may not be as productive as the late afternoon when the temperatures have risen.
- A few Yellow-rumped Warblers usually winter, but the last two weeks of April see peak numbers of our most common migrant warbler. Sometimes hundreds may be seen along the lake edges at Centennial Park or Lake Elkhorn.
- In late April and early May, check Palm Warblers carefully for the paler western subspecies whose numbers peak in late April. Palm Warblers are frequent along lake edges at Centennial and Lake Elkhorn at this time.
- Grasshopper and Vesper sparrows should arrive—the former mostly in late April and the latter from early April on. For both, there is at least one late March arrival date.
- Some White-crowned Sparrow migration can usually be detected in late April and early May. Where there are flocks of White-crowned Sparrows, search carefully for a Harris's Sparrow, a choice find in the East in this late April/early May period.
- Rusty Blackbirds can normally be found most of the month, although numbers drop in late April.
- Orioles (especially Orchard) and Scarlet Tanagers begin appearing late in the month; the majority arrive in early to mid-May.
- This month, especially the last half, provides the best chance during the year to spot a Purple Finch (or even a Pine Siskin or Evening Grosbeak). Search treetops, like tulip trees whose seeds are favored, or scan flocks of American Goldfinches. Purple Finches may show up briefly at feeders, but are unlikely to be seen with large flocks of House Finches.

M a y

- Continue to watch lakes and reservoirs, especially during the passage of storm systems with south or southeast winds. Under those conditions, unusual waterfowl, gulls, and terns may appear briefly.
- To best appreciate spring migration, plan to spend at least one long day in the field during the first half of the month. The hours from dawn until mid-morning will produce dozens of species. For the experienced birder, this period is one of the high points of the birding year; for the beginning birder, it can be an exciting introduction to a lifelong addiction.
- Listen for the scarce Northern Bobwhite to begin calling after the first week of May. There are few remaining in the county, but occasional reports are received.
- Watch for loon flights during the first half of May, especially the first three hours after sunrise.
- Some shorebirds may linger in dwindling numbers to the end of the month; snipe most often leave by mid-month.
- Most Bonaparte's Gulls will be gone after the first week.
- May is the prime month to watch for migrating Black Terns flying over local lakes and reservoirs. They rarely stay for more than a few hours. Local birders have become accustomed to watching them make a single pass the length of a lake or reservoir and disappear out of sight.
- Yellow-billed and Black-billed cuckoos come through in small numbers throughout May; they may still be migrating the first 10 days of June.
- Six of the seven county Chuck-will's-widow records have been in May (the seventh was June 17). The most recent was May 11, 1991. All records have been in the southern or southeastern parts of the county.
- Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers may stay until early May.
- The last half of May is the time to spot an Olive-sided Flycatcher in the top of a dead tree.
- Eastern Wood-Pewees are seen and heard in small numbers until the middle of the month when most birds arrive.
- Alder Flycatchers are elusive migrants in this county. The overwhelming majority of records have been between May 14 and June 7.
- Willow Flycatchers migrate primarily mid to late May, even into early June. This species is doing well in the county in the wet, open, shrubby habitat it favors. Meadowbrook Park, the islands at the west end of Centennial Park, and the area east of Lake Elkhorn beneath the transmission lines are reliable spots to find them nesting.
- A few Least Flycatchers move through during this month. Listen for their sharp, repeated two-note call at wood edges or in open woods.
- For almost 50 years Common Ravens have been an extreme rarity in the county with just one accepted record in December 1978. That changed dramatically in 2006. With at least two nestings or attempted nestings in counties north and northwest of Howard County, ravens began to appear south of the Patapsco River in May and continued through the rest of the year. The initial sightings were either along or north of I-70. By fall, single birds were detected twice in the Columbia area. All sightings in 2006 were in the Piedmont, but one in East Columbia was not far from the Coastal Plain. The influx continued in 2007, but the sightings were fewer. It is certainly worth taking a second look at any large black bird. Interestingly, a number of the sightings have involved one or more crows mobbing a raven.
- During the first week of May there is usually at least one day when all of the swallow species can be seen hawking insects at Centennial or over one of the Columbia lakes.
- Brown Creepers, Winter Wrens, Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Hermit Thrushes are seldom seen after the first third of the month.
- Heaviest Swainson's Thrush migration normally runs from the middle to around the twentieth of the month, while the Gray-cheeked Thrush movement peaks a few days later. Thrush migrants sometimes continue to be detected until the last week of the month. Listen at first light or dusk for a brief period of song.
- American Pipits are usually gone before the middle of the month; most left in April.
- Cedar Waxwings are late migrants and late nesters. This month they may still be wandering in flocks. At one time, they were a relatively unusual county nester; the last few decades have seen a decided increase in local breeding.
- May 1st to 15th is usually the period of heaviest warbler migration, but some years the third week is best. Keep an eye out through the end of the month. While numbers will drop off

quickly, there will be lingerers of the early moving species and others like Mourning Warblers, which are late migrants—will be arriving. Their numbers peak at the end of the third week or beginning of the fourth week of May. The wispy song of the Blackpoll may often be heard until the last day of the month or into June. Early in the morning, when temperatures may still be low, it pays to seek out areas where sunshine warms the trees and insects to find maximum bird activity. On windy days, search for sheltered spots. Do not confine warbler watching to sunny days. Mornings with light rain or overcast skies after a rainy night may prove highly productive. An unusually long period of rainy weather may cause a fallout of species in astonishing concentrations. Extended periods of chilly nights with northerly winds may cause birds to linger for several days.

- By mid-May scrubby fields at Centennial Park, Schooley Mill Park, and Rockburn Branch Park should be resounding with the strange combination of sounds produced by male Yellow-breasted Chats. It is highly entertaining to watch this species as it establishes its breeding territory.
- Although most of the spring Summer Tanager records are from the last few days of April or the first week of May, they have been seen throughout this month.
- Beginning in early May (occasionally late April), check brushy edges and areas near water for Lincoln's Sparrows. The largest numbers normally occur mid-month. Mt. Pleasant is a prime location.
- White-throated Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, and Pine Siskins may linger in dwindling numbers until the middle of the month. An occasional bird may stay later. Wintering White-crowned and Swamp sparrows are joined by additional migrants in late April and early May, but their stay is brief with few seen after mid-May.
- Watch for Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and Indigo Buntings at feeders. Not all members of these species have learned to take advantage of feeder offerings, but there are a handful of reports each spring.
- Bobolink flocks usually appear the last few days of April or the first week of May; they leave by late May. Look for them in extensive fields of mustard or alfalfa, or in large areas of long grass with a few shrubs.
- Rusty Blackbirds are usually gone from the county after the first week of May.

- After the birding excitement of April and May, June may be a letdown. During June and July, concentrate on observing courtship and nesting behavior of resident species in a variety of habitats. Birders who have participated in any breeding bird atlas field work are attuned to activities that signal courtship, establishment of territory, nest building, or the presence of young. Understanding that behavior adds an extra dimension to birding during the late spring and summer.
- Many residents sing vigorously when establishing and maintaining territories. Use this period to learn new songs and calls. Few people have the ability to hear numerous bird songs and commit them to memory quickly. For most birders, it is a process that takes time and frequent repetition. Start with those species seen and heard frequently. Knowing the more common songs and variations will provide a solid base on which to build—and it will save many a frustrating search for a mystery songster. For the early riser, hearing the "dawn chorus" (a period of intense singing as birds awaken) can be an exciting experience. When trying to learn a new song, however, it may actually be more useful to go afield a little later in the morning so there are fewer competing sounds.
- If bird feeders are filled during the summer, adults will bring their young. Watching juveniles acquire flying and feeding skills can be a source of enjoyment. Summer feeding is not necessary. Moving or dripping water is a magnet for most birds.
- Heron and egret dispersal from their breeding grounds rises this month and continues through the summer. Watch for these long-legged waders at lakes, reservoirs, and ponds.
- Sometimes Ospreys may be seen all summer in the vicinity of lakes and reservoirs. There are a very few nesting records from Triadelphia Reservoir (Montgomery County side) dating from a time when WSSC had erected two platforms—which are long gone. No other Osprey nesting in this part of the Piedmont has been verified.
- A decade ago any sighting of a Bald Eagle in the county was noteworthy. Fortunately, this is no longer the case. A sighting can still be breathtaking, but the species' presence here is no longer highly unusual. These majestic birds are not just being reported from Triadelphia Reservoir where there has been an active nest for more than a decade, or from Duckett Reservoir, where there has also been an active nest for several years, but from many parts of Howard County. In 2006, a third active nest was verified on private property in the north-central part of the county. During the recent breeding bird atlas field work, eagle breeding was confirmed just east of the Patapsco River which means birds also drift into the county from that direction. Observing a Bald Eagle almost anywhere in the county has now become a possibility. During the late fall, migrants join the residents; some stay the winter if the reservoirs do not freeze completely. Brighton Dam is the vantage point from which to scan for the Triadelphia birds. Centennial and the Columbia lakes have increasingly produced sightings
- Rails are among the most elusive local species. Soras and Virginia Rails are regular migrants and rare breeders. Meadowbrook Park has extensive wetland habitat where rails and bitterns have been seen and heard in migration. The possibility for breeding at that location certainly exists.
- Willow Flycatchers are still filtering through early this month.
- Boxes for Eastern Bluebirds or other cavity nesters should be monitored weekly during the entire breeding season to prevent House Sparrows from nesting.
- It is not always necessary to arise early to enjoy singing birds. Dusk brings a second period of increased song. In late May and throughout June, there is little to rival the melodies of the Wood Thrush and the Veery. Wood Thrushes utilize both moist floodplains and dry hillside shrub understories and can be heard in almost any deciduous forest in the county. They are tolerant of man's presence in suburban woodlands. Hearing a Veery's reedy, haunting song at twilight is a greater challenge. Their presence is limited because they require extensive tracts of moist forest with a dense shrub layer. Although some northern portions of Patapsco Valley State Park still have nesting birds, a consistent location is the Middle Patuxent Environmental Area. Deer control, which is allowing some regrowth of the shrub layer, has probably saved them as a breeding species there.
- Northern Mockingbirds continue singing at night. Note how many songs of local breeding birds are incorporated into the repertoire of the neighborhood mocker.
- Occasionally, a warbler is still passing through during the first week of June. It is likely to be one of the late migrating species such as Bay-breasted, Blackpoll, Mourning, or American Redstart.
- June has produced few county rarities, but a late migrant or a wandering water bird is always a possibility



- Late summer is a good time to study the young of local breeding birds. Although some fledglings are identical to adults, in some species there is a dramatic difference in plumage. When they leave the nest, the young of common perching birds have a short tail, partially developed flight feathers, and beg for food for several weeks.
- Look for young Wood Ducks and adults in eclipse plumage on secluded ponds and rivers. The marshy end of Centennial Lake, Race Road wetlands, and quiet locations along the Patapsco River or the Middle Patuxent River are possibilities.
- Continue watching for vagrant egrets and herons on local lakes and rivers; many will be immature birds. Great Egret numbers often peak this month. Either of the night-herons may be detected at dusk along the edges of one or more of the three Columbia lakes at some time during the summer. The Yellow-crowned Night-Heron is the more unusual of the two.
- Warm summer days, when thermals are strong, are a good time to view soaring hawks and vultures. Watching both species of vultures together is an effective way to learn the "jizz" of each. Although Black Vultures used to be uncommon in the eastern part of the county, it is now possible to see them countywide. For a good chance of seeing both species, try Alpha Ridge Park, Mt. Pleasant, or Western Regional Park.
- By mid-month, start watching mudflats and reservoir/lake edges for early shorebird migrants. Most of these early migrants will be adults still in partial breeding plumage. Whether any particular site will be productive is unpredictable. If heavy rains have filled ponds, lakes, and reservoirs, there will be few muddy edges—and few shorebirds. On the other hand, too dry a season means that exposed mudflats will dry quickly and harden; worse, the empty expanses are soon covered with sprouting vegetation that holds little attraction for migrants. If the stars are aligned properly, flats will be exposed gradually as heat reduces water levels and brief showers moisten the exposed mud. Check the entrance pond at Western Regional Park, as well as the mudflats at Browns Bridge, Pigtail, and Big Branch from now until late September.
- From mid-July through August, watch extensive short-grass areas for the infrequently seen Upland Sandpiper.
- At dusk, listen for Eastern Screech-Owls this month and next. Families have fledged and are talkative. The diminutive owls have often been found at Daniels.
- Great Crested Flycatchers call at dusk, sometimes only briefly.
- Late this month start checking reservoirs, as well as lakes and ponds, for flocking swallows.
- In late July, juvenile Purple Martins gather in flocks, often on dead branches at the tops of tall deciduous trees. They have also been observed using light fixtures adjacent to the ballfields at Centennial Park.
- Fruit-bearing trees, both wild and domestic, are magnets for family groups. Many species besides Northern Mockingbirds, Gray Catbirds, and Brown Thrashers gravitate to mulberry, cherry, chokecherry, and sour gum trees. Orioles, thrushes, woodpeckers, waxwings, tanagers, and blackbirds are among the groups that may be observed gorging on ripe fruit.
- There is some early migration of songbirds this month. By month's end, note the disappearance of most Orchard Orioles, many Yellow Warblers, and the majority of Louisiana Waterthrushes.
- Check alfalfa fields or weedy expanses for Dickcissels singing from a weed or from a nearby utility line. The presence of this visitor from the Midwest is highly sporadic.
- Those with a curious turn of mind should watch for fledgling Brown-headed Cowbirds and observe the host species. Young cowbirds usually announce themselves with an incessant call. All too frequently they are seen following a smaller host across a suburban lawn.
- The American Goldfinch is the county bird and can be seen almost anywhere in the county. Most nest in late July after thistle goes to seed. Centennial Park, Schooley Mill Park, and Rockburn Branch Park, as well as the Middle Patuxent Environmental Area all have extensive suitable habitat.



- August can produce unusual sightings—or days when almost nothing is seen (i.e., when one shorebird or warbler wave has moved out and the next has not arrived). The chance of seeing something special is enough to keep some observers checking reservoir levels, watching weather systems (particularly cold fronts and hurricanes), and visiting specialized habitats.
- The calendar says it is midsummer, but fall migration is underway. This migration is more extended than the one in spring when birds are intent on reaching their breeding grounds. Although the fall movement is most pronounced from the last half of August through October, it continues until lakes and reservoirs are frozen which can be well into winter and, of course, varies from year to year.
- Scan the sky with binoculars at every opportunity! This is a rewarding practice at any time of the year, but especially so during fall migration. Hawk watchers are acutely aware that raptors are not the only birds engaged in long distance movement. Waterfowl, cormorants, egrets, herons, gulls, terns, swifts, swallows, and pipits are just some of the possibilities. Besides birds, monarchs and other butterflies, as well as half a dozen species of dragonflies, may pass overhead. Wind speed and direction, temperature, time of day, cloud cover, and precipitation—not to mention location, persistence, and luck—all influence what might be seen. Sky-watching is exciting because it is so unpredictable. Early morning and evening tend to be the most productive periods, but during the mid-September to late October period, almost any time of the day is worthwhile.
- Teal are among the earliest waterfowl migrants. The first birds usually arrive between mid-August and early September.
- Continue to look for wandering egrets, herons, cormorants, or even a very occasional White Ibis.
- Northern Harriers have been seen moving through the county beginning in late August, primarily from dawn to mid-morning.
- Soras may be present from mid-August into late October, though they are seldom heard or seen. Scan pond edges at Meadowbrook Park, especially in foggy or drizzly weather. Join a field trip to the University of Maryland Central Farm where they are usually recorded in the course of the season.
- Shorebirds are obvious this month on reservoir mudflats and along shallow pond edges. Heavy rains may make some fields and sod farms attractive. Heat and increased water usage draw down the reservoirs exposing mudflats at Pigtail and Big Branch that attract a changing array of shorebirds. (The size of exposed flats varies from year to year depending on rainfall, heat, water demand, and dam maintenance.) Most county sediment control ponds are too steep-sided to be attractive, but the shallow pond at the entrance to Western Regional Park is an exception. Forebay Pond at the east end of Lake Elkhorn can also be worth checking; Wilde Lake's southern end usually has a sandbar as does the northwest edge of Lake Kittamaquindi. Whenever any of these lakes is dredged, excellent habitat is created temporarily during the dredging. If the drawdown coincides with a peak migratory period, unusual shorebirds become a reality. Some birders remember the spring a Piping Plover and a Short-billed Dowitcher appeared during the 1994 dredging of Wilde Lake. No matter how attractive local shorebird habitat may be, Howard birders are forced to work hard for almost every species beyond a basic handful.
- Killdeer numbers increase on both mudflats and short-grass expanses at turf farms as well as at Western Regional Park. The peak is mid to late August.
- At one time this was a month when Laughing Gulls appeared in numbers. That has not been the case for almost a decade when the county ceased to have an active landfill. This month and the next are still among the best possibilities for spotting a wanderer, but it tends to be a matter of luck since sightings are so few.
- Be alert for the passage of Caspian Terns, especially mid-August to early September. Rarely are they seen for more than a short time, normally in low numbers, on or over reservoirs and lakes. Occasionally, they are reported resting on the sandspit at the northwest end of Lake Kittamaquindi or on a sandbar at Triadelphia Reservoir.
- Both Black Terns and Common Terns are unusual county birds. They have been seen moving ahead of fronts or storms but are unpredictable in frequency of appearance or location although Triadelphia has the most records. The few fall records are scattered through August and

A u g u s t

September.

- The most consistent county location for Forster's Tern is Triadelphia Reservoir. Some years there will be a succession of days in mid to late August when a few will be visible from Brighton Dam, either resting on one of the buoy markers or flying over the water.
- Dusk from mid-August through early September is the prime time to spot migrating Common Nighthawks.
- Ruby-throated Hummingbirds continue to visit flowers and feeders. The two species of jewelweeds (both found in damp habitats) are among their favorite wildflowers.
- Look for Olive-sided Flycatchers perched at or near the tops of dead or dying trees near water. A favored perch or location may be used for hours; occasional birds may stay in a neighborhood for several days. The third week of August through the second week of September is the peak period.
- Late August to mid-September is the best time to search for Yellow-bellied Flycatchers.
- Swallows are ubiquitous over ponds and lakes. Brighton Dam may be good for species besides the nesting Cliff Swallows, especially during the first half of the month.
- A flight of passerines may be triggered when temperatures drop below 60°F or when there is a drop of 10°F or more.
- American Robins begin to congregate at roost sites in late afternoon. Trees with dense foliage such as maples are a frequent choice. Suburban gatherings are not always popular with homeowners as the birds may number in the hundreds.
- Blue Grosbeaks are sometimes easier to find this month than earlier in the summer. Check open scrubby areas and brushy borders, often near small streams or wetlands. Rockburn Branch Park and Alpha Ridge Park are consistent locations.

- The peak of Broad-winged Hawk migration is generally between the 15th and 25th of the month, although good numbers have been observed as early as the 12th. Major flights of migrating Broad-wings may be seen anywhere in the county. Large numbers have been counted at Schooley Mill Park, Centennial Park, and west of Ellicott City.
- Although Merlins may be sighted as early as late August, numbers increase by the middle of this month.
- Shorebirds can still be found on mudflats, along pond edges, and in short-grass areas throughout the month.
- From late August to mid-September, check extensive short-grass areas such as turf farms for Buff-breasted Sandpipers. American Golden-Plovers may drop in this month, while Black-bellied Plovers may continue through October. All share their favored habitat with ever-present Killdeer.
- Migrant terns over lakes and reservoirs continue to be a good possibility throughout this month.
- Barred and Great Horned owls are again calling frequently.
- Whip-poor-wills typically leave this month, although it has become increasingly hard to tell because there are so few breeding locally.
- Ruby-throated Hummingbirds will be going through in dwindling numbers by the end of the month; a few may linger into early October.
- Red-headed Woodpecker migration seems to peak the last two weeks of this month and the first week of October. Keep an eye out for brown-headed juveniles as well as adults.
- Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers begin to show up the third week of the month.
- Most flycatchers, other than Eastern Phoebes which remain into October, are gone by mid to late September; a few pewees have been detected until mid-October.
- Red-breasted Nuthatches may begin to appear in pine or mixed pine/deciduous woods. The first migrants are often seen at feeders.
- Kinglets may begin to arrive in September, although the earliest Ruby-crowns may have put in an appearance in late August. The majority of both species do not move in until October.
- Look for the largest number of migrating warblers this month. They are usually seen in small groups, frequently in the vicinity of water, often in association with mixed chickadee, titmouse, and nuthatch flocks. Migrants are often found in black walnut and various species of oak, hickory, ash, and willow trees. Grapevine and Poison Ivy tangles are also excellent possibilities. After cool nights, look for activity in areas that are warmed by early sun. During the last few hours of daylight, there is another period of feeding before the night flight.
- Take a second look at any Tennessee Warbler to be sure you don't have a Philadelphia Vireo.
- Autumn is the time to watch for the elusive Mourning and Connecticut warblers. The Mourning's migration period runs from late August to early October, although September brings the largest numbers. Connecticut Warblers (which are not spring migrants in Maryland) should be looked for from the beginning of the second week in September to mid-October. The last half of September usually is the peak period.
- From mid-September to late October, search brushy weed patches, especially those close to water, for Lincoln's Sparrows.
- Both White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos may arrive during the first half of the month, but numbers are few until late September or early October.
- Rose-breasted Grosbeak numbers normally peak the last half of the month.
- Look for migrating Bobolinks from early September to late October.
- While scanning the sunny late summer and autumn skies for migrating birds, note the passage of Monarch butterflies. They may begin moving an hour or two after sunrise and may be seen at altitudes of hundreds of feet as well as close to the ground. Several dozen an hour will frequently be tallied.

S e p t e m b e r

- Don't confine your birding to "October's bright blue weather." Storms and heavy rains may force down unusual species or create concentrations of more common migrants.
- Although a few migrant Canada Goose flocks arrive in late September, the most dramatic influx comes in early to mid-October. There is often a day (and night) when hundreds or thousands of birds in dozens of flocks may be seen and heard overhead. Unlike the numerous resident geese, most of the migrants will be flying at a great height in purposeful flight and many flocks will track along a similar path.
- Waterfowl arrive in good numbers, especially the latter half of the month-often in bad weather. Numbers and species may change daily. Remember that many fall mornings combine cool air and warm water temperatures which are ideal conditions for fog. It is most often a problem on the reservoirs, producing frustrating viewing conditions until later in the day.
- From late October through early December, Long-tailed Ducks are possible. Although they have been most consistent on Triadelphia Reservoir, a few birds have been seen on local ponds and lakes, particularly Centennial Lake.
- Most Green Herons disappear after early October; occasionally, a few linger longer. A handful of late records span November.
- Hawk migration continues with accipiters and falcons predominating, although one of our most common buteos, the Red-tailed Hawk, reaches peak numbers during the last half of October. A few Merlins may be seen from September into November. Peregrine Falcons migrate mostly in October. They have been observed most frequently over extensive fields or reservoirs.
- Soras have been seen as late as October 23rd.
- American Coots begin to arrive and can usually be seen on one or more of the larger lakes.
- Although shorebird numbers drop this month, don't ignore mudflats. Black-bellied Plovers, Greater and Lesser yellowlegs, Semipalmated, Least, White-rumped, and Pectoral sandpipers, Dunlin, and Short-billed Dowitchers have all been observed at least once during this month. There are seldom more than a few of any of these species. Pigtail and Browns Bridge are prime shorebird locations. Big Branch is also worth checking. The attractiveness of these locations depends on the water level in the reservoirs. The other possibility for late shorebirds is the entrance pond at Western Regional Park, but much depends on the amount of edge exposed and whether the mud is damp.
- The only two Red Phalarope records are from October-one from Centennial Park and one from Lake Kittamaquidi.
- Watch for a late Forster's Tern over the reservoirs and larger lakes. The county's latest record is at the end of the month, but there is a possibility they will still be wandering through into early November.
- The first major wave of Northern Saw-whet Owls should be arriving and/or moving through the last week of October and the first week of November.
- The majority of Chimney Swifts disappear just after the middle of the month; an occasional bird may be spotted until late October.
- Keep hummingbird feeders filled! The vast majority of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds have departed by early October. Any hummingbird seen late in the month or in succeeding months is more likely to be a stray from the West rather than the expected Ruby-throated. Most are immature birds which can make identification difficult or impossible unless they are captured and banded. Howard County is fortunate to have a registered hummingbird bander who can band the bird and release it. Banding these late migrants can provide useful information about out-of-range species, not to mention positive identification. Please contact this website immediately if you have a late hummingbird or one that is not identifiable as a Ruby-throated.
- Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, both kinglets, and Winter Wrens show up in numbers.
- Outside the breeding season, American and Fish crows travel many miles to roost with other crows. Depending on day length and distance from a roost, crows may be seen flying in one direction (or staging at intermediate stops) as early as 3:00 p.m.
- The fruit of the black (sour) gum is attractive to a wide variety of bird species. The foliage usually turns red early so the tree is easy to spot. Half a dozen species may feed in a single tree.
- The last few days of September through the third week of October is the prime time for Marsh Wrens to be moving through the county.
- During mid to late October when Ruby-crowned Kinglets arrive in large numbers, they

O c t o b e r

sometimes can be found at close range and near eye level in dry patches of goldenrod, giant ragweed, and other densely vegetated open locations.

- Passerines are still going through. Warbler numbers (except for Yellow-rumps) drop dramatically by the last half of the month. Falling yellow, brown, and mottled green leaves can make it difficult to spot drab, mostly silent, warblers.
- By late October, Yellow-rumped Warblers are gobbling Poison Ivy fruit. By winter, there may be little fruit remaining.
- October is sparrow month. Rarities are always a possibility, especially if one seeks the specialized habitats of the more unusual species. The University of Maryland Farm and Mt. Pleasant both have excellent sparrow habitat. (The former is not open to the public although the Bird Club has permission to run field trips; the latter is open to the public on Friday and Saturday only.) There is always the possibility of spotting a species that has never been documented in the county or one that has not been seen for decades.
- Look for Rusty Blackbirds in wet, floodplain woods. Patuxent River State Park is a good area to search during fall and winter.
- If this is an invasion year, Red-breasted Nuthatches, Purple Finches, and Pine Siskins may begin appearing at feeders late this month or early next. The number of all feeder birds begins increasing this month.

- By late November or early December, large flocks of Canada Geese gather daily at Centennial Park. If ice forms, the geese keep a sizeable hole open on the lake. Many birders tend to ignore the geese attempting to pick out ducks or grebes among the larger bodies, but taking the time to check the geese carefully can be productive. Scan feeding and resting birds for a Snow Goose of either color phase; a White-fronted Goose would be an extreme rarity. The smaller, grayer-backed Cackling Goose with a small triangular bill, short neck, and blocky head is also worth the search. Do not base identification solely on size for diminutive Canadas frequent this lake.
- Tundra Swan migration (day or night) builds from early in the month to a peak in mid to late November. Occasionally, a flock rests on Triadelphia Reservoir, less frequently on Centennial Lake.
- A constantly changing variety of waterfowl should be looked for at lakes and reservoirs. Some will remain for weeks, others may stay only a few hours. Each cold front brings the potential for unusual birds. Heavy winds and rain may drop any of the scoter species, a Red-necked Grebe, or a Long-tailed Duck onto reservoirs; less often they may be found on lakes. Strong winds and rough water can make viewing difficult, but it is often a necessary trade-off. By the time winds have dropped, any exciting strays have probably departed.
- Ospreys are still occasional this month.
- Hawk migration continues although the largest number of migrants has passed. Red-tailed Hawks continue to move well into December. For the patient or lucky observer, late autumn can produce such specialties as Northern Goshawk, Golden Eagle, and Rough-legged Hawk.
- An occasional shorebird may linger. Both yellowlegs, Spotted, Semipalmated, Least, and Pectoral sandpipers, Dunlin, Wilson's Snipe, and American Woodcock have all been recorded in November.
- Late Bonaparte's Gulls could still be seen into December.
- Check gull flocks carefully for the infrequent Lesser Black-backed Gull.
- Although most Ruby-throated Hummingbirds have left the area, any hummingbird appearing at feeders this month or next could be a vagrant from the West. Many cannot be identified by sight (or even from a photograph). Contact this website so species verification may be attempted by a licensed bird bander.
- Eastern Bluebirds winter in flocks and do not defend territory in the winter so they are unlikely to be present near nest boxes. Search for them not far from water in protected areas containing a good supply of fruiting plants such as sumac, pokeweed, and dogwood. County bluebird trails have been so successful that it is possible to see and hear this lovely bird in most of our parks during much of the year.
- Scan plowed fields, corn stubble, and mudflats for cryptically-colored American Pipits. Their two-note call is sometimes detected overhead as they move in small groups or large flocks.
- Most warblers will have departed by late October. Orange-crowned Warblers are late migrants with both October and November records. There is always a chance of finding a lingering Nashville, Pine, or Palm warbler, Common Yellowthroat, or Yellow-breasted Chat; less frequently, a species such as a Wilson's Warbler is seen (there are even a few winter records). Of course, Yellow-rumped Warblers winter in small numbers.
- American Tree Sparrows can be located from mid-November until early April. Most years a few winter at Centennial Park.
- Although the first Fox Sparrows usually appear in October, they start showing up in numbers underneath feeders or in brushy areas the first ten days of November.
- Snow Buntings are observed occasionally along gravelly shorelines at Triadelphia Reservoir when the water level is low. Late November to early December is a good time to watch for them. This has also been one of the special species found at the Alpha Ridge Landfill so watch for field trips to that location.
- Watch feeders for northern irruptives. The movement of Red-breasted Nuthatches, Purple Finches, Common Redpolls, Pine Siskins, and ever-more-elusive Evening Grosbeaks is related to food abundance on their breeding grounds. Even when there is ample natural food north of us, a few individuals of some of these species may wander into central Maryland. Evening Grosbeaks have become a rare winter visitor, even during winters when other northern species may be seen in abundance.
- Scan the tops of tulip trees for finches feeding on the seeds.
- White-winged and Red crossbills are rarely seen irruptives that may stay through April during those years when they invade. Look for them on cones near the tops of conifers. Either species is an exciting find for the county. Please report any you see.

N O V E M B E R

- Until lakes and reservoirs are completely frozen, continue to check them for waterfowl. As water freezes and the season progresses, most loons, grebes, and ducks will move on, but there are always a few that linger in the small amount of remaining open water.
- The large number of Mallards at local lakes affords ample opportunity to observe their courtship activity that starts in late fall and continues through the winter.
- A few Common Mergansers usually begin to arrive in early December. By mid-month their numbers begin to build. For reasons that are not apparent, in some winters the total may reach 1,000 or more on Triadelphia Reservoir-providing it remains ice-free and the water levels are normal. Four of the last five years, these winter numbers have been among the highest in the state-an unusual circumstance for any species in this Piedmont county. Because both reservoirs are closed to the public from December 15 to March 1 (or later if there is still ice), the best vantage point is Brighton Dam. By standing on the sidewalk on the north side of the dam any time from about 3:00 p.m. until dark, it is possible to watch the mergansers fly from the main reservoir into a cove at the left side of the dam. In the morning, the process is reversed. (On weekdays, nearby traffic is worse in the morning.) Red-breasted and Hooded mergansers may also be present, but normally there are only a few of those species.
- During the colder months, watch powerlines, utility poles, and leafless trees along major highways for perched hawks. In open country in the western part of the county, keep an eye out for a Rough-legged Hawk or a Northern Harrier hunting low over fields. Both of these species occasionally winter in the county, the harrier more consistently. Neither species is easy to find.
- Although unusual gull species are most likely in January and February, Iceland and Glaucous gulls have been recorded a few times in December. Lesser Black-backed Gulls have now become almost regular each winter, but that may be limited to a single sighting.
- By December, Northern Saw-whet Owls may have taken up residence in pine plantations and in dense, viney, deciduous tangles. Finding a perched saw-whet owl, whether after a long search or as an accidental encounter, is not soon forgotten.
- Check tangles and exposed tree roots along riverbanks and hillside streams for the tiny, secretive Winter Wren. Fortunate is the individual who hears the liquid song of this mouse-like bundle of energy in the "dark of December."
- Birds are never evenly distributed in a given habitat, but in winter it is more obvious than during the breeding season. In wooded areas and along wood edges, look and listen for small mixed flocks of chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, kinglets, woodpeckers, and Carolina Wrens as they move through an area. In more open brushy situations, look for various sparrow species, Northern Cardinals, House Finches, and American Goldfinches. Check individuals in any grouping carefully for the less common species that may accompany the flock.
- Now and then an escaped caged bird is spotted at a feeder, but more exciting is the lingering warbler, thrasher, or oriole. Once in a great while someone finds a geographic stray such as a Varied Thrush, Dickcissel, or Yellow-headed Blackbird. Severe winter weather, especially heavy snow, prolonged cold, or ice storms tends to produce the most reports of vagrants or lingering migrants. If neighbors or friends mention a strange bird at their feeders, please check it carefully. Birders don't have a corner on rare species! The only county Painted Bunting record is based on a photograph taken at a feeder. The bird was present for several weeks, but the homeowners did not realize the rarity of their visitor. If you spot a rare bird, try to obtain a photograph and please report the species to this website so that interested birders may attempt to see it.

D e c e m b e r