

CHICKADEE CHATTER

Newsletter of the Lycoming Audubon Society (LAS)

May - June 2011



Saturday, May 14th, 2011

— **PA Migration Count**, a 24-hour count, counting all birds seen/heard in Lycoming Co; contact Wes at 584-3107 or [via email](#) to participate.

May 25, 2011 — TUREEN DINNER

Dave Brinker of the Maryland DNR will present a program about the **Appalachian Goshawk**



Project which he conducts annually in Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. [See article about program on page 2.]

As always, everyone brings a "dish to share", along with their own tableware and utensils. Beverages will be furnished.

Dinner at 6:00 pm with program to follow. **Old Lycoming Township Fire Station Social Hall**, 1600 Dewey Avenue, Williamsport.

July 27, 2011 - Our ANNUAL PICNIC

Will be held at Rider Park, 6:00pm. Mark your calendars now! Again, everyone brings a dish to share, drinks will be provided. See July-August newsletter for additional details.



A MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT...

Your Chapter, the Lycoming Audubon Society, has had an exciting year, although perhaps a bit frustrating at times. We have continued our many projects and activities, and have embarked on a new one, installing and monitoring bluebird boxes along the routes of the proposed Lycoming County Farm nature trail. After a short absence, we restarted a familiar one, the Adopt-a-Highway litter cleanup along old 220 near the Lycoming mall (and we already picked up litter as part of an Earth Week celebration). We had quite a few enthusiasts participate in the two Christmas bird counts held in Lycoming County. We cleaned and refreshed the wood duck boxes and mallard nests at the Powys wetland, as part of our management agreement with the PA Game Commission. And the purple martins have already returned to the house we erected on county property at Lysock View.

However, we also had some disappointments. We cleaned and freshened the wood duck boxes and mallard nests at another of the wetland areas we manage near Haleeka, and watched as Lycoming Creek breached the embankment and completely ruined that work. We lost our use of the meeting hall at the Little League headquarters due to a change in their use policies and had to scramble to find a new location (but we are very grateful for the time we did use that facility!) And we just learned that the Lycoming County Planning Commission approved a developer's plan to build homes near Rose Valley Lake, a proposal we believe is contrary to the county's planning policies.

Our annual meeting will be held May 25, beginning at 6:00pm with the ever-popular tureen dinner. A great program by Dave Brinker of the Maryland DNR will start at 7:30, when Dave will talk about the Appalachian Goshawk Project that he conducts annually in Maryland, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. The summer family picnic will be on July 27 this year, also beginning at 6:00pm at Rider Park. I hope to see you then.

WE WELCOME OUR NEW MEMBERS!!!

Victoria Ayers	Dawn Kisinger
Shannon Baney	Stacy McKee
Dolores Calhoun	Marty Meisers
Sara Fidler	Dr. SueAnn Schatz
Jen Freund	Kathleen Scott
Kim L. Hoffer	Gregory Shore
Bruce L. Hoffer	Harry (Skip) Stackhouse
Ed Johns	Ribert T. Stiber, Jr.
William Kiessling	Marshall Updegraff

Dan Alters

MAY PROGRAM

Goshawk: Driven by Its Prey!



Admired by people for its aggressiveness, courage, flight prowess and hunting ability long before the dark ages, the Northern Goshawk is an ultimate avian forest predator in the northern hemisphere. For centuries they have

been used for falconry throughout Europe and Asia. Hunters, fisherman, hikers and bird watchers consider it the meanest bird in the forest. With short wings and a long rudder-like tail goshawks are superbly adapted for pursuing prey in a forest and aggressively attacking anyone who comes near their nest during the breeding season. Northern Goshawks periodically undertake massive exoduses from their core breeding area in Canada. What makes these birds tick? Why are they important to us?

Persecuted for years as a robber of game, attitudes had slowly changed and over the past 50 years, Northern Goshawks have expanded their breeding range and increased their population size in the Northeastern U. S., including the Central Appalachians. Since 1977 Dave Brinker has studied goshawks in both Northeastern Wisconsin and the Central Appalachian Mountains. Initiated in 1994, the Central Appalachian Goshawk Project has monitored 90 goshawk nesting attempts, banded 46 nesting adults, and investigated winter movements of breeding adults from NW Pennsylvania down the Appalachian Mountains through the high country of West Virginia.

A forest nesting species that uses mature trees as nest sites, the Northern Goshawk has become a species of considerable conservation interest throughout it's U.S. breeding range. Following a petition to list goshawks as a threatened species, significant research has been conducted on them in the Rocky Mountain states. In the east most National Forests list Northern Goshawks as a sensitive species of management interest, but little research has been done on them east of the Mississippi River.

Learn about the ecology and natural history of this fascinating inhabitant of the forest around us. Are goshawks still increasing in the Central Appalachians? Do breeding adults migrate? What drives the massive goshawk incursions from Canada and might we experience once in the near future? **Come find out on May 25th!**

HIGHWAY BEAUTIFICATION

The next time you drive to the Lycoming Mall from Montoursville via old Rte. 220, take note of the nice clean roadsides and offer your fellow LAS members and friends a word of thanks. On Thursday, April 14, six volunteers from our chapter spent a couple of hours scouring the berms and banks cleaning up 17 garbage bags of litter, three auto tires and numerous large signs, stakes, etc. from this stretch of highway. By 9:30 the next morning workers from the PA Department of Transportation had come and hauled the whole mess to the landfill. Motorists probably don't give a thought to the ultimate fate of that bag of trash they pitch out the window, but we know that wind and water will have their way and that stuff ends up in someone's lawn or in our creeks and rivers. Not this time!

Our Chapter is a voluntary participant in the DOT's excellent Adopt-A-Highway Program, which is designed to keep our roadways looking better and to remove unsightly



and potentially hazardous trash from our environment. Perhaps as important as the actual cleanup work is the educational aspect as our fellow citizens see crews out doing the work. Probably more than a few passersby will think twice before pitching the trash next time. If you look closely in the vicinity of the Tractor Supply Store west bound and near the Twin Hills Cemetery you'll see the DOT signs recognizing LAS for our stewardship of that section of roadway. DOT also supplies trash bags, gloves and safety vests for our use in our cleanups, and as mentioned earlier they remove the collected trash.

Our crew will be back out on the job three more times this season, with sessions scheduled for June 14, August 2 and October 11 at 5:30 PM each day. We now have a pool of fourteen volunteers to help as their schedules permit. A few more certainly wouldn't hurt to keep each volunteer's effort at a reasonable level, so please call Gary Metzger, team leader, at (570)435-5368, if you'd like to help on one or more of the dates.

Gary Metzger

**Join our list-serv: "LASbatsbirds"....email
your request to lasbatsbirds@aol.com**

GARDENING FOR BIRDS: SERVICEBERRY

Those of you with good memories about past newsletters will recall that I featured Serviceberry in my Gardening for Birds series a few years ago. This small native tree is one of my favorites for attracting birds in the Spring, and so it's worthwhile to review its amenities again.

Serviceberry is a small tree native to Pennsylvania and adjacent states. A member of the Rosaceae (Rose) family, it treats us to a beautiful display of showy white flowers in April or early May. Enjoy the flower display quickly, as the flowers are short-lived and are followed by attractive green, oval-shaped leaves.



Next, the berries form, and as they ripen, birds take notice! In late May or June dozens of species of birds seek out Serviceberries (also called Juneberries) for the *very* tasty reddish-purple fruit. Catbirds and Robins are the species I've frequently observed feasting on these delicacies in my urban neighborhood, although I've read that Cedar Waxwings, Scarlet Tanagers, and Wood Thrushes savor the berries as much as I do. Yes, I leave plenty of berries for the birds, but I also take my share from my two trees, which had a fantastic crop in 2010. In case you've never tried them, the berries taste something like blueberries.

Come autumn, when the angle of sunlight lowers and nights turn chilly, Serviceberry's alternate leaves turn wonderful shades of red, orange, and yellow. Three species of Serviceberries occur naturally in the Commonwealth: *Amelanchier laevis* or Allegheny Serviceberry, *Amelanchier arborea* or Downy Serviceberry, and *Amelanchier canadensis* or Shadbush Serviceberry. According to The Plants of Pennsylvania (Rhodes & Block, 2000) Shadbush Serviceberry grows naturally only in the

southeastern counties, whereas the other two species occur throughout Pennsylvania. In the 'wild', these trees usually have multiple trunks and don't grow much larger than 15 to 25 feet tall. However, I have observed several healthy single-trunked specimens on city streets in Williamsport. They grow in both damp and dry soil and need at least partial sunshine to flourish. There also are other *Amelanchier* species classified as shrubs.

Why not add one or more Serviceberries to your property? Among native trees, they are the first of the growing season to fruit. Once established, they need little or no maintenance and will not overwhelm a small yard with their modest size. I planted my first trees (which I bought and had shipped from Musser Forests, Inc.) in 2003 and had fruit within a couple of years.

Most nurseries that specialize in native plants sell Serviceberries. Our local Ironwood Acres Nursery near Trout Run sells Shadbush and Allegheny Serviceberries as well as a non-native Saskatoon species.

Keep watch for their ripening berries as spring grows old! Happy gardening and happy bird-watching!

Jim Green

NATIVE PLANT SALES IN MAY

The Ned Smith Center for Nature and Art in Millersburg will hold its 13th Annual Native Plant Sale from 9:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. on Saturday, May 14th. Meadowood Nursery from the Hershey area will provide more than 150 species of wildflowers, ferns, grasses, trees and shrubs. Admission is free and gardening experts will be present to help answer your questions. The Center's address is 176 Water Company Road. For more details, [contact the Center](#) or by phone at 717-692-3699.

Hawk Mountain in northern Berks County has its annual native plant sale on Saturday and Sunday, May 21 and 22, between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. A variety of trees, flowers, vines, grasses, ferns and shrubs will be offered. For more info, [contact Hawk Mt.](#) or via phone at 610-756-6961.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF “TJ” AN EDUCATION BALD EAGLE



On the 19th of February, TJ passes away from still unknown reasons. Here is the story:

It was going to be a very busy weekend for the two of us. On Friday, the day before, we drove to Plymouth Meeting, PA, for a presentation to the Audubon Group there. TJ, was the perfect performer. While I talked and moved my arm around in gestures like I have the habit to do, he followed my every move, would reach over and nibble at my shirt and would turn his head upside down being very inquisitive. In short, acting with no troubles at all. The Audubon chapter was great and we even booked another talk with an environmental center in the area for later this summer.

Since my next program was to be in the Richmond, Virginia, area on Saturday evening, we headed to Maryland and spent the night at my Mother's place near Baltimore. TJ would spend the night in his crate as he has done all along, and usually likes to go in there to be out of sight of distractions. I arrived around 11:30pm and did a final check on him at midnight and all was fine. The next morning I was up early and did a check at 7:00am. He was sitting okay on the perch but when I got him out to let him get some fresh air and stretch his wings, he fell off the fist. Now the wind was really blowing and I thought it was that at first, so I set him on the ground. Instead of getting up on his feet, he just laid there.

Something's wrong! I placed him on the front seat of my vehicle and he stood up but was still acting funny, so I left him there to get his bearings. I was thinking that maybe he got a little CO poisoning due to all the traffic I had driven through from the Philly area to Baltimore via I-95. So I left the windows down some for fresh air and ate breakfast. By 8:00am he was no better and I started making calls. I cancelled my program, called my veterinarian and headed his way. At 9:00 am, TJ passed away!

It was a holiday weekend, so on Tuesday, I took him to Penn State to the Department of Agriculture and submitted the carcass for necropsy. Since, no body parts are allowed to leave that facility, I had to remove his wings and tail to be shipped off to the Eagle Repository in Denver, where eagle feathers are dispersed to Native Americans for religious purposes. I knew that they would not be needed for the necropsy and I informed both the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the Pennsylvania Game Commission of my intentions, as well as consulting with the biologist that would be performing the necropsy.

That afternoon, I received a phone call and was given the results from the 'Gross Necropsy'. First of all, **HE WAS A SHE!** Now that shocked me! Months earlier, I had sent off a couple of small body feathers to a lab to have the bird sexed but that lab did not have a data base to perform the sex check for Bald Eagles. Based on other measurements, I concluded TJ was a mid-sized male. Now, the bird became a very small female. The other results are just as shocking. TJ was in perfect health as far as body weight, some fat and overall condition. What was found was a much enlarged liver with white flukes throughout — the probable cause; and enlarged kidneys — that caused death, most likely due to the liver problem. So, further lab tests were needed to discover the cause of the two organs to fail.

Six weeks later, I received the additional lab results and they are still inconclusive. Everything has come back negative, so more tests have been ordered. One of these tests is for West Nile Virus, but I really feel it will be some sort of bacteria. My reason is this: from her feather damage and where it was, tells me that the bird was knocked out of the nest at around thirty days old. That will put the timeframe around the beginning of April for most eagles nesting in the lower 48 states. So the bird was forced to stay on the rivers edge, either on the ground or on a low limb, that she could only hop up on, and she was exposed to the muck and debris that floated by during the hot summer months. By October, when the bird was rescued, who knows what she had gotten into or ate? From what I have been told, something like an enlarged organ does take some time to develop, so she most likely was on her way down when I received her a year and a half before. There were NO symptoms that gave any indication of the problem, and in retrospect, none that I can recall.

As in all life, death will happen. When it is untimely, like this was, it is a shock to us that are near.

When I put out the notification of the demise of TJ, I was a bit surprised at the support, cards and phone calls of sympathy. It was a bit overwhelming to me. Also, I was very touched by some of the comments of how we improved the life experiences of some people with their chance to be up close and personal

....continued on page 7, "Education Bald Eagle".....

Email us at: LycomingAudubonS@aol.com

BIRDING “HOT SPOTS” in LYCOMING COUNTY and ENVIRONS

A BEGINNING LIST:

- Rider Park
- Rose Valley Lake — Information and directions on reverse.
- Canfield Island
- Airport Wetlands (Mill Street, Montoursville) - Information and directions on reverse.
- Susquehanna River Trail
- Genetti Hotel — 200 West Fourth Street, Williamsport. (Corner of Fourth and William St.)
- Lysock Farm
- Montgomery Pike Overlook (Rt15)
- Muncy Digs (Canal Archeology site) — Information and directions on reverse.
- Cogan House Farm Fields
- White Deer Ridge — Skyline Drive — Information and directions on reverse.
- Avis Flats
- Little Pine State Park
- Pine Creek Rail-Trail
- State Game Lands 252
- Montgomery Cliffs (by invitation)
- Montour Preserve
- Crystal Lake Camps
- Rickets Glen
- Cherry Township (Sullivan Cos – Sandhill Cranes)

BIRDING SPOTS BEYOND (within 2 hours drive)

- Tussey Mountain Hawk Watch — Centre County
- Hawk Mountain — Schuylkill County - www.hawkmountain.org
- Lake Cowanesque — Tioga County
- Hyner State Park — Clinton County
- Ole Bull State Park — Potter County
- Bald Eagle State Park — Centre County
- Rothrock State Park — Huntingdon County
- Bear Mountain —
- Harrisburg Water front—Dauphin county

We are compiling “birding locations” in and close by to Lycoming/Clinton County and will be publishing information about each on our website and in the newsletter. Please feel free to send us your comments and directions for any site on this list. This is a beginning list, so if you have an additional site, please send that information, too. Email or mail to Larry Waltz at lnrwaltz@aol.com or by regular mail to: Lycoming County Audubon Society at P.O. Box 4053, Williamsport, PA 17701, attention to Larry.

Please include the following for each site: Directions to the location, comfort facilities — if available, seasonal and breeding species that frequent the location “to-be-seen”, and parking options. We will publish each location in *Chickadee Chatter* as space permits, and they will also be listed on our website.

Rose Valley Lake

Rose Valley Lake is a 389-acre reservoir owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and managed by the Fish and Boat Commission for public fishing and boating.

Rose Valley Lake may offer the best variety of birding in Lycoming County. Everything from Bald Eagles and Osprey to Blue-Gray Gnatcatchers and Willow Flycatchers.

Spring and fall migration are excellent times of the year to catch waterfowl migration. When the lake thaws (usually late in March) many species of ducks, loons, grebes, and geese are there. April and May bring waves of warblers and other neo-tropical migrants which can be best viewed from the south boat launch area and Trimble Road. The north boat launch area also provides a nice mix of habitats for a wide variety of species.

Directions from Williamsport: Rt. 15 North to Trout Run. Take Trout Run Mountain. Road to the top of the mountain. Go left on Rose Valley Road and go right onto Trimble Road. Follow the signs to the south boat launch.

Mill Street in Montoursville

Mill Street has been known for many years to local birders as a great place to find spring migrants. Mill Street is a gated (Oct 1st to March 31st) road that parallels the Loyalsock Creek. We recommend you park at the very end of the street where there is a small parking area and picnic ground. The Susquehanna River and the Loyalsock Creek meet here. An excellent mix of migrants can be found through the month of May. Walk back toward the Lycoming Regional Airport where many swallows congregate. Lycoming Audubon Society member Fred Stiner found a vagrant Scissor-Tailed Flycatcher along the Loyalsock Creek in 2003.

White Deer Ridge [Skyline Drive]

White Deer Ridge is an excellent place to witness the spring raptor migration. From late winter on, you can view hawks, eagles, and waterfowl both to the south and north of the lookout. Golden Eagles are the highlight here and can be found on southerly winds from late February through March.

Directions from South Williamsport: Take Rt. 554 (Sulphur Springs Rd.) south from Route 15 south to the top of Bald Eagle Mountain where Skyline Drive is gated. Walk approximately ¼ mile to the east where the power line right of way crosses the mountain. Viewing is best from the clearing to the south of the road.

Muncy Historical Society Canal Archeology Site [Muncy Digs]

This site along the Susquehanna River has open fields, ponds, waterways and a wooded area, so it's a good birding destination in any season. Take one of two easy walks: a short path to the River's edge (you'll see a river bridge, an old abandoned bridge abutment, and grassy areas) where you may observe swallows, shorebirds, waterfowl, especially mergansers, and maybe even a Bald Eagle or Osprey; or cross the road past the dig site toward the ponds to look for warblers, waxwings, bluebirds, nesting raptors and other birds that are fond of mudflats.

Directions from Williamsport: I-180 east to Exit 13-A. Turn right onto Rt. 405. At the traffic light, turn left and travel about a mile to Pepper Street. Turn right onto Pepper Street and proceed 2 miles to the Canal Site along the Susquehanna River.

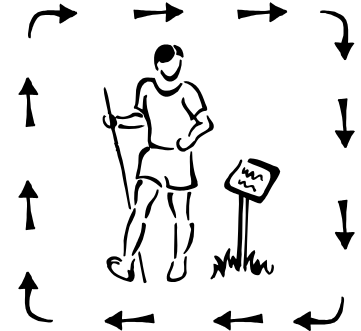
LYSOCK FARM LEARNING SITE

The Lycoming County Conservation District, "Lysock Farm", just off the Warrensville Road and behind Valley View Home, wants to create a demonstration learning site where interested people might experience 'good practices' measures for farming and nature conservation. Commissioner Jeff Wheeland and Conservation District staffer Mark Davidson, along with Crey Entz-Rine, Watershed Specialist, are spearheading the effort.

The dream is coming true: riparian buffers are growing in place; farm animal fencing is keeping the stream bed clean, tree/shrub plantings with their protective tubes are visible in the wetlands; and selective tree cutting is improving sunlight in the forest canopy. Though there is not a CREP farm field program planned at this time, it is projected that the fields will be prepared for planting using a "no-till" method.

A nature trail, eventually open to the public with signage, is being planned that will guide the walker through open fields, suggest the value of wetlands, inspire quiet moments in a wooded ravine, describe the difference between red, white, black and rock oaks and convince you that dead tree snags are beautiful. At the distant perimeter one will experience a beautiful 'Rider Park' moment, overlooking the Loyalsock Creek.

The Lycoming Audubon Society (LAS) has its hand in this venture. Back on 2007, LAS put up a Purple Martin House on the front lawn of Lysock. This March and April several members of LAS met with Jeff, Mark and Crey to add Bluebird boxes to the trail. Fred Stiner of LAS, our "go-to-guy" for Bluebird conservancy, guided the process of choosing materials and determining placement. The twelve boxes were placed in clusters of two in order to deal with House Wren and Tree Swallow competition. The box openings were sited as close as possible to trees and shrubs so the hatchlings would have immediate protection.



Watch for further detail in *Chickadee Chatter* for the opening of this new nature resource here in Lycoming County. Enjoy!

LAS participants: Wes Egli, Ron Beach, Dan Alters, Fred Stiner and Larry Waltz.

Larry Waltz



EDUCATION BALD EAGLEcontinued from page 4....

with a live Bald Eagle. An attendee from the Nippenose Elementary school told me how the students really looked forward to our visit, and how they talked about it for days after. This was the "convincer" that I had to continue. So, I will.

For the future: I am looking BIG this time. Not just for a replacement bird, but also for a facility and program to reach out to the county, state and Mid-Atlantic Region populations. I am forming a non-profit organization, and getting together a committee to assist me in this dream. Like TJ, I will not last forever, but hopefully the mission of educating the public, giving them the experience of being physically near a live eagle, and explaining the ecology and needs of America's greatest symbol, will live on for a long time in their lives.

In my next issue, I will outline my desires and lay out of the facility I envision. You are most welcome to join me with this endeavor. Feel free to contact me and to do what you can.

To be continued soon.

Regards, *Michael W. Kuviga*



Happy Belated Birthday to...Anna DeWald.....!!! Anna is a faithful attendee at our meetings, and recently celebrated her 105th birthday!!



BIRD OBSERVATIONS



Despite the record setting rainfall for April and cold temperatures, bird migration seems to be moving along. The winter of 2010-11 brought in a fair number of irruptive finches, mostly Pine Siskins and Common Redpolls. Many of these birds are still hanging around as of late April, providing local birders a chance to see these occasional wanderers from the north.

Early in April my neighbor was walking her dog around our pond and described a bird that sounded an awful lot like an American Bittern. Turned out it was, and it was here at my property in Old Lycoming Twp. for a few weeks.

Linda Frye had a great time on the river on April 8th and reported "Ring-necked Ducks, Mallards, Greater Scaup, Long-tailed Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, Horned Grebes, Green-winged Teal, American Widgeons, Common Goldeneye, Black Ducks, Canada Geese, White-winged Scoters, Surf Scoters, Wood Ducks, Coots, Hooded Mergansers, Buffleheads, a pair of Common Loons and a lone Snow Goose. Also add a Peregrine Falcon, an American Kestrel, a flock of flickers and several phoebes!"

On Saturday April 9th, Mike Kuriga led approximately 15 folks to the Montgomery cliffs to watch the nesting Peregrine Falcons and to observe other birds. The trip was a success and all participants were able to watch the adults take turns sitting on the eggs. Other birds reported on the trip included eight Golden-crowned Kinglets.

Larry Waltz has been providing us with some great bird reports from his home in Buchanan Meadows. Larry was one of the lucky ones to get siskins, redpolls and Purple Finch this year.

On April 15th, Fred Stiner reported the first Purple Martins at our martin house in Warrensville. Fred reported two males, but I haven't heard if the females have arrived?

On April 20th, I got a good look at a Merlin perched at the top of a tree along Fox Hollow Road. This falcon is not often seen in these parts, but they can be encountered from time to time.

On April 21st Linda Frye had a really unusual report..."I was sitting in our family room watching the White-throated Sparrows, siskins, and a dozen or so Purple Finches when something big flashed past the window. I got up in time to see a Northern Harrier standing on a male Purple Finch."

On April 26th Wayne Laubscher reported from the Mill Hall wetlands: "two American Bitterns and one Common Moorhen. The Moorhen was initially hanging out with American Coots but quickly "ducked" into the cattail vegetation along the edge and remained hidden. We also flushed a Wilson's Snipe and found both Great Blue and Green Herons."

Alex Savakinas and Katie Bell each reported the early Baltimore Orioles this last week of April. Alex also reported "as many as three male Rose-breasted Grosbeaks at a time at my feeders. White-throated sparrows and Purple Finches are still common at my feeders as well as numerous Goldfinches and House Finches. Bluebirds, Blue Jays, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers also enjoying the feast."

And finally, Wes Egli has been keeping us posted on some great birds in Picture Rocks. In addition to Bald Eagles, siskins, etc, Wes reported the first clutch of five bluebird eggs on April 26th as well as a hummingbird.

Please send your bird reports [to Dave Ferry](#). I also send out regular bird sightings via email. Let me know if you want to be included.

Dave Ferry

March 26, Rose Valley Lake field trip report: Birds sighted: Canada Goose, Wood Duck, American Wigeon, Mallard, Green-winged Teal, Ring-necked Duck, Scaup, sp., Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye, Hooded Merganser, Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, Pied-billed Grebe, Horned Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Turkey Vulture, Red-tailed hawk, American Coot, Belted Kingfisher, American Crow, (probable) Cliff Swallow, Black-capped Chickadee, American Robin, Song Sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Common Grackle, Common Redpoll (heard).

Wes Egli

Kids' Korner: Sing a Song

How and why do birds sing? And how and why do different species of birds produce different songs?

When YOU sing a song, you use your voice box, or larynx, located at the top of your throat. Birds have their "song box," or syrinx, located much deeper in their chests, at the bottom of their windpipes.

Many bird species like mallards, chickens, gulls, and coots make only a few kinds of sounds, and they are born knowing how to do it—in other words, their songs are innate. Some bird species, known as the songbirds, have the ability to learn many new songs after they are hatched. For these species, the males usually have a larger "song center" in their brains than the females, and sometimes the female of these species won't sing at all. Songbird babies usually learn their songs from their father. Each songbird species has its own "sensitive period" for song learning. Meadowlarks, song sparrows, and swamp sparrows learn all their songs in the first few months after hatching and then continue to sing those same songs throughout their adult lives. Mockingbirds, blackbirds, and indigo buntings continue to learn new songs even after their first year—these are the opera stars of the bird world!

Birds may use their songs to mark territory, attract mates, and identify others of their own species. For canaries, males who sing the most complex songs have the greatest success in triggering their mates to build nests. Some birds use the space between phrases in their songs to help identify their own species; these include the common yellowthroat, towhees, and most sparrows. Other birds use the sequence of specific phrases to identify their own species; these include the winter wren and brown thrasher. However, Northern mockingbirds and European starling often imitate non-bird sounds, like machinery or barking dogs. When I lived in New York City, there was a group of mockingbirds that even learned to imitate car alarms!

Bird song activities:

Try to see how many different bird songs you hear each time you go outside. Watch a bird outside your window, and listen carefully: how many different songs can one bird make? Blue jays have at least 7 different calls, for example. European starlings and Northern mockingbirds have a huge song repertoire. What common sounds from your neighborhood can you hear imitated by these birds?

For more information about bird songs: See [The Birder's Handbook](#), by Paul Ehrlich, David Dobkin, and Darryl Wheye, from Simon and Schuster Publishers.

This Kids' Korner provided by Dr. Mary Morrison, Lycoming College.



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