Chickadee Chatter

January/February 2026 **Litchfield Hills Audubon Society Newsletter** **Volume 71/Issue 1**

The mission of the Litchfield Hills Audubon Society is to protect birds, other wildlife, and their habitats, through conservation, education, research, and advocacy.

FOCUS ON BIRDS

Merlin Magic

By Ginny Apple

Imagine the surprise on May 14th when ultimate birder, Dave Rosgen of Winchester, looked up and saw infrequent travelers in our midst. On their way from South America to Canada, a pair of Merlins stopped over in Winsted at Forest View Cemetery and decided to stay for a while — long enough to mate and produce four healthy chicks.

Dave alerted my friend, colleague, and fellow LHAS Board member, Gina Decker, and me about the magical sighting — these falcons *are* named Merlin, you see — and we joined Dave at the cemetery to witness the pair mating multiple times. In between, the female, particularly, took chase after ravens and crows, as Merlins are wont to do.

According to UConn professors Chris Elphick and Phil Rusch, who are working on the new Connecticut Breeding Bird Atlas and who keep track of such flights of fancy, these are the first recorded pair of Merlins in the state!

See Calendar on pages 6-7 for our Upcoming Meetings & Field Trips

A quick call to Tom Hester, our ultimate birding photographer friend, and we were assured that these nesting/breeding Merlins in our midst would be adequately and artistically chronicled.

Merlins mating in Winsted.

Photo: Tom Hester

Oh, and by the way, since these falcons are air hunters, they pegged lots of sparrows and songbirds while they visited our area and delighted us all with their amazing aerial prowess

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Co-President's Message

By Janet Baker

Editor's Note: Below is an excerpt from the speech Janet gave at our volunteer appreciation dinner November 14. Since many of our volunteers were unable to attend, we want to let you know how much you are appreciated.

All of us are volunteers, as LHAS is an all-volunteer organization with no paid staff members. My husband and I spent 37 years overseas. While John had a work visa, I was not allowed to work, as the local governments felt I would be stealing a job from a local person. So, I became a volunteer and, at one time or another, I did just about every job any committee had to offer. It was fun, it helped many organizations, and I made some very good friends in the process. Hopefully you all will find these same rewards as volunteers.

Diane Edwards specifically asked me to tell you how much the LHAS appreciates the work you do for us. Without you, we would not have such wonderful guardians of our sanctuaries. Our wildlife would not have such avid custodians to ensure their welfare, and the world would not have the information we supply from our research on the bird counts and other special activities. Yes, we treasure every moment you bless us with your time and effort, and we thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Without YOU there would be no LHAS.

LHAS Officers

Co-President	Diane Edwards	860-309-5139
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Wigwam Brook Sanctuary	*vacant*	

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Chickadee Chatter is published in January, March, May, July, September, and November. Submission deadline for the **March/April** issue is **February 1.**

Please email items to appear in the newsletter to **Diane Edwards** at **edwardsd68@charter.net** or mail them to her at **68 Shingle Mill Road, Harwinton, CT 06791.**

Send other business to the appropriate chairperson at **LHAS, P.O. Box 861, Litchfield, CT 06759-0861 or lhasct@me.com.**

NEW MEMBERS

By Harry Ainsworth, Membership Records Chair

Lori Belosi.....Watertown
Catherine Boyle..... Kent
Susan Burton ..... Bantam
Marilyn Dillon .....Oakville
Beverly Fanelli..... Bristol
Mary Hallorn ..... Southbury
Maria Hill.....Litchfield
William Maher.....Litchfield
Susan Markowitz ..... Kent
Edward Marshall ..... Riverton
Robert McGoldrick.....Northfield
Delores Ann Miller..... Morris
Natalie Solan .....Salisbury
Sally Spillane.....Lakeville
Elizabeth Summerville.....Goshen
Robert Wacks.....Oakville
Ken Wilson ..... Warren

LHAS membership is at 1,075.

If your newsletter is addressed incorrectly, send an email to Harry Ainsworth at hla1@me.com.

Condolences

LHAS extends our condolences to **Donna Potwin**, whose brother, George "Buddy" Lester, passed away in October.

We also express our sympathy to the family of former LHAS member **Claranne Parker**, who passed away in October at the age of 97.

This newsletter and other LHAS features can be seen IN LIVING COLOR at www.lhasct.org.

Scan the QR code at left with your smartphone to go to www.lhasct.org.

Many thanks to our former proofreader **Doreen Orciari**, who has stepped down after many years. Thanks to **Janet Baker, Lorraine Lorenzini, and Lynne Williamson** for proofreading this newsletter.

The *Chickadee Chatter* is printed by **Photo Arts Printing Company,** Torrington, CT.

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Merlins

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Female Merlin.
Photo: Tom Hester

and acrobatics.

"I was amazed at how swiftly they could pluck a sparrow out of the sky, then settle on a branch, pluck out the feathers, and have a really good meal," said Tom. "They rarely missed!"

The Merlin, *Falco columbarius*, is a small falcon with a powerful build and is broader and stockier than the slightly smaller American Kestrel — just a little larger in length and wingspan, but up to 50% heavier.

Merlins are 9.5 to 13 inches in length, with 20- to 26-inch wingspans. Males weigh an average of 5.8 ounces, while the females can weigh up to 8 ounces. In comparison, American Kestrels, which are commonly seen along roadways and field edges, are 8.7 to 12.2 inches long, with 20- to 24-inch wingspans and weights ranging between 2.8 and 5.5 ounces.

Merlin fledgling with food.
Photo: Tom Hester

Merlins have sharply pointed wings, a broad chest, and a medium-length tail and use surprise attacks to bring down small songbirds and shorebirds. They are powerful fliers, but distinguishable from larger falcons by their rapid wingbeats and overall dark tones. They once were called Pigeon Hawks.

Each Merlin eats as many as 900 birds a year. Merlins mostly hunt other birds.

Unlike the Peregrine Falcon — which can dive at speeds up to 240 mph — Merlins don't usually dive or "stoop" on their prey. Instead, they power up in horizontal flight, plowing into a murmuration of starlings, clouds of sandpipers, and strong-flying pigeon flocks at speeds topping 30 mph and have been known to reach speeds of 70 mph. They are relentless when in pursuit of prey, with small-to-medium-sized birds being their main source of food.

Merlin chicks.
Photo: Tom Hester

It was immensely exciting to watch the pair as they frequently acquired their meals in the cemetery and, on occasion, ventured toward Winsted for an easy meal there.

Merlins will also eat dragonflies, bats — even small mammals — but they rely heavily on a variety of birds for food, including House Sparrows, finches, and waxwings.

Their skillful flight made them favorites in medieval falconry, and they were used by noblewomen to hunt mostly Skylarks. Both Catherine the Great of Russia and Mary Queen of Scots flew Merlins.

> *"This was just spectacular to watch and realize that these were the first recorded nesting pair of Merlins in the state."*

"Watching this pair of Merlins mate, nest, and successfully hatch four chicks was amazing," Gina said. "We spent much of their nesting cycle looking in on them each day."

After a little less than a month mating and renovating an abandoned nest in a large White Pine, the female was on the nest in June. The chicks hatched in early July (gestation period is usually four weeks, with female on eggs midway through) and grew rapidly. During this time, the male would bring birds to the female, who would perch on a tree nearby and pluck the feathers, then take the birds to the nest to feed her four chicks.

By July 18th, they were little grayish-white fluff balls and by July 29th appeared ready to fledge. By this time, they had shed their down feathers, were branching and flapping their wings, all the while screaming for food. By August 2nd, they had fledged and were hunting.

"This was just spectacular to watch and realize that these were the first recorded nesting pair of Merlins in the state," Dave said.

Perhaps the Merlin magic will return, once again, next May and thrill birders with their skillful and majestic sky maneuvers.

Nature Explorers' Second Family Duck Ramble

By Vickie Dauphinais, Education Committee Chair

Family Duck Ramblers.

Photo: Vickie Dauphinais

On a blustery, gray November day, a group of adventurous birders gathered at Point Folly on Bantam Lake to spot waterfowl. The ramble was led by Nature Explorers' Ann Orsillo and Josh Szwed. Justin Mack, Joann Neddermann, and I helped with the logistics. Ann gave the group of parents, grandparents, and children an animated introduction to common waterfowl in our area. Everyone was equipped with binoculars, and scopes were set up to get a better look at the ducks scattered across the lake. Despite the inclement weather, the group was treated to close-up views of Buffleheads, Common Mergansers, Hooded Mergansers, Ring-billed Gulls, lots of Mallards, and a pair of majestic Mute Swans. The spotting scopes allowed for a nice view of the Ruddy Ducks' long, cocked-up stiff tails.

Searching for birds besides waterfowl.

Photo: Justin Mack

As we made our way around Point Folly, the group shifted from scanning the open water to exploring the sheltered trails. A Great Blue Heron was spied on the water's edge; a flock of Rusty Blackbirds were busily feeding close to the trail — a nice surprise! Due to the wind and cold temperatures, there was little bird activity among the trees. That didn't dampen the kids' excitement and energy. They had fun identifying old nests in the trees and shrubs, including squirrels' messy leaf nests, catbirds' stick nests, and best of all, a sack nest high in a tree, likely belonging to a Baltimore Oriole family. They checked out a "pencil-chewed" tree by a resident beaver, and were amazed to see the small, neat rows of round holes on a tree trunk left by an industrious sapsucker. The group gathered back in the parking lot to add up the species seen — 14 total. Lastly, they savored duck-shaped cookies made by Ann and posed for a group photo. Despite the wintery weather, everyone left with a better appreciation of waterfowl and nature.

Nature Explorers' Spooky Walk at Boyd Woods

By Marie Kennedy

LHAS Education Committee member Justin Mack (left) talks to kids about bats.

Photo: Marie Kennedy

The late-October walk was well attended by 18 people, including youngsters and their families. Dressed in their favorite Halloween costumes, the kids were excited to head to the bird blind to spot feeding birds. Next, the group went to the "tree cave" and searched for "critters," then down to the "Spooky Hickory Tree" for photo opportunities and to learn about owls. A longer hike led the group to the pond where the kids and parents learned all about bats. Then it was on to the Monarch Meadow for a "Predators and Prey" game. This year, the prey got away! What will happen next year?

LHAS Volunteers Treated to Dinner

By Janet Baker, LHAS Co-president

LHAS wouldn't be where it is today without the many dedicated volunteers. On a lovely evening on November 14, LHAS hosted the second annual volunteer appreciation dinner at Sunset Meadow Vineyard in Goshen to thank them for their hard work, diligence, and participation in our many activities. About 30 volunteers enjoyed a nice dinner and each other's company. Unfortunately, some volunteers were not able to join us. We missed you and want to convey our thanks for all your help.

Vickie Dauphinais organized the occasion. She and her committee of Pam Hicks, Terri Bianchi, Marie Kennedy, and Elizabeth Frey-Thomas did an amazing job pulling it all together — from invitations to a varied menu. The staff at Sunset Meadow was most cooperative and helpful.

From left: Pam Hicks, Vickie Dauphinais, Terri Bianchi, and Marie Kennedy.

Photo: Celeste Echlin

From left: Marie Kennedy, Dave Tripp Jr., Kate Wong, Jay Coles, Carrie Szwed, Josh Szwed, and Ann Orsillo.

Photo:Vickie Dauphinais

From left: Ginny Apple, Donna Rose Smith, Russ Naylor, and Janet Baker.

Photo:Vickie Dauphinais

FOCUS ON BIRDS

The Black-capped Chickadee

By Ann Orsillo

The Black-capped Chickadee is not only the mascot for LHAS but it is my favorite bird. This sprightly and small bird (5 inches long) is the only wild bird that has eaten seeds from my open hand. At the time we were living in a condo in Torrington with hemlock and pine trees just outside the windows. A small flock of chickadees were bouncing around the branches. I opened the window and held out my open hand with sunflower seeds. I waited patiently. One bird's sharp black eyes watched me as it hopped from branch to branch just above my hand. At last one after another hopped on my hand and snatched a seed. I could feel their little sharp claws and scaly feet. The black cap, gray back, white cheeks, and the flurry of gray and white wings was very evident.

After that encounter our bird feeder was kept full and visited every day throughout the winter by these delightful forest birds.

Black-capped Chickadees travel and feed throughout the winter in a loose flock of titmice, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and other resident birds. They are very good at finding food. It is amazing that their little brains retain where they have stashed seeds and where bird feeders are located. Migrating birds will follow chickadees so they can feed as well.

Chickadees are by nature curious, bold, and very active. Just a short "pish" from birders will bring them in close. While filling the bird feeder in the garage the other day I spilled some seeds. Chickadees must have been watching since they flew into the garage and snatched up the spilled seeds. Their warning call of chickadee-dee-dee is reserved for our dog or a fox that ventures into the yard.

A chickadee's diet consists of seeds, especially black oil sunflower, as well as caterpillar eggs, spiders, aphids, and other insects. They hop around branches and hang upside down to glean bugs from the undersides of leaves and branches. Although frequent visitors to bird feeders, only

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Meetings, Bird Walks and Activities

LHAS Calendar — Winter 2026

NOTE: Unless otherwise indicated, **General Meetings** are held on the first Monday of each month. When the first Monday of the month falls on a holiday, the meeting is held on the second Monday. Meetings are held at the Litchfield Community Center, 421 Bantam Road (Route 202), Litchfield, and/or via Zoom.
Board of Directors Meetings are held the third Tuesday of every other month at 7 p.m. at 28 Russell St., Litchfield, CT.

GENERAL MEETINGS

Note: The meetings below will be in person and on Zoom. To participate on Zoom, go to the Calendar section of our website, lhasct.org, to register. You will be sent the login link. The meeting times shown below are when refreshments are available. A short business meeting begins at 7 p.m., followed by the presentation.

January 5 . . . . . Forests and Forestry in Connecticut . . . . . Monday, 6:45 PM

Jim Gillespie, a certified forester in Connecticut, will talk about the Stony Brook Forest in Sharon that he has owned and managed for over 30 years. He will tell us about forest workers and their machinery, forest management techniques, deer protection exclosures, young forests, tree identification, recreational uses of the forest, bird habitat creation, and timber harvesting. He will also touch on forest history, in particular the charcoal industry, as well as the past, present, and future challenges to forests and specific tree species. Jim has provided consulting to private landowners, land trusts, municipalities, and other landowners for more than 40 years.

February 2 . . . . . The Northern Saw-whet Owl . . . . . Monday, 6:45 PM

This is the smallest forest owl in eastern North America. In the fall, thousands of them leave their breeding grounds in southern Canada and the northern U.S. and move south to find food and cover. Often called migrants, it is more appropriate to refer to them as "nomads" or fall "passage birds," since they never end up in the same place twice. Much of their life history remains a mystery. Join federally licensed raptor bander Larry Fischer as he unravels some of the mystery surrounding the life history of the Northern Saw-whet Owl. Larry has been banding and watching owls and hawks for more than 40 years. He is a state and federally licensed bird bander with an emphasis on birds of prey and is a former president of the Western Connecticut Bird Club.

EVENTS AND FIELD TRIPS

January 18 . . . . . .Bald Eagles at Shepaug Dam . . . . . Sunday, 9 AM

Come visit the Shepaug Dam Bald Eagle Observatory on River Road in Southbury to see our national bird at work and play in its natural element. Plus, we're likely to observe Common Mergansers, American Black Ducks, Red-tailed Hawks, Common Ravens, and other avian treats. Often, something really good shows up — in several winters, we've had a visiting Peregrine Falcon. As an extra benefit, we'll enjoy educational exhibits with live birds of prey shown by local rehabilitators. Meet at the Canfield Corner Pharmacy at the junction of Routes 6 (Main Street North) and 47 in Woodbury. ***Any questions, call Russ Naylor at 203-841-7779 and leave a message.***

January 25 . . . . . Shorebirding in Stratford . . . . . Sunday, 9 AM

January is always full of surprises — once again, let's see what unusual birds are showing up at the shore. We will meet in Stratford (exit 30 off I-95 north) at the Dunkin Donuts on Route 113/Lordship Boulevard at the corner of

The next Board Meeting will be held at 7 p.m., Tuesday, January 20, at the LHAS office, 28 Russell Street, Litchfield.

Honeyspot Road. We will check out the local birding hotspots, including "Warehouse Pond" (aka McKinney Refuge); Long Beach, where the ice piles up in huge mounds on the sand; Stratford Point (if open) to watch for gannets and maybe even alcids out on the Sound; Short Beach; and the Birdseye Boat Launch. Let's hope for Snowy Owls! King Eiders? Harlequin Ducks? It probably will be cold and windy, so come prepared! ***To register or for more information, contact Angela Dimmitt in advance at 860-355-3429 or angeladimmitt@aol.com.***

February 14 . . . . . .Great Backyard Bird Count and Walk at Boyd Woods . . . . . .Saturday, 9-11 AM

Spend a couple of hours with Rich and Debbie Martin watching and counting birds at Boyd Woods Sanctuary. In the past, Boyd Woods was quite the hotspot in Litchfield County for bird species counted over the four-day period of the Great Backyard Bird Count. We'll be sure to see many birds from our wonderful bird blind at the well-stocked feeding station, but we'll also explore other habitats as we search for unusual species. Meet at the Boyd Woods parking lot on Route 254 in Litchfield. Bring binoculars, dress warmly, and wear appropriate footwear for slippery, snowy trails if necessary. Snow or rain cancels this walk. ***For more information, contact Debbie Martin at barnowl524@hotmail.com or 860-819-7462.***

February 20-22 . . Birding Around Newburyport, MA . . . . . Friday-Sunday

Dave Tripp will once again escort LHASers around the Newburyport, Amesbury, and Salisbury areas in search of wintering northern birds. In the past, this trip has seen rare birds like Great Gray Owl, Boreal Chickadee, Varied Thrush, Townsend's Solitaire, and Harris' Sparrow. Other uncommon birds encountered in the past are Short-eared Owls, "white-winged" gulls, Barrow's Goldeneye, Rough-legged Hawks, and Northern Shrike. An added bonus is a day trip to Gloucester and Rockport on Cape Ann, which may add Razorbills, Thick-billed Murres, Harlequin Ducks, Black Guillemots, and more gulls and waterfowl. ***If you plan to go, email Dave at dtrippjr@gmail.com.*** We will stay at the Fairfield Inn in Amesbury; check websites to find the best rate.

Black-capped Chickadee

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Black-capped Chickadee.
Photo: Diane Friend Edwards

20% of their diet comes from feeders. So don't worry if you run out of seed. However, studies have shown that their survival rate is higher in areas where bird feeders are available.

In early spring, the male chickadee will make a high-pitched, clear whistle — "fee feee" or "fee fee fee," with the last note emitted at a slightly lower pitch. This is their mating call. Soon this dominant male and the dominant female will break free from the winter flock in search of a nesting location. They will choose either an old woodpecker hole or a cavity in a tree. They might also choose a nesting box. I have seen them popping into a tree cavity and heard them "chip-chipping" inside. Working diligently and nonstop, each of the pair carries a small wood chip and deposits it several wing beats away. This activity may be carried out until the nest cavity is grooved to their satisfaction. Next, they bring materials into the nest cavity. Piece by piece, animal hairs, bark strips, and plant down form the base of the nest. The final touches consist of mostly moss and other soft materials. The completed nest is perfectly round.

One day when I was working on my patio garden, two chickadees flew and landed next to me. They pulled moss from the cracks in the patio and flew into the backyard. Flying back and forth for hours to collect the moss was an obsessive endeavor propelled by the hormonal instinct to reproduce. Once the eggs are laid the female will incubate them for 12 to 13 days. The male will bring her food and defend the territory until the eggs hatch. If the female leaves the nest, she first tends to the nest in an interesting way. She covers the nest and eggs with a blanket of soft materials. Both sexes will feed the chicks caterpillars and other insects. Fledging at 16 days, the young will leave the nest and follow their parents and beg for food with a distinctive "chisk shisk" sound.

Chickadees are permanent residents. They do not migrate. They range from Alaska through the North American continent to the Northeast. (There is some overlap with the southern Carolina Chickadee.) When the flock becomes too large, some of the birds fly to a different area in a phenomenon called species dispersal. When the dominant male or female dies, a subordinate will take their place.

Let's enjoy these regulars to our feeders and yards. They will bring us lots of joy.

Cape May Trip Report

A Windy Whirl and a Wending of Wings

By Russ Naylor

The Cape May birders.

Photo: Dave Tripp's cell phone

Our 2025 Tripp trip to Cape May was a bit breezy, and the migrating birds were sparser than usual — contrary winds and flooding earlier in the week dispersed birds and slowed their passage to a trickle, even with northwest winds while we were there. Still, our 14 wayfarers took in a diversity of bird life in a jovial atmosphere of adventure and fellowship — though we won't get into the tomfoolery that followed: imitating Screech Owls outside the window at 3 a.m. (Editor's note: Fran Zygmont denies it!), or inadvertently letting several crickets loose in Dave Tripp's SUV.

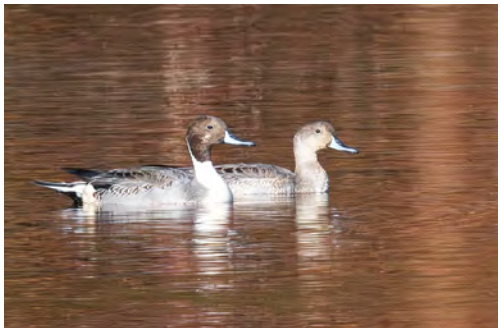
Four of the many White Ibises flying by.

Photo: Paul G. Edwards

Sunrise at Higbee Beach Wildlife Management Area.

Photo: Diane Friend Edwards

Our Thursday, Oct. 16th, start at Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge (aka Brigantine NWR) was ushered in by a Bald Eagle and a flyby formation of more than 100 White Ibises (both adults and juvies). Amid a plethora of puddle ducks, we savored Caspian Terns, Horned Grebe, an adult "gray ghost" (a male Northern Harrier), Hudsonian Godwit, Tricolored Heron, and seven kinds of waders. An early Rough-legged Hawk circled by to check us out.



Northern Pintails.

Photo: Dave Tripp, Jr.

Friday's activities commenced with an impromptu tai chi session done in the way of the crane to bring us luck for the weekend. This paid off at once with a dawn flight of Common Loons over the Hyland Motor Inn before our departure for the day's birding. Stone Harbor's Wetlands Institute yielded nine Western Willets and a Tricolored Heron. The shoreline at Stone Harbor not only had Lesser Black-backed Gulls, Black Scoters, and American Oystercatchers beneath passing Ospreys, but also one Bank Swallow — the first new bird for our cumulative Cape May checklist. Nummy Island showed Marbled Godwits, at least 1,450 Brants, Boat-tailed Grackles, and a puzzling young shorebird that stumped even the experts among us until it was finally ID'd as a Red Knot.

Birding at the beach.

Photo: Kate Wong

South Cape May Meadows sheltered White-crowned Sparrows as well as a late Bobolink. The Cape May Observatory had Blue-winged Teal, a Bald Eagle, Pied-billed Grebe, and Eastern Towhee. A late-day visit to Lily Lake produced Ring-necked Duck, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and a late Northern Waterthrush — a second newbie to our cumulative Cape May checklist.

During Saturday's jaunt to Higbee Beach, we encountered a cheery chorus of Carolina Wrens, yellow-shafted Northern Flickers, a flutter of both kinglet species, a luscious spread of "butterbutts" (Yellow-rumped Warblers), and a Yellow-billed Cuckoo to flavor our morning's birding. A trip to the shore there revealed four pods of dolphins fishing offshore, with two Bald Eagles perched nearby ready to swipe fish driven to the surface. Gannets graced the Coral Avenue beaches. Back at the Cape May Bird Observatory, we scored Common Gallinules, a Pied-billed Grebe parent evading a fully fledged youngster — you're on your own now, baby! — American Wigeons, and a solidly built stud of an American Bittern winging across the pond to crash like a catapult-flung stone into the reeds.

Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

Photo: Dave Tripp, Jr.

Double-crested Cormorant.

Photo: Diane Friend Edwards

After a quick dash into the convention center in Cape May to check out books, bins, tours, and telescopes, our stalwart leaders scored a hat trick for us back at the bird observatory, snagging Brown Pelicans, Parasitic Jaegers, and an apparent Pomarine Jaeger — yet another new addition to our overall Cape May checklist. This was a crowning touch to end our birding day.

American Avocet in winter plumage.

Photo: Dave Tripp, Jr.

We finished our journey on Sunday back at Edwin B. Forsythe NWR with a Screech Owl greeting us at the entrance. We saw birds we had not seen on Thursday — a gracefully undulant flock of nearly 300 White Ibises. At least three Hudsonian Godwits stood tall amidst yellowlegs, while at another stop we enjoyed a boisterous feeding scrimmage of White Ibises, Glossy Ibises, Great Egrets, and Snowy Egrets, all bumbling about after baitfish. At one point we experienced a "peepalooza" of sandpipers — a muster of Dunlins mixed with Least, Semipalmated, and White-rumped Sandpipers — an excellent chance to sharpen our shorebird identification skills. We ended our

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Dunlins, Greater Yellowlegs, and Hudsonian Godwits.

Photo: Ann Orsillo

Forster's Terns.

Photo: Diane Friend Edwards

Trip Reports

By Russ Naylor

Trees, Trees, Murmuring Trees

Yes, birding and botany do mix! On October 11, 2025, we embarked on a quest of "birding by trees" at Bent of the River Audubon Center in Southbury. The jaunt was led by Ken Elkins, a bottomless fount of natural history data. We enjoyed a sumptuously sensory experience, ID'ing trees and shrubs by bark and leaf texture and structure as well as growth pattern — getting a look into the world of trees and shrubs and of the birds associated with them.

Our path led into inspecting three groups of birches (gray/white, black, and yellow), several kinds of cherry and apple, two groups of maples (sugar/Norway, red/silver), two groups of oaks (black/red versus white), plus a number of smaller plants that feed our avifauna — elderberry, bayberry (high fat content), chokeberry, poison ivy (protein source), and more.

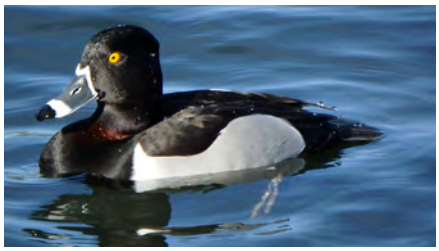
We reviewed bird/tree associations — hemlocks for nesting Black-throated Green and Blackburnian Warblers; Norway and other spruces for Cape May and Bay-breasted Warblers; oaks for a variety of insectivores; and sycamores for nesting orioles and cavity nesters: Screech Owls, Pileated Woodpeckers, flickers, Wood Ducks, mergansers, and nuthatches.

As we botanized, the birds all around us didn't disappoint. There were Common Mergansers, Pileated Woodpeckers, ravens, Belted Kingfishers, and Red-shouldered Hawks. A stunning plethora of smaller migrants fed on insects borne on the various trees — especially fall aphids and midges. We saw waves of Yellow-rumped, Palm, and Blackpoll Warblers mixing with Ruby-Crowned Kinglets, all aloft. Below, swarmed dozens of sparrows seeking both seed and insect fare — towhees, Song, Swamp, White-throated, Field, and Savannah. Frugivores — robins, Cedar Waxwings, bluebirds, and sapsuckers — harvested fall fruits proffered on willing limbs. A boisterous throng of some 80 goldfinches swarmed the Bent's north meadow in quest of tasty seeds.

Kudos to Ken for dispensing doses of rich and detailed knowledge of our local natural history and symbiotic connectedness. Also, we congratulate him on his new position as education director at the Catherine Violet Hubbard Memorial Foundation in Newtown.

A Model Waddle and All That Twaddle

On November 9, 19 LHAS "featherfervents" flew forth amid scattered showers — a delightfully ducky day — to scout Bantam Lake and its environs for a diversity of waterfowl ("anseriformes") and sundry web- and wet-footed modern-day dinosaurs. Amid a sprinkling of Black Ducks, Common Goldeneyes, and Common Mergansers, we enjoyed seeing rafts of Ruddy Ducks, Buffleheads, and Mallards. A few shy Wood Ducks made a bashful appearance.



Ring-necked Duck.

Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Ring-necked Ducks graced Jones Pond in Morris. Surprisingly absent were Hooded Mergansers and Mute Swans — perhaps they cleared out ahead of predicted frigid conditions to come in a few days? But we did see sundry non-anseriformeses: Pied-billed Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Double-crested Cormorant, an airy flight of Bonaparte's Gulls, and an ululation of Common Loons.

Best bird of the day was a Red-throated Loon obligingly preening and posing for approving paparazzi. The local Bald Eagle pair kept us under surveillance from aloft — one imitating an Osprey's cheeping to tweak our auditory ID skills. (Is this bird picking up one of Fran Zygmont's habits of mirthful mimicry? If so, may the Merlin app dub it a starling!) Local ravens indulged in aerial pranks above us, especially at Jones Pond where one reversed roles by playing tag with crows. A few Rusty Blackbirds put in a brief appearance at Point Folly.

At the end of our itinerary, Cemetery Pond in Litchfield hosted 16 American Wigeons and an American Coot to boot — not to mention about 3,500 grackles and a Merlin!

Altogether we indulged in a pre-Thanksgiving "featherfeast" thanks to bird whisperer Fran Zygmont and his chief avian aficionado Dave Tripp — a most excellently executed excursion. Well done!

Cape May

(continued from page 9)

birdy journey at the back side of Brigantine, finding rafts of Ruddy Ducks (for the third year in a row!), an American Avocet, and a wind-tossed Eared Grebe as a nice finale to an "aviabundant" extravaganza.

As always, high-fives and huzzahs for Dave Tripp and Fran Zygmont for a splendid featherquesters weekend!

We ended up with a total of 148 species.

Conservation News

Audubon: This Winter May Be 'Finchy'

Evening Grosbeak.

Photo:Wikimedia Commons

The Winter Finch Forecast is here. Its findings? Get ready for boreal birds! Each year, biologists with the Finch Research Network use data about food availability to predict the "irruptions" of boreal bird species, large-scale movements they make in search of food. Predictions indicate we can expect Redpolls, Purple Finches, Evening Grosbeaks, Pine Siskins, and others in Connecticut this winter!

Bipartisan Group of Senators Forms Stewardship Caucus

In October a bipartisan group of U.S. senators created the Senate Stewardship Caucus to support the health, recreational, and economic benefits of our natural resources. The new caucus commits to working across the aisle to advance efforts that protect and restore public lands, waters, and wildlife habitat; increase outdoor access for communities across the nation; and strengthen local economies that depend on healthy and abundant natural places.

IUCN Red List: Deforestation driving global bird declines

Birds play vital roles in ecosystems and for people, serving as pollinators, seed dispersers, pest controllers, scavengers, and ecosystem engineers, notes a news release from the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). Ominously, 61% of bird species assessed by BirdLife International have declining populations — an increase from 44% in 2016, according to the IUCN's most recent update of its "Red List" of species at risk of extinction.

The most prevalent cause of bird population declines, states IUCN, is habitat loss and degradation, driven especially by agricultural expansion and intensification and logging. In addition, invasive species, hunting and trapping, and climate change pose significant threats to birds globally.

See a Gray Fox? Let CT DEEP Know

Gray Fox.

Photo:Wikimedia Commons

Chances are, you probably haven't seen a Gray Fox. Red foxes? Yes — they often frequent human environments. But forest-dwelling Gray Foxes shy away from people and are mostly nocturnal. Nevertheless, if you are lucky enough to see one, please let CT DEEP know by reporting the sighting at ***portal.ct.gov/deep/wildlife/report-a-wildlife-sighting***. DEEP aims to study Gray Fox population trends in our state to see if these foxes are declining, as they are in some other states.

DEEP Still Researching Fishers

Fisher.

Photo:Wikimedia Commons

DEEP's Wildlife Division staff are now in the third season of live-trapping and tracking fishers as part of its multiyear study to better understand the state's population. Despite having suitable habitat in Connecticut, the fisher population has been gradually declining. Through this study, staff biologists hope to better understand fisher habitat preference, den selection, reproduction rates, and mortality.

The fisher's long, slender body, short legs, and elongated bushy tail are usually dark brown to nearly black. Because fishers seldom travel in open areas and tend to be nocturnal, they are not often seen by humans. Nevertheless, DEEP encourages the public to report any fisher sightings, including road-killed fishers. (Use the same web address as for the Gray Fox, above.) When submitting sightings, it is especially helpful to include any photos and videos.

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Forest Bathing at Stonybrook Forest in Sharon

By Vickie Dauphinais

Forest bathing (or *shinrin-yoku*, in Japanese) is the practice of immersing oneself in nature. Research has shown forest bathing helps to reduce stress, lift mood, improve attention, and boost immunity. On a bright, sunny fall day in October, a few of us joined Jim Gillespie at his forest in Sharon to experience the pleasures of nature through all of our senses. One of the attendees, Beverly Rogers, described the experience beautifully:

To forest bathe is to consciously
Involve all your senses.
The light is strong and clear ...
It sparkles and magnifies the blue of the sky
I smell the rich damp of the earth buried in leaves
Touch the bark of the trees; some smooth, some rough.
The brook gurgles brightly on its way ...
Unseen birds chirp and chime, carrying on with the business at hand.
This was the forest bath I was invited to partake in, and with friends, it was
All the more inspiring ...

Photo above: Jim Gillespie

Photo below: Vickie Dauphinais