



The Osprey

Our 45th Year!

Newsletter of the Monmouth County Audubon Society

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Message from the President

by Bob Henschel

Winter, Snow and the Great Backyard Bird Count

Back in the 1970s we never worried about cancelling February meetings; the reason being that throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s Mother Nature was perpetually inconsiderate of any group that scheduled meetings on the second Wednesday of the second month. So for several years Monmouth Audubon (known back then as the Monmouth Nature Club) simply didn't plan any programs between January and March. Then for several years, and eventually several decades, she showed her benevolent side, so we gradually returned to a calendar that included all the winter months. But now, having been snowed-out on two of the past three February get-togethers, we just might want to reconsider our options. Is the trend no longer our friend? Or should we consider the recent past just an anomaly?

As best I can recall, we aren't legally bound to a particular meeting scheme. Presuming we continue to hold nine evening programs per season, that presents us with the option (providing Church of the Nativity is available) of continuing to travel to Fair Haven on cold, dark nights in February, or on warmer, daylight-illuminated evenings in June. We'll talk about the pros and cons at our April business session — which begins at 7pm on our meeting nights (except for Family Night in March). In case I haven't reminded you lately, you're all invited to join us.

Last month's snow, ice, cold and wind impacted our annual four days of the Great Backyard Bird Count in some interesting ways. In 2009, conditions were distinctively benign —the reservoir was totally open and the ground more shades of brown than we seemed to appreciate at the time. Ducks were everywhere, and our most common feeder bird was, amazingly, the Pine Siskin. In sharp contrast, this year we tallied avian residents against a background of foot-deep snow and a lake that was about 90 percent ice-covered. Ducks were scarce, and last season's small, striped northern visitors apparently opted for a winter "stay-cation" in Ontario.

A year-to-year comparison shows we counted 43 species this year compared to 40 in 2009. Ten of the birds we observed this year weren't on hand last year; which also means we had 7 last year that evaded us this time around. New to our list were Golden-crowned Kinglet, Savannah Sparrow and Brown-headed Cowbird; bringing the cumulative six-year total at the Manasquan Reservoir Environmental Center to 65 species.

One particularly encouraging footnote concerned the numbers of finches — goldfinches and House Finches that mobbed feeders throughout the weekend. Conspicuously absent within the flocks was any sign of conjunctivitis,



2010 marks the first year that MCAS recorded a Golden-crowned Kinglet during the Great Backyard Bird Count.

the disabling eye ailment that's been plaguing them for several years.

And what more can I add about our bald eagle twosome? This year they produced their first egg on January 4th, identical to last year's earliest-on-record-in-NJ date. The first eaglet (we're not sure yet if there's more than

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Everything you ever wanted to know -- about NIGER (or NYJER®) SEED

The name NYJER® is a trademarked name owned by the Wild Bird Feeding Institute (WBFi), which is now owned by the franchise operation, Wild Bird Centers of America. The name was created to eliminate product confusion and the offensive mispronunciation of the word “niger.” It became a recognized, trade-marked name in 1998.



Goldfinches enjoy Niger/Nyjer seed at this feeder.

Niger is not the pink to purple flowering plant of the thistle species. Niger is native to the highlands of Ethiopia. It is in the composite (sunflower)

family and is closely related to the popular garden plant cosmos (genus *Coreopsis*). It has yellow, cosmos-like flowers and grows to six feet high. The seeds have up to forty percent oil and in Ethiopia, India and Myanmar (Burma), it is a vital oilseed yield. It is traditionally harvested while the buds are still yellow and then stacked to dry. The seeds are closely held in the flower head. It is the only major wild bird feed ingredient imported from overseas.

The seeds have been marketed as bird seed for about 40 years. In 1985, the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture ruled heat treatment as a “condition of entry” when bringing niger/thistle into the US. Heat treatment is supposed to devitalize all weed seeds that may be present in niger shipments. Attempts were made to grow a type of niger in North America; a niger growers group was even formed. By 2002, a plant had been developed and seeds were produced -- and no bird would touch it! To determine why, a test was conducted with 15 different feeding stations, with the North American niger in one feeder and Ethiopian niger in the second. Sure enough, when given the choice, birds chose the Ethiopian over the North American niger.

One of the differences between the seeds is that the Ethiopian niger is heat-treated to prevent germination in North American soil. The same process of heat treatment was applied to the North American niger, and the experiment was restarted. This time, the finches ate both types of niger at the same rate. Why would they prefer the heat-treated seed -- does the heat remove the moisture to make the shell easier to crack? Does it make for a better tasting seed? Does it look different in the UV color spectrum? The answer is not known.

Chances are that you won't be buying locally grown niger any time soon. Part of the reason is that there is no farm equipment available to separate the tiny seeds from the chaff. Niger is all hand-harvested overseas — think about that when you are pouring it into your feeder. Between that and tariffs, you can understand why it's an expensive feed to put out.

Another factor driving up niger seed prices is corn. Corn prices went crazy on all the ethanol speculation, and many farmers opted to plant corn rather than trying to grow bird food like niger or sunflower (it's costly since you have to protect it from the very creatures it is being grown to feed) in favor of growing corn.

Birds that are attracted to niger seed include the American Goldfinch (shown above), Pine Siskens, Redpolls (very uncommon in NJ), occasionally chickadees and titmice, and ground-feeders like juncos and sparrows, which clean up the ground spillover from under the feeder.



by Harden Fowler

Earth Day, 40 years later

As we celebrate Earth Day on April 22, we need to think about the fact that the Earth is warming up at an unprecedented rate due in large part to our actions and needs to be reversed for the sake of all mankind. At the December United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen more than 194 countries were represented for two weeks of scientific presentations, in the hope of reaching an agreement on worldwide policy changes. It proved to be a difficult mission, with countries wanting to get more than they were willing to give up. President Obama was able to help in negotiating the Copenhagen Accord, an essential beginning, but bolder action is needed. Climate change will disrupt weather patterns (winter 2010?), flood coastal areas and reduce crop yields, all at a time of population growth. Former Vice President Al Gore was among the many national leaders present and made an inspiring speech, urging America to lead the World by re-powering our economy with clean energy. He stated, "We have the means to secure our future. The question is whether or not we have the political will."

In the early years of Earth Day, a bumper sticker stated, "Think globally...act locally!" This slogan still makes sense today. Americans should lead by getting involved at all levels with our political and economic decision-makers. We should make the little changes within our power to promote a better environment and support a positive, proactive approach to climate change. On Earth Day and every day, we must work for a better environment, conservation of resources and expanded use of clean energy.

Backyard habitat

To spur your interest in our "Backyard Habitat for Wildlife" program at our May 12th meeting, let's re-visit our conservation article from 2008.

Creating a backyard wildlife habitat is something that has a direct benefit and can give immediate enjoyment. The National Wildlife Federation website (www.nwf.org/backyard) has the step-by-step procedure to create a habitat, along with links to related information on attracting wildlife to your yard.

The requirements for a successful backyard habitat rely on the fact that wildlife needs food, water, cover and space to survive year round. Your yard may already contain some or all of these elements, so with minimal effort you can vary the habitat and food sources, within local restrictions. A bird feeder or native plants that produce berries, seeds, nectar or nuts will supply food for your visiting birds. Water can be a bird bath, a man-made pond or running water. Shrubs, tall grasses, trees or dead branches all can supply cover during feeding or nesting. Creating your habitat away from commotion will give the birds a sense of space and safety. Once your habitat is complete the birds can be viewed from the comfort of your own home, year-round.

2010 Conservation Scholarship

The \$1,500 Ted Engberg Conservation Scholarship application and information is now available on our website, www.monmouthaudubon.org, and at Monmouth County high school guidance offices. Applications must be submitted by May 1 for students continuing their education at a four year college or university and majoring in the field of conservation.

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one) probably hatched on the Monday or Tuesday before the GBBC. Throughout last February's count we were able to see two tiny fuzzy white heads each day, so our eagle count was 4. But this year their rebuilt nest (the other fell down over the summer) is deeper and higher, so over the four days we couldn't see any little mouths receiving the small chunks of fish, Common Merganser and cottontail Mom and Dad had scattered around the rim of the nest. So, as the official "count master" I felt it more "accurate" to report our eagle total as only 2 rather than 3...but you know and I know she wasn't feeding any chickadees.

For full reports on these years Great Backyard Bird Count—the 597 species sighted-- go to <http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc/>. As usual, the results are quite interesting.

Special Thanks

Our organization would not survive without the generosity of our members. We are happy to have several people who have earned our thanks this issue through their cash donations. They are: John Luthin of Avon; Rocco and Cathy Dimeo of Highlands; and James McGee, Jr.



Join the MCAS eGroup!

An eGroup is a bulletin board just for MCAS members. You will receive information on upcoming trips, local conservation news, bird sightings, etc. We also use this system to announce the availability of the newsletter online.

To subscribe, send an e-mail to mcas_newslet-subscribe@yahoo.com.



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Membership Application

Please enroll me as a member of the Monmouth County Audubon Society (Q04) and/or the National Audubon Society. My check is enclosed for:

- \$10 **Regular** Chapter member
- \$20 Chapter **Sustaining** member - all funds stay in our area, helping us to support local efforts and provide services here in Monmouth County.
- \$20 **National Audubon Society** member - includes Chapter membership (rate for new members only; renewable at \$35)
- Please contact me regarding volunteer opportunities.
- Do not add my name to the mailing list; I will read the newsletter online.

Name _____

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Please make checks payable to MCAS and return along with application to:
 Monmouth County Audubon Society, P.O. Box 542, Red Bank, NJ 07701.

Membership questions? Call us at 732-USA-BIRD.

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coming up

Wed., April 14 8:00 - 9:30 pm
"Purple Martin Madness," Tim Shaheen

Sat., April 17. 9:00 am - noon
Sandy Hook Bird Walk, meet in Visitor Center parking lot

Sat., May 8. 8:15 am - noon
Spring Migration at Allaire State Park, meet in parking lot by historic village (main entrance)

Wed., May 12 8:00 - 9:30 pm
"Backyard Habitat for Wildlife," Michael Pollack

(All ending times are approximate.)

* Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of each month Sept.- May at Church of the Nativity, Ridge Road, Fair Haven. Meetings are open to the public, and refreshments are served.

Check our website or call (732) USA-BIRD for more details on field trips, activities or cancellations due to weather. This is a 24-hour message line.