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# The BIRD CALL

Winter 2024

Newsletter of the Bronx River-Sound Shore Audubon Society, Inc.

## National Audubon Society Leadership Conference

By Ted Kavanagh

The National Audubon Society (NAS) held a leadership conference in Estes Park, Colorado, in early November with the intention of better integrating chapter activities with NAS's five-year "Flight Plan." I attended the conference on behalf of BRSS, part of a 20-person delegation from the New York - Connecticut region. A total of some 350 attendees represented Audubon's national and district offices, local chapters and international "partner" organizations from Canada through Central America and the Caribbean, and as far south as Chile.

Over three days the delegates reflected on what more local chapters can do to further the three broad themes of the Flight Plan: (i) climate crisis solutions; (ii) hemispheric cooperation; and (iii) diversity and equity. Small break-out sessions with "peer" chapters from around the country – all -volunteer organizations of similar size to BRSS – were useful to learn what other groups are doing to increase engagement and positively impact their communities. In this spirit, you'll see BRSS rolling out some of these new initia-

tives in the coming months and years.

No Audubon meeting would be complete without some local birding. Rocky Mountain National Park was snowy and cold, but a few of the local avian residents displayed nicely, notably including the Canada Jay (see photo). This engaging member of the Corvid family (crows, jays, magpies, etc.) was named Canada's national bird in 2016. It's found in every part of Canada, and its range extends into the northern US states and Rocky Mountain region. Also known as the Gray Jay, Camp Robber and Whisky Jack, it is anything but shy around humans. Always inquisitive, it can be a pleasant companion on a cold walk through the woods.



## Hesperornis: The Toothed Menace of the Cretaceous Seas

By Alex Pinnock

Around 100 to 66 million years ago, in what is now North America, on the beaches of the Western Interior Seaway (a massive shallow sea that split the continent in two) you might have happened upon a strange looking bird. With a posture like a penguin's, wings that were so small you could barely see them, and flattened skin instead of webbed feet, this animal seemed out of place among the giant aquatic reptiles and the non-avian dinosaurs that left imprints in the sand.



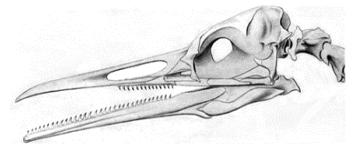
This creature is *Hesperornis*. Standing about three feet but stretching out to five with its neck extended, *Hesperornis* was an adept swimmer, utilizing its grebe

-like flattened feet to powerfully propel it forward, rather than with its flippers like modern penguins. To catch and keep fish in its mouth, *Hesperornis* had a feature long gone in modern birds: teeth. These teeth allowed the animal to prevent struggling fish from escaping its jaws.

Its agility in water especially aided it against the



Wikipedia



aquatic predators that it competed with and was hunted by, including mosasaurs and even giant ancient fish like *Xiphactinus*. While *Hesperornis* is a bird, it is not part of the same family that all the birds we see today are descended from. While every bird chirping in the trees outside or stealing your sandwich on the beach are part of the Neornithes clade (literally meaning "New birds"), *Hesperornis* is a member of the clade that is most closely related to them, the aptly-named Hesperornithes clade. Unfortunately for us birders, this more basal group of aquatic birds went extinct in the KPG extinction which killed out the non-avian dinosaurs as well. Usually the story of birds glosses over the different lineages that existed before the end of the Cretaceous and all the unique adaptations that they had to share, but the tale of the toothed oddity that is *Hesperornis* reminds us that what makes a bird a bird isn't always set in stone.

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is a chapter of the National Audubon Society  
serving the communities of  
Bronxville, Eastchester, Edgemont, Hartsdale,  
Larchmont, Mamaroneck, Mount Vernon, New  
Rochelle, Pelham, Scarsdale, and Tuckahoe*

**Mamaroneck Monarch Butterfly Festival**

By Maria Albano

On Sunday, October 1, 2023, BRSSA participated in the 2nd annual Mamaroneck Monarch Butterfly Festival in Harbor Island Park. This festival is organized by the Committee for the Environment (CFTE), a volunteer group from the Village of Mamaroneck, whose mission is to identify and protect local natural resources. In addition to this wonderful event, another exciting initiative currently taken on by the CFTE is the restoration of the Rockland Pocket Preserve. This preserve is over 10,000 sq. feet of land next to the Sheldrake River which has been restored through much hard work. The area is now a sanctuary for birds and pollinators thanks to the many native plants, trees and shrubs planted there.

At the festival, families from Mamaroneck and surrounding communities enjoyed arts, crafts and activities that helped educate the young participants about the endangered Monarch Butterfly. Other important information was shared about native plants and environmental issues. At the BRSSA table, visitors to the Monarch Festival enjoyed several crafts including making adorable butterflies using paper plates and clothes pins. Children lined up to have their wingspan measured and were fascinated to learn what bird shared that measurement. It was a great opportunity to share information about our local chapter of the National Audubon Society, and some of the programs offered.

**Our Bird Seed Sale**

Thank you to our customers who bought birdseed during our fall seed sale. Between profits on the seed and your incredible donations our total boost to our coffers was more than \$8000. **OUR BEST SALE EVER!**

The February bird seed order form is included in this newsletter. Our two seed sales are the only fundraisers we do. The money generated from the sale is used to produce this informative newsletter, continue the important work of our Bluebird Project, support local native plant gardens and butterfly gardens, offer programs in local schools as well as our free programs and field trips.

All the details of the sale are on the enclosed form. Please consider purchasing seed from us. It is reasonably priced and extremely high quality.

## Winter/Spring 2024 Audubon Programs

### January 24 at 7 PM: The Secret Lives of Wild Bees - Nick Dorian

You've probably heard "Save The Bees!" but do you know which bees need saving? Over 4000 species of bees inhabit North America, and most don't live in hives or make honey. These wild bees come in every size, shape, and color you can imagine, and they live all around us, hiding in plain sight. In this lecture, PhD student and bee expert Nick Dorian will introduce you to the wild bees of the northeast. Together, we'll examine their varied lifestyles, habitat needs, and intricate relationships they have with flowering plants and other insects. You'll come away charmed by these tiny pollinators and with clear action items for how to support them in your backyard.

*Nick Dorian is an ecologist, an educator, and a naturalist. He is a PhD student at Tufts University where he studies the population ecology of solitary bees and runs the Tufts Pollinator Initiative ([sites.tufts.edu/pollinators](http://sites.tufts.edu/pollinators)), an urban pollinator conservation and community outreach group. He co-wrote and photographed an online field guide to wild bees*

[www.watchingbees.com](http://www.watchingbees.com).

Register at <http://brssaudubon.org/programs>

### February 7 at 7 PM: Bird Photography - Tom Warren

Tom, a former photojournalist who now lives in Dobbs Ferry is an avid bird photographer who has had his photos featured in Audubon's "Top 100" five times. Tom will not only share some of his most-recent photography but will talk about how the latest photo technology has both simplified but even, in a way, complicated the art of capturing photos of birds in their Westchester County habitats. He will also provide tips to help make your bird photography a little less daunting than it may seem.

Register at <http://brssaudubon.org/programs>



### Upcoming Event in June - Mount Vernon Bird Day at Willson's Woods Park

Fun activity stations where participants can learn interesting facts about birds, small group bird walks, nature scavenger hunt, and more. Date and Time to be determined.

## Harbingers of Winter

By Vern Schramm

A chill is in the air. The first frost has occurred. Late in October, often on the same day, the bird population changes at the backyard bird feeder. After a long absence in the summer months, the White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos appear. Time to initiate the winter-feeding pattern. Both white-throats and juncos prefer to forage on the ground. Both birds scratch amongst



the ground cover with a distinct double-footed backward kick. Leaves and twigs go flying to reveal snacks. Sunflower seeds and millet are favorite foods during the winter. Like many bird species, winter is a time to focus for food and wait for the rites of spring. Early spring birdsong includes near constant calls from most species and includes the clear, distinct and piercing calls of the white-throats preparing to migrate north, breed and feed on the abundant insects that populate Canadian summers.



In song, the White-throated Sparrow is distinct. While in the United States he sings a melodic and wistful "Old Sam Peabody, Peabody, Peabody." Although the song is the same when pairs reach their breeding grounds, mostly in Canada, Canadians hear "Oh sweet Canada, Canada, Canada." Legend has it that a New England farmer named Peverly was trying to decide when to sow his wheat. As he walked the fields he heard a clear voice saying "Sow wheat, Peverly, Peverly, Peverly." Peverly accepted the recommendation and harvested an unusually abundant crop that fall. And for years in New England, farmers accepted the call as a planting signal and the White-throated Sparrow was known as the Peverly bird. Alas, human language is mutable, and the association of farmer Peverly with the White-throated sparrow has been replaced with the three-syllable Peabody, a more common name.

Bird language is also mutable. Natural ecology scientists in Canada began recording White-throated Sparrow songs over the years. A variation of the call was recorded in 2004 and by 2019 had spread through most of the White-throated Sparrow population breeding in Western Canada. Now the new song is spreading to birds spending their winters in the lower 48.

The new song conforms to a different mnemonic, "Old Sam Peabuh-Peabuh-Peabuh-Peabuh." The three, three-syllable trills that ended the call are being replaced by four two-syllable notes. The altered bird language is spreading from west to east. So far, the new call remains rare in the territory of the Bronx River Sound Shore Audubon group. But we will be on the lookout for the arrival of new bird languages.

*Photos courtesy of Robert D. Burk, taken in Central Park.*



## FIELD TRIPS



Please Contact Doug Bloom at (914) 834-5203 for info or to register. **LIMITED TO 20 PEOPLE.**

### January 7, Sunday- Jones Beach

Meet at 8 AM Parking lot at Coast Guard Station West End. Moderate walk in sand about 3 miles. Restroom available. Looking for Alcids and other wintering birds, possibly Snowy Owls.

### January 27, Saturday - Shawangunk Grasslands - See article below

Meet at 2:30 PM. Easy walk. Restroom available. Looking for wintering birds including possible Short-eared Owls.

### February 3, Saturday - Eagle Fest at Croton Point Park 8 AM to 4 PM

### February 10, Saturday - Eagle Walk

Meet at 8:30 AM at Croton Point Park parking lot. Moderate walk looking for eagles.

### March 3, Sunday Marshlands and Read Sanctuary

Meet at 8 AM at Read. Moderate walk with some uneven ground. Looking for wintering ducks and other migrants.

### April 20, Saturday - Bashakill Wildlife Refuge, Wurtsboro, NY

Meet at 8 AM at Haven Rd. Easy walk. No restroom. We will be looking for early migrants.

### April 27, Saturday - Angle Fly Preserve

Meet at 8 AM at Angle Fly. Moderate walk with some uneven ground. Restroom available. Looking for early spring migrants.

### May 5, Sunday - Central Park

Meet at 7:30 AM at 77<sup>th</sup> St. at statue across from Museum of Natural History. Easy 3+ mile walk. Restroom available. Will be looking for spring migrants such as warblers, orioles and others.

### May 11, Saturday - Central Park/ North Woods

Meet at 7:30 AM at 103rd St. and Central Park West. Looking for spring migrants.

### May 18, Saturday - Doodletown Road

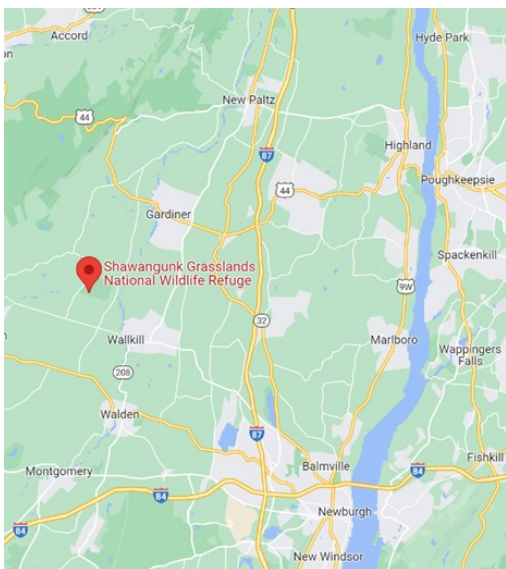
Meet at 8 AM at Doodletown Road. Moderate 2 - 4 mile uphill walk with some uneven ground. Best place to see Cerulean Warblers nesting and other migrants.

### May 25, Saturday - White Memorial Park

Easy walk. Restroom available. Meet at 8 AM in parking lot at Visitors Center lot. We will be looking for early migrants such as warblers and other songbirds.

## An Owling Excursion to Shawangunk Grasslands

By Ted Kavanagh



Google Maps

Owling expeditions can be hit-or-miss. One can sometimes stumble across a Great Horned Owl or Barred Owl roosting during the daytime, and owls can sometimes be “called-in” after dark. For a more reliable owl excursion, consider a wintertime trip up the Hudson to Shawangunk Grasslands National Wildlife Refuge. Situated 12 miles northwest of Newburgh, the refuge occupies the site of an old army airfield that was used to train pilots during World War II. The roughly one mile square area (565 acres) was turned over to the US Fish and Wildlife Service in 1999 and now features gently rolling grassland bordered by hardwood forest.

In the crowded NE US, grasslands like this are increasingly rare habitat for species like Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, Grassland Sparrow, and Horned Lark; all of which can readily be seen at various times of the year at Shawangunk. The open fields also make a happy hunting ground for a variety of raptors, notably including the American Kestrel, the Northern Harrier and the Short-eared Owl.

The raptors at Shawangunk put on a spectacular evening airshow. In the late afternoon, around 4:00 in mid-winter, the harriers are the warm-up act. Typically by the dozens, they hover (or “kite”) in the breeze, then swoop down low over the grass in search of their rodent and small bird prey. Females are a chocolate brown, while males live up to their “gray ghost” nickname.

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While the kestrels and harriers are on-site all year round, the owls are the stars of the show when they're on-site from November through March.

For first-time visitors to Shawangunk, the wait for the owls can be anxious. The harriers are great, but where are the owls? Shadows are lengthening, the air is getting a bit chillier – is this trip going to be a bust? Then, as if by magic, first one owl is seen cruising low over the fields; then another; then what seem to be a dozen. They're materializing out of the grass itself, and the sight is awe-inspiring. With their bullet



shape in the air and their bright yellow raptor eyes, they are beautiful, silent killers in search of rodent snacks.

Even in February, a birder visiting Shawangunk will likely be rewarded with sightings of bluebirds (coming to feeders), meadowlarks and other songbirds. Bird photographers typically gather later in the afternoon near the parking lot and along the path bordering the higher NW side of the grassland. The daily owl and harrier aerobatics are truly one of the winter birding highlights our area has to offer, well worth the 90-minute drive up the Hudson.



## Meet Two of our Board Members

### Bernie Conway



I have worked for almost 20 years as a professional horticulturist at the New York Botanical Garden (NYBG) with a team in the Horticulture Department to make the garden a must-see stop for New Yorkers and tourists from around the world.

In the famous Rose Garden, I work on both the roses and the lawn within the garden walls. Our team is

charged with every aspect of making sure the roses are healthy and ready to be viewed and enjoyed by the more than one million visitors to the NYBG.

I also work to maintain and care for the Tree Peony collection at the NYBG. When these bloom in late spring to early summer visitors are simply overwhelmed by their beauty.

In general, I find great joy being involved in outdoor activities including gardening, hiking, and nature exploration to include plant walks and bird walks. I am inspired to conserve wild locations or to restore habitats by being involved in projects that include working on creating pollinator gardens and planting native plant gardens in New Rochelle and Tuckahoe.

Our Audubon Chapter often does public outreach to promote local and national conservation issues. To this end I serve on our Conservation Committee. Finally, I do my best to educate others about composting, no-till gardening, native plant gardening, and tree species (what they are and where to find them and what birds are around them).

### Jeff Zuckerman

I am the treasurer of our wonderful Audubon chapter. What that means is that I monitor our revenue sources and expenditures to make sure we are a viable non-profit organization . . . which we are. We most definitely run on a tiny budget with 90% of our income coming from our twice-yearly seed sales.

The background for this septuagenarian was a Bronx upbringing, a college degree from CCNY in NYC, an MA from Columbia University and the start of a teaching career in the Bronx before moving to Westchester. I spent many years teaching mathematics in Bronxville Middle and High Schools before retiring 15 years ago. Union activism has been a huge component of my entire life.

I am married to our membership chair and newsletter editor, Clare Gorman. She does more work for BRSS Audubon than I do and she is a much more experienced birder than I am.

Together we monitor Bluebird boxes at both Bonnie Briar Country Club and Lake Isle Country Club.

For fun I play lots of golf and we travel whenever we can. We have two granddaughters who are now 14 and 12. We live in the lovely small village of Tuckahoe and are a very happy couple.



**Bronx River-Sound Shore  
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(formerly Scarsdale Audubon Society)  
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