

The BIRD CALL

Spring 2021

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

Virtual Annual Meeting June 3

Because it is still not safe to gather, we will hold our annual meeting using Zoom again. Hopefully, we can resume meeting in person next year. Get your vaccine!

We will officially elect board members, and report on past accomplishments and future plans.

The slate of Directors for the Class Of 2024 are: Miriam Beveridge, Clare Gorman, Ted Kavanagh, Erin Provenzano, Susie Williams and Jeff Zuckerman.

We are still waiting until we can meet in person to celebrate our honoree, Madelaine Eppenstein.

As many enjoyed the traditional bird walk before our annual meeting, we will hold a virtual bird walk. To join this field trip, just click on the zoom link at 5:45. If you want to share any of your bird photographs during this “walk” (perhaps a lifer you got or a bird in an exceptionally striking pose), please send the photographs in advance to brssaudubon@gmail.com by May 31.

We will send out several e-notices of our annual meeting with the link included.

If you are not signed up to get our e-notices via Constant Contact, please send an email to brssaudubon@gmail.com. We do not share the email list with anyone.

Hope to “see” you all at our Annual Meeting.

Please join us Virtual Annual Meeting

Wine & Cheese Social (BYOB)

Thursday, June 3, 2021

6:00 p.m.

Optional virtual bird walk, 5:45 p.m.

Please join our Zoom meeting by entering the below link in your browser

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81755730892>

Or find the link on our brssaudubon.org homepage

Spring! The Black Birds are Back!

By Vern Schramm

Before bud break, before the crocus bloom, a sure sign of avian spring is the return of black bird species that are scarce during the cold of winter. Around the first week of March, almost at the same time, the Red-winged Blackbirds, Brown-headed Cowbirds and Common Grackles fill the backyard feeders.

The unmistakable conk-la-ree song of the Red-winged Blackbird, ending in a musical trill, announces their arrival. A puffed-up and calling Red-winged Blackbird stopping at your feeder is likely to be in migration. That is, unless you are fortunate enough to be near a marsh with tall reeds or cattails, their preferred nesting sites. Males

can be heard singing all summer. They vigorously protect a territory that may include several nests of his multiple female partners. He will swoop on any intruder coming near the nest, including curious bird watchers. Females look at first glance like a large sparrow with none of the striking contrast of red and yellow on black. She is quieter than the males, and a steady worker, building the nest by weaving together marsh reeds and grasses.



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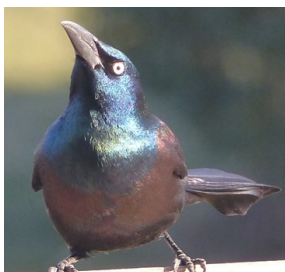
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*Bronx River-Sound Shore Audubon Society, Inc.
is a chapter of the National Audubon Society
serving the communities of
Bronxville, Eastchester, Edgemont, Hartsdale,
Larchmont, Mamaroneck, Mount Vernon, New
Rochelle, Pelham, Scarsdale, and Tuckahoe*

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The Brown-headed Cowbird arrives at the same time. The coffee-headed males share the glossy black coat of the Red-winged blackbird. The female is an almost stealth-colored dusky brownish grey, appropriate for her lifestyle as a brood parasite. Her job is not to build a nest, but to find another nesting bird, follow it and deposit one of her eggs in the clutch so it can be raised by an unsuspecting stepmother. Here, the Song Sparrow is a favorite host to raise Cowbirds, as their egg colors are similar, even though the Cowbird egg is slightly larger. Alas, the Cowbird chick can outgrow and displace the sparrow brood. The Cowbird mother has no nurturing duties after laying the egg. A common sight in the late spring is a hard-working Song Sparrow mother feeding a larger Cowbird baby as it follows her closely and begs incessantly. Once grown, the fully developed Cowbird joins a flock of the same species to forage together. Cowbirds evolved following herds of North American Buffalo and antelope. Now they are more frequently found in fields with domestic cattle.



The Common Grackle is the king of the migratory black birds. Larger than the Red-winged or Brown-headed species, its iridescent coat and gleaming yellow eye are unmistakable. Arriving in flocks in the spring, the males compete for positions at the feeder and in perches. Grackle competition involves an aggressive heads-up display to show how tall they are to their competitors. While the Red-winged has a lovely song, and the Cowbird is mostly silent, most listeners would wish that the Common Grackle might keep its song to itself. The song is aptly described in the 1917 edition of *Birds of America*, "...puffing out his body, ruffling up his feathers and then emitting a sort of asthmatic squeak, which suggests the protest of a rusty hinge." Despite the rusty voice, we appreciate the beauty of sunlight on the Grackle giving rise to glossy dark violets, steely-blues and bluish-green hues set against inky black backgrounds.

These are not the most colorful birds of spring, but their arrival brings a welcome knowledge that, once they arrive, spring is here to stay.

*Thank
you!*

Thank you to all our customers who purchased birdseed through our February seed sale. This is our main fundraiser during the year and we appreciate your continued support. Our profit on the second seed sale was \$3818. The donations for year were \$4723. The total profit and donations for the two seed sales this year is \$13873.

We would like to acknowledge those who gave donations through the seed sale this year:

Louise Abel, Maria Albano, Paul Basch, Doug Bloom, Eileen Bower, Sheryl Breuninger, Leslie Brill, John Callahan, Suzanne Clephane, Ernestine Colombo, Bernie Conway, Julia De Carlo, Madelaine Eppenstein, Robert Everett, Cece Fabbro, Margaret Falk, Melissa Horlick Feldman, Clare Gorman, Elizabeth Harriss, Kathryn Heintz, Emita Hill, Tina Hoerenz, Phil Horner, David Kaufman, Ted Kavanagh, Kelly Mac Pherson, Dave Margulis, Valerie Marini, Scott Mellis, Sandy Morrissey, Linda Murphy, Wendy Murphy, Francine Naughton, Suzi Oppenheimer, Dorothy Patterson, Donald Pinals, Neil Powell, Erin Provenzano, Karen Raggins, Douglass Reitter, Vern Schramm, Joan Shapiro, Barbara Spiridon, Jean Stephenson, Marc Straussberg, Ellen Valle, Jan Von Mehren, Lisa Wagner, Joan Weissman, William Wertheim, Sidney Witter, Phyllis Wittner, Josette Zichello, Jeff Zuckerman

Woodland in Saxon Woods Park Ducks Flying Frisbees

By Sandy Morrissey

As I head down the trail, my eye is bombarded with giant boulders. Dainty spring wildflowers push defiantly through the leaf litter. I recognize Dutchman’s Breeches and Trout Lily. I use an app to ID a delicate white one – Claytonia Virginia. Any name with virginica means a native and that lifts my spirits.

Pockets of lush green wetlands spring into view in low-lying areas. Occasionally, the dirt path gives way to rocky outcroppings, recalling my strolls through the Ramble in Central Park. How had I missed this park so close to home?



Welcome to a stroll among giant boulders.



What child wouldn't want to play here?

Trekking along in sheer wonder, a wild turkey gobbles to announce its presence. The knocking of a woodpecker leads me off the trail to ID the Hairy finding its dinner in a dead snag. As I round the loop and head back, the Mamaroneck River comes in and out of view. A calling female Wood Duck can’t be seen but I smile knowing it’s there.

I meet up with a friend Anik, who had alerted me to a threat this natural wonderland was now under. Without her I would have missed the Great Blue Heron high up on a stick nest under construction. She saw two herons yesterday.

She’s here to show me the evidence that change was likely coming to this peaceful kingdom. Unbeknownst to just about everyone, including county legislators and people on the parks board, a large area of this undeveloped woodland was slated to be altered to be an 18-hole Disc Golf course! Google the sport to learn more about it.

Yes, a quiet woodland might give way to foursomes flinging frisbees among the trees. Anik shows me the ribbons and spray-painted markings on the trees, laying out where the holes of the course will be. An expert design group was paid \$20,000 for the plan.

Fortunately, the word got out. People who frequently use this passive park got on social media and let the wider community know. They reached out to Audubon. That’s why I was in the park.

The number one reason our beloved birds and other species are declining is **loss of habitat**. We say this all the time. If Saxon Woods Park got turned into a disc golf course – even if they left all the healthy trees standing as promised (but dead trees were doomed to be cut), it would be a disruption to the flora and fauna. The dainty wildflowers would be trampled. The woodpecker’s dead tree – that gives so much food and shelter – would be gone. Removing the understory would totally upset the ecosystem.



Dutchman’s Breeches, one of several native wildflowers on the woodland floor.

As of this writing, after a loud cry from the community, the Disc Golf course has been shelved, at least for now. We applaud County Executive, George Latimer, for making the right decision. But we Audubon members must stay ever vigilant to protect the wild places still left.

Do make a point to stroll this hidden jewel, Saxon Woods Park, using the entrance south of the Hutch. Go soon to enjoy the spring ephemerals. The dawn chorus. The warblers which will use the woodland on their way north. You won’t have to duck a frisbee!



Great Blue Heron on stick nest under construction, near Mamaroneck River which borders the park.



FIELD TRIPS



Please Contact Doug Bloom at (914) 834-5203 for info or to register. Meet at Scarsdale Village Hall unless otherwise specified. **FOR COVID SAFETY REASONS, FIELD TRIPS NOW LIMITED TO 10 PEOPLE, MASKS REQUIRED. NO CARPOOLING.**

May 2, Sunday - Central Park

Meet at 7:30 am at 77th street at statue across from Museum of Natural History. Will be looking for spring migrants such as warblers, orioles and others.

May 8, Saturday - Rockefeller Preserve

Meet at Rockefeller park lot at 8:00 am. Looking for Spring Migrants.

May 15, Saturday - Doodletown Road

Meet at 8:00 am at Doodletown Road. Best place to see Cerulean Warblers nesting and other migrants.

May 23 - Sunday, White Memorial Park, Connecticut

Meet at 7:00 am at the Village Hall. We will be looking for early migrants. Warblers and other songbirds that are passing thru.

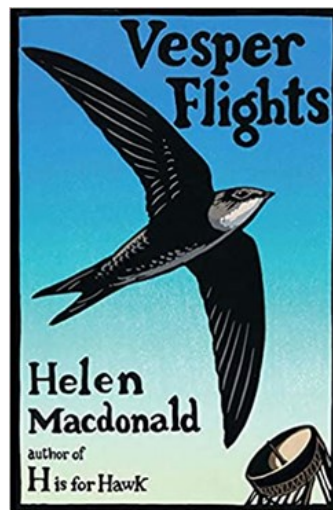
A Review of *Vesper Flights* by Helen Macdonald

By Ted Kavanagh

Audubon members may know Helen Macdonald, a British writer and naturalist, as the author of *H is for Hawk* which chronicled her training of a Northern Goshawk. Macdonald had been a falconer as a young girl but had given it up, only to decide to spend a year training a fledgling hawk, named Mabel, in part to get over the untimely death of her father from a heart attack. (That book inspired a television show called “H is for Hawk: A New Chapter” that aired originally on Nature in 2017, and which features some astounding goshawk aerobatics.)

Macdonald’s latest book, *Vesper Flights*, collects a few dozen of her essays, many dealing with birds but also related to climate change, shrinking habitat and how we can all better observe the miracles of nature. The title piece describes, in Macdonald’s usual lyrical style, the astounding behavior of swifts which, unless they are on the nest, spend their entire existence – eating, drinking, mating and sleeping – on the wing. So-called vesper flights are what were once thought to be the one-per-day evening ascent of swifts thousands of feet into the sky. Now known to also occur early in the morning, these synchronized flights are thought to allow swifts to determine upper atmosphere air currents, to collectively orient themselves, and possibly to get some shut-eye.

Macdonald relates the story of a French aviator during WW 1 who cut his engine at 10,000 feet to circle down slowly over enemy lines. As she puts it, he flew “into a small party of swifts in deep sleep, miniature black stars illuminated by



the reflected light of the moon. He managed to catch two – I know this sounds impossible – but I like to think that he or his navigator simply stretched out a hand and picked them gently from the air. The remote air, the coldness, the stillness, and the high birds over white clouds suspended in sleep. It’s an image that drifts in and out of my dreams.”

In this homebound Covid time, we can at least travel vicariously through books like *Vesper Flights*. Many of Macdonald’s essays are set in Britain, including one on “swan upping.” By tradition, all of the swans on the Upper Thames were owned by the Queen or, for example, by groups such as the Worshipful Society of Vintners, and “upping” over five days each summer was the process (including rendering them flightless) by which all of the new cygnets were marked and allocated to the appropriate owners. That tradition continues (not including ownership and the making-flightless part) to band the swans and monitor the health of the population.

Other essays wander farther afield, including an account of a four-hour session Macdonald spent one night in early May on the top deck of the Empire State Building, observing the river of birds and insects migrating up the Atlantic Flyway illuminated by the halo of light cast by the LEDs around the spire. She notes the efforts by conservation groups to have these and other lights dimmed, particularly during migration, but can’t help remarking on the unique ability of a high rise to show us “a tumultuous world teeming with unexpected biological abundance, and we are standing in its midst.”

Some of these essays appeared originally in the *New York Times Magazine*, where Macdonald is a contributor. Many of them render more tangible the damage we’re inflicting on our planet. As she puts it, “it is one thing to show the statistical facts about the [wood warbler’s] decline. It is another thing to communicate to people what wood warblers are, and what this loss means, when your experience of a wood that is made of light and leaves and song becomes something less complex, less magical, just *less*, once the warblers have gone.”

PROGRAMS

All BRSS Audubon Programs are free and open to the public. Due to the continuing COVID-19 danger, we are still not offering in-person programs. All programs offered are virtual using the Zoom app.

REGISTRATION REQUIRED (AND LIMITED TO FIRST 100 REGISTRANTS). ONCE YOU REGISTER, YOU WILL BE SENT THE LINK THE DAY BEFORE THE PROGRAM AND YOU WILL BE NOTIFIED IF REGISTRATION IS OVER-CAPACITY.

Tuesday, May 11 - 7:30 pm via Zoom **JAMAICA BAY, AN URBAN ESTUARY: ISSUES, MANAGEMENT, AND WILDLIFE**

PRESENTER: DON RIEPE

Jamaica Bay is home to a great diversity of wildlife. Despite a century of abuse and 3 million people living nearby, over 340 species of birds, 110 species of finfish, 71 species of butterflies, and 700 species of moths have been documented by naturalists as using the estuary either for nesting, wintering, or migrating through the roughly 13,000 acre preserve. Management issues include a major airport on its eastern shore, 4 sewage treatment plants and three closed landfills along its borders.



Creative programs such as “Buffer the Bay”, landfill conversions to parks, raptor management, marsh restoration, and national park status have helped restore and revitalize the bay waters and habitats.

Don Riepe has been involved with all these projects during his conservation activism during the past 40 years. His articles and photographs have been published in many journals and magazines including Smithsonian, National Wildlife, Audubon, Defenders, and the New York Times.

For 25 of those years, Don worked as a resource specialist and manager of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. During this time, he started a raptor management program for Ospreys and Barn Owls and continues working with this project today. In 2003, he retired from the National Park Service and currently works in the bay as the Jamaica Bay Guardian for the American Littoral Society, a coastal conservation organization. Also, since 1982, he has been an active board member of NYC Audubon and member of their advisory council. This program will cover the many issues and projects associated with wildlife management and habitat restoration Don has been involved with over the years.

Bluebird Nesting Season off to Great Start

By Sandy Morrissey

Reports are rapidly coming in from our bluebird nest monitors of new bluebird nests and now of nests with eggs. Hoping the weather cooperates, and we don't have any other disasters (like the parasite in 2017).

A giant thanks to our 30-plus monitors who head out at least once a week to check the boxes and make sure aggressive House Sparrows don't succeed in using our boxes to spread more harm.

A big thanks to my friend, Mike Vaughn, who recently altered 20 new Gilbertson boxes to fit our needs. He will be making more nest kits in his wood shop by the fall. Don't know what we would do without you, Mike!



Our craftman extraordinaire, Mike Vaughn.



1st session Girl Scouts make two boxes.

2nd session Girl Scouts make 3 boxes. We did 2 sessions to stay socially distant. A parent helped each daughter.



The world is slowly opening and we did our first nestbox

The Fabulous Belted Kingfisher

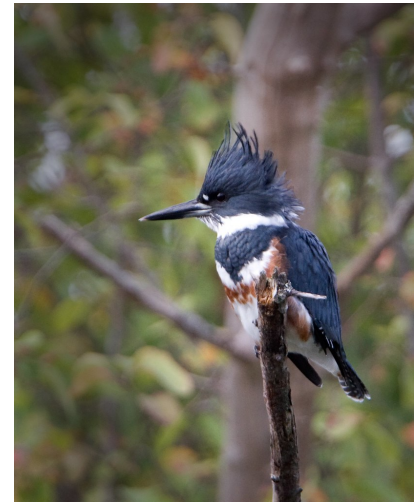
By Jeff Zuckerman

Everyone probably has their favorite bird they love to observe and learn about. For me, this is the Belted Kingfisher. I offered to write this article as a way to force myself to investigate as much as I could about this wonderful bird which has brought me great joy over the years. First, the simple observation items: the large head, the classic white collar around the neck, the thick, straight, pointed bill, and the shaggy crest on the top and back of the head showing “attitude” (something akin to the extravagantly crested Hooded Mergansers which I also love).

OK, so let’s dig deeper and find out some cool things about the Belted Kingfisher:

- * Although it is fairly rare that female birds are more colorful than males, it’s true for these Kingfishers. Both sexes have a slate blue head, large white collar, a large blue band on the breast, and white underparts. The back and wings are slate blue with black feather tips with little white dots. The female, however, also features a broad rusty band across the upper belly that extends down the flanks. (The reasons for this are not clear, but getting into the speculation here would make this article way too long).
- * Belted Kingfishers have a very energetic flight pattern. They live near streams, rivers, ponds, lakes, and estuaries across North America. Most often we hear a loud, rattling call before we see the Kingfisher.
- * Belted Kingfishers spend most of their time alone until they pair up for breeding once per year. They nest in burrows that they dig into soft earthen banks, usually adjacent to or directly over water. Both sexes take part in digging a horizontal tunnel with the nest chamber at the end. The tunnel is generally 3 to 6 feet long and usually slopes upward from the entrance to guard against rising water.
- * Belted Kingfishers forage by plunging headfirst into the water, capturing fish measuring less than 5 inches near the surface with their bills. It is so exciting to see one watching for fish from a branch, wire, rock, or other perch above the water, or even hovering above water with wings flapping rapidly before diving. They drop down, grab the fish with a quick splash and immediately return to the perch they were on in one quick sequence. Just great to witness. They will also eat crayfish, mollusks, insects, small amphibians and berries. They spend winters in areas where the water doesn’t freeze so that they have continual access to their aquatic foods.

(Our newsletter editor is my lovely wife and she tells me that I have exceeded the limit for this article. I invite all of you to read more about my favorite bird).



Female Belted Kingfisher

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building programs this spring. Thanks to Girl Scout troop 2688 in Scarsdale for making 5 nestboxes, which will go to George Field in Scarsdale and Kensico Cemetery. And thanks Ossining HS students, who made 4 boxes that have been placed at Croton Point Park.

Ossining HS students worked outside in frigid cold to stay safe while making nestboxes.



Enthusiastic Youth Birders visit Twin Lakes Park

Our next youth field trip is May 16, 9:00am, at Rye Nature Center. Attendance is limited. To register please email brs-saudubon@gmail.com.



Great Egret in stunning breeding plumage.



Mute Swan on its nest drew "ahs."



Masked and hoping the spring birds aren't too socially distanced from us.



Trying to get a glimpse of the Pine Warbler flitting too quickly in the trees.

**Bronx River-Sound Shore
Audubon Society, Inc.**

(formerly Scarsdale Audubon Society)
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