



News from the *'Hood* Patuxent Bird Club

A Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society

www.patuxentbirdclub.org

September-October 2021

Upcoming Virtual Meetings

Tuesday, September 14, 7:30 pm

Sign in to Zoom at 7:00 pm for informal social time before speaker

**Patuxent Research Refuge: A Gem in our Midst
Presented by Jennifer Greiner**

Jennifer Greiner is the Refuge Manager at [Patuxent Research Refuge](#), our local refuge that is part of the National Wildlife Refuge system. Jennifer will give us an overview of the Refuge, and will discuss some of its unique aspects as well as its habitats and wildlife species. She will explain how Patuxent is participating in the US Fish & Wildlife's Urban Refuge Initiative, and will describe the good things happening at all three tracts of the Refuge. Jennifer will also explain how you can get involved.



Jennifer at the Patuxent River

About the presenter: Jennifer Greiner holds a Bachelor's degree in Biology from Kalamazoo College and a Master's in Natural Resource Policy and Administration from the University of Michigan. Now in her 27th year with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Jennifer has served the agency at its national headquarters, at the North-Atlantic Regional office, and in the field. In 2020, she assumed the position of Refuge Manager for the 13,000-acre [Patuxent Research Refuge](#) in Laurel, and was appointed by Governor Hogan as Federal Facilities representative on the Patuxent River Commission. Her past positions include habitat coordinator for the watershed-wide Chesapeake Bay Program, National Coordinator for the agency's Coastal Program, and Wildlife Biologist with the Endangered Species program. Jennifer and her family live near Herring Bay in Anne Arundel County, where she enjoys paddling, RVing, running half marathons, and singing in a band called Shoal Sister.

This program, sponsored by Patuxent Bird Club and PGAS, will be presented via Zoom and is free and open to the public. Advance registration is required and seats are limited. Please register no later than midnight of Sunday, September 12. To register, go to the registration form at https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1SgdnupNb2_D92AueMD_Bil4-SHL_vdKVP-eD4pWU9oY/edit?usp=sharing. Your Zoom link will be sent by email on Monday, September 13, but only if you register before then.

Meetings continued next page

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*Upcoming Virtual Meetings, continued***Tuesday, October 12, 7:30 pm**

Sign in to Zoom at 7:00 pm for informal social time before speaker
Natural Filters in the Anacostia River, the Recovery of an Urban Waterway
Presented by Jorge Bogantes Montero

For more than three decades, the [Anacostia Watershed Society](#) has been working on recovering the Anacostia River's ecosystems, especially its natural filters. After decades of restoration, education, and advocacy work, we are seeing a great recovery of the biodiversity of the aquatic ecosystems in the Anacostia River. This presentation will be a virtual tour of the river and a tale of recovery of what once was a neglected urban waterway in the nation's capital.

About the presenter: Jorge Bogantes Montero is a Natural Resources Specialist at the [Anacostia Watershed Society](#) in Bladensburg, MD. He leads ecological restoration efforts on public parklands in the Anacostia River watershed, including wetland restoration, tree plantings, meadow creation, SAV propagation, mussel propagation, wildlife monitoring, and invasive plant management. Jorge has a Bachelor's degree in Natural Resource Management and Protection from the Universidad Estatal a Distancia in San Jose, Costa Rica, his native country. Before moving to the U.S., Jorge worked in Costa Rica on tropical biodiversity conservation.



*Jorge with an 18-yr-old kapok tree
he planted in Costa Rica*

This program, sponsored by Patuxent Bird Club and PGAS, will be presented via Zoom and is free and open to the public. Advance registration is required and seats are limited. Please register no later than midnight of Sunday, October 10. To register, go to the registration form at <https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1EU56Skvk-GqhjkE49ZqjRXCowwXzhQJWRgPS7SmH0go/edit?usp=sharing>. Your Zoom link will be sent by email on Monday, October 11, but only if you register before then.

Meeting Schedule for Remainder of the Club Year

November 9 (corrected date)	Dr. Matt Perry, Emeritus Research Scientist, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center	Waterfowl of the Chesapeake Bay
December 14	Traditional Holiday Movie Night	Film TBA
January 11	Dr. Sahas Barve, evolutionary ecologist and ornithologist, Peter Buck Fellow, Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History	TBA
February 8	Jim McCann, State Zoologist, MD Department of Natural Resources	Dragonflies & Damselflies of Maryland
March 8	Ana Maria Castaño Rivas, Deputy Director of Conservation, Parque de la Conservación, Colombia; also one of the coordinators of Global Big Day in Colombia	The Global Big Day Experience in Colombia
April 12	TBA	TBA
May 10	Paul Baicich, nationally known birder, prolific author, consultant for the NWR System, and editor of the Birding Community E-bulletin	Access Matters: Why Birders Should Care
June 14	Members' Night	Members share their photos of birds and birding

Upcoming Bird Walks and Bird Counts

- [Fran Uhler Natural Area](#) – first Saturday of each month: September 4, October 2, November 6, December 4. Leader: Bill Sefton. Meet at the parking area off Lemons Bridge Road north of Bowie State University at 7:30 am.
- [Governor Bridge Natural Area](#) – third Saturday of each month: September 18, October 16, November 20, December 18. Leader: Bill Sefton. Meet at the parking area off Governor Bridge Road, south and east of the Route 301/Route 3/Route 50 interchange at 7:30 am.
- [Lake Artemesia Natural Area](#) – first and third Thursdays of each month: September 2, September 16, October 7, October 21, November 4, November 18, December 2, December 16. Leader: rotates as schedules permit. Meet at the parking lot at the corner of Ballew Avenue and Berwyn Road in Berwyn Heights. The start time is 3 pm from September through March.
- [Fall Bird Count](#) – Saturday, September 18. Coordinator Matt Felperin. See article on page 5 for details.
- [Jug Bay Christmas Bird Count](#) – Sunday, December 19. Compiler Marcia Watson. Details will be provided in the November-December newsletter.
- [Bowie Christmas Bird Count](#) – Friday, December 31. Compiler Dave Mozurkewich. Details will be provided in the November-December newsletter.

Note that on bird walks or counts, the leader has the discretion to ask participants to wear masks, regardless of vaccination status, and also to ask for social distancing. And we may have to cancel if the COVID situation worsens. On the other hand, if the virus situation stabilizes or improves, we anticipate scheduling additional field trips and bird walks.

Meetings and Speakers Hosted by Other MOS Chapters

Many MOS chapters are continuing their monthly meetings in an online format, and would welcome your attendance for their guest speaker presentations. To see upcoming meetings and speakers around the state, go to the online MOS calendar at

<https://mdbirds.org/calendar/>

Patuxent Bird Club Officers and Directors

President	Marcia Watson	
Vice-President	Fred Fallon	
Treasurer/Memberships	Jane Fallon	
First Year Directors (Term 2019-2021)	David Mozurkewich	
	Kevin Bennett	
	Vacant	
Second Year Directors (Term 2020-2022)	Ken Cohen	
	Matt Felperin	
	Ikumi Kayama	
Representatives to MOS State Board	Marcia Watson	
	Ross Geredien	
Field Trip Coordinator	Vacant	
Newsletter Editor & Webmaster	Marcia Watson	
Fall & Spring Bird Counts	Matt Felperin	
Bowie Christmas Bird Count	David Mozurkewich	
Jug Bay Christmas Bird Count	Marcia Watson	
Visit us on the web at www.patuxentbirdclub.org		

Message from the President

I want to thank each and every one of our members for sticking with the Patuxent Bird Club and supporting us all through this long pandemic. I am disappointed, and I suspect that you all are too, that we are starting another membership year with virtual meetings instead of being able to return to our usual meeting place at the College Park Airport. Right up until early August, the boards of Patuxent Bird Club and Prince George's Audubon had been anticipating the resumption of in-person meetings, but with the latest COVID news, we jointly decided to put safety first and continue with virtual meetings, at least through November of this year. We'll continue to monitor the COVID situation in order to make decisions about when to safely return to in-person meetings.

On the positive side of the equation, the virtual meeting format is enabling us to include an international speaker in our line-up: in March, ornithologist Ana Maria Castaño Rivas will join us on Zoom from her home base in Colombia, South America, to tell us about Global Big Day in her country. Colombia typically leads the pack in posting huge species lists for Global Big Day.

As announced via an email earlier in August, the regular monthly bird walks at Fran Uhler Natural Area, Governor Bridge Natural Area, and Lake Artemesia Natural Area have resumed; see the schedule on page 3 of this newsletter for details. We had started planning a full set of additional field trips but that planning has paused while we wait to see what is happening with the virus.

We are still planning to hold the annual Fall Bird Count, which will be on Saturday, September 18. See the article on page 5 for details. Most people who participate in the Fall Count bird solo or in a small team, so we feel that this activity can be conducted safely. The same is true for the Jug Bay Christmas Bird Count and the Bowie Christmas Bird Count, which are scheduled for Sunday, December 19 and Friday, December 31, respectively.

And a reminder: it's time to renew your membership in Patuxent Bird Club – unless you are a new member who joined after April 1st of this year, in which case your membership is good until August 31, 2022. Please renew online at the MOS website, or if you absolutely must pay with a check, please use the form at the back of this newsletter. Note that checks should be mailed to Carol Daugherty, the MOS Treasurer, not to our local chapter treasurer.

Thanks again for being with us as we launch a new birding year.



Welcome New Members!

- Bryan & Ashley Egan & Family
(Shannon, Aspen, & Rowan)
- Sherry and Stacie Davis
- Chris and Elizabeth Hanan
- Jacqueline Massenburg
- Joanna Veltri, Maya Veltri & Ella Veltri
- Anne Wiley and Joe Mead
- Katherine Wilkins & Ben Lichtenwalter

Call for Volunteers: Fall Bird Count

The Annual Fall Bird Count (aka May Count) will be held this year on Saturday, September 18th. Our aim for that day is to census birds throughout Prince George's County. We hope you'll volunteer to participate. You can choose your own start and stop times, as well as the location where you count. You can stay home and do a backyard or feeder count, or you can select your favorite park or wildlife area. Some folks like to stay out all day, moving from spot to spot to see how many bird species they can tally within the day.

Some coordination is necessary to make sure we reduce overlap and spread birders out across the county. If you wish to participate, **please contact our county Fall Count coordinator, Matt Felperin at <[REDACTED]>, no later than Saturday, September 4th.** Matt will provide you with a checklist for the count as well as instructions for submitting your numbers, or you can print and use the checklist at the back of this newsletter.

We do ask that participants practice COVID precautions during the count, such as not sharing a car with people outside your household, unless all have been fully vaccinated. And remember that mask wearing is now required in all indoor spaces in Prince George's County, even if you are vaccinated. Follow the CDC guidelines as well as our county and state requirements. The most important thing is simply "Be safe, above all else."

Mysterious Bird Illness

As you are no doubt aware, a mysterious illness afflicting birds of many species was detected in our region in the spring. Here is the latest update, as provided in a press release from the MD Department of Natural Resources.



Update as of August 17, 2021

In late May, wildlife managers in the District of Columbia, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, and other states began receiving reports of sick and dying birds. Several passerine bird species have been affected. No human health or domestic animal (pets, livestock and poultry) issues have been documented. **As of mid-August, reports have decreased in many jurisdictions and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources is lifting its previous recommendation to cease feeding birds.** *[emphasis added]*

The natural resource management agencies in the affected states and the District of Columbia, along with the National Park Service, continue to work with diagnostic laboratories to investigate the cause(s) of this event. Those laboratories include the USGS National Wildlife Health Center, the University of Georgia Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study, the University of Pennsylvania Wildlife Futures Program, the Indiana Animal Disease Diagnostic Laboratory and multiple state laboratories.

While no definitive cause(s) of illness or death have been determined, the following pathogens have not been detected, based on results received to date: Salmonella and Chlamydia (bacterial pathogens); avian influenza virus, West Nile virus and other flaviviruses, Newcastle disease virus and other paramyxoviruses, herpesviruses and poxviruses; and Trichomonas parasites. Transmission electron microscopy, metagenomics work, and additional diagnostic tests are ongoing.

Residents who choose to resume feeding birds and providing water in bird baths should remain vigilant and consider the following standard guidelines:

- Clean feeders and bird baths with soap and water at least once a week, then disinfect with a 10% bleach solution to prevent potential infectious disease spread between birds and other wildlife. After cleaning, rinse well with water and allow to air-dry. When handling bird feeders and baths be sure to wear disposable gloves and wash your hands when finished.

Continued next page

Bird Illness, continued

- When feeding birds follow expert recommendations such as those listed in the Audubon International Guide to Bird Feeding.
- Avoid handling birds unless necessary. Dispose of dead birds in a plastic bag, seal, and discard with household trash, or alternatively, bury them deeper than 3 feet to prevent disease transmission to other animals. If handling is necessary, wear disposable gloves or use plastic bags on your hands to avoid contact with carcasses.
- Keep pets away from sick or dead wildlife.
- Report sick or dying birds to the Maryland DNR / USDA Wildlife Services Call Center at 1-877-463-6497 (410-349-8130 for out-of-state phone numbers). Licensed wildlife rehabilitators can be found on the DNR website.
- Maryland DNR greatly appreciates the assistance of the public and wildlife rehabilitation facilities during this outbreak. Wildlife disease investigations take time and can be inherently challenging. Additional information and guidance will be shared as more results are confirmed.

<https://news.maryland.gov/dnr/2021/07/02/bird-illness-investigation-continues-in-several-states/?eType=EmailBlastContent&eld=fb012d44-5f93-40f3-80e1-492f7ab0cdd4>

Prince George's County Big Day – 5/9/21

By Kevin Bennett

The following is taken from an email report sent to the MDBirding Google Group on 5/11/21, and reprinted here with the kind permission of Kevin Bennett. Kevin is a member of the Board of Directors of the Patuxent Bird Club.

I've been birding Prince George's County as much as I can since I moved to Greenbelt in 2018. It's not a long time, but I felt a strong connection to the county that seemed underbirded in relation to its potential. Mostly I biked to Lake Artemesia, a five-minute ride from my apartment, but in 2020 I started to explore more widely. This year, tragically, I moved to Alexandria, but I haven't been able to get over what still feels like my home county. So last month I decided I would attempt a big day in PG to get closure (and maybe also see some nice birds). I enlisted a fellow UMD grad student and expert birder Menachem Goldstein to help pass the unofficial PG big day record ("unofficial," meaning it was the highest total Russ Ruffing* had in his records—thanks, Russ!) of 120 species set by Dave Mozurkewich, Fred Schaffer, and Rob Ostrowski in 2009 and the same three plus Stan Arnold in 2010. A beatable number, but one that would require either getting lucky with a bunch of migrants or managing to find almost all of the breeders.

For the route, my plan was to start in the southern part of the county trying for owls and whip-poor-wills, then make our way north along the Patuxent, getting breeders in the morning before snapping up specialized birds in the afternoon in the northern part of the county. I was counting on making up for lost morning migrants we might have had in a place like Lake Artemesia with getting all of the breeders while they were still singing. We didn't have time to do much scouting, so we relied on eBird reports from previous years to find breeders (thanks to Jeff Shenot for atlasing in southern PG!). We stuck to ABA rules for big days, meaning rare bird alerts are off limits, but playback is OK. Ultimately, though, playback didn't net us any species, which I guess is how it ought to be.

We started at 3:30 am sharp on Sunday morning (5/9) on the entrance road to Cedarville State Forest listening for whips. There was no moon, but it was a partly clear night so conditions could have been worse. No whips, but a Barred Owl called once to start us off. Next up was the power line cut on Aquasco Farm Rd., where once again, whip-poor-wills were not calling, and as with all of my previous attempts in the county, I missed this species. Rails were similarly quiet in the marshes at Aquasco, but a Solitary Sandpiper in our headlights was a nice driving tick, Barred Owls called like crazy from every corner, and a Barn Owl screaming from out in the marsh eliminated the need to try to see one later in a nest box. As we were leaving, we stopped with open windows to listen to a chat singing in the dark. Menachem called out Great Horned Owl. I strained to listen. Then yep, there it was. We left Aquasco at 5:15 am with 13 species and headed for Milltown Landing.

Continued next page

County Big Day, continued

Great Horned Owls were hooting as we arrived, and birds were starting to sing from the forest and tall fields. We walked through the mix of habitats counting birds mostly by song: Acadian Flycatcher, pewee, Wood Thrush in the woods, Prairie Warbler, Field Sparrow, Indigo Bunting on the edges. At the dock on Black Swamp Creek, a family of five river otters rolled around and played, oblivious to our presence. Beyond them, a Least Bittern grunted. I heard it, Menachem didn't—a "dirty" bird, at least for the moment. Menachem called out our one and only Yellow-billed Cuckoo of the day from down at the river boat launch, and a Ruby-throated Hummingbird showed off its U-shaped display flight as we walked back toward the car. A Magnolia Warbler sang as we departed, and we headed up to Jackson's Landing with 56 species.

Jackson's gave us our best migrant haul of the morning: Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Bay-breasted, Cape May, Chestnut-sided, Blackpoll, Black-throated Blue Warblers, plus breeders Prothonotary, Yellow Warbler, and Louisiana Waterthrush. A Purple Martin at the boat launch saved us a later stop. Yellow-throated Warblers were cooperative next to Croom Airport, and a Hooded Warbler sang from near the Selby's Landing boat launch. It was a few minutes before the Critical Area Driving Tour would open, so we made a quick run up to Mount Calvert for Laughing Gull and Marsh Wren plus a few others, then returned and headed down the CADT towards Merkle.

A few Greater Yellowlegs and a Spotted Sandpiper were our only shorebirds from the observation tower, but a singing Yellow-throated Vireo was species 100 at 10:15am. A harrier over the marsh was a nice surprise. In the fields and edges at Merkle we added Grasshopper and Savannah Sparrow, plus Northern Waterthrush and Cliff Swallow, saving a long detour later. Finally, we stopped at the wetland on Fenno Rd for a pair of Red-headed Woodpeckers I'd found there last year. We added Green Heron and Belted Kingfisher for good measure. To finish up the morning, we tried without success for the Virginia Rail I'd found at Cheltenham Wetlands Park two weeks earlier, but a Sharp-shinned Hawk overhead made the detour worthwhile.

For the second half of the day, we headed up north. Ring-billed Gulls were at Bladensburg Waterfront Park as expected, and so were the nesting Yellow-crowned Night-Herons over the street in University Park. The fields at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center did not produce the Dickcissel I'd found there the previous day, but Bobolink, meadowlarks, and kestrels were all in place. Menachem called out a Merlin, and sure enough, the small streaky falcon came right over our heads, flying north at a Merlin's typical pace, made a half-hearted pass at a flyby cowbird, and was quickly out of sight. In the woods along Beaver Dam Rd., we finally saw a White-breasted Nuthatch, heard a quiet Swainson's Thrush, and tracked down a rolling song deep in the woods—a Kentucky Warbler, in the exact same spot it was singing last summer, was species 120.

Next, we drove along the Patuxent South Tract entrance road hoping for Worm-eating Warbler, but came up empty, so we headed up to Laurel Lake, where Black-crowned Night-Herons have been hanging out for a while. One bird was right in its place, and we were at 121. The last spot of the planned route was the fields at Konterra Dr. We opted to try parking on the side of the I-95 entrance ramp from Rt. 200 for maximum visibility (a \$0.40 privilege), which paid off with a raven, another flock of Bobolink, and another Greater Yellowlegs. The Rough-legged Hawk, sadly, was a no-show. To finish off the north part of the county, we made a quick run to my old stomping ground at Lake Artemesia and added Warbling Vireo for species 123.

Our last stop was back at Mount Calvert for sunset. We didn't get the hoped-for Forster's Terns, rails, or nighthawks, but small groups of Spotted Sandpipers put on a show. As the daylight faded and light rain started falling, Menachem heard a Least Bittern calling from the marsh, a "dirty" bird no longer, and we ended the day having both gotten all the birds, for a final species total of 123.

I'm proud of our total, especially since it beats—by one species—my personal big day record from a solo East Texas count I did a few years ago. We might have ended up with a higher number if we had put more effort into migrants early, but there wasn't too much to complain about in the end. Worst misses included Forster's Tern, Worm-eating Warbler, and (sigh) House Wren. In the end, if it is a record, it's a beatable one. Hopefully someone tries next year. Maybe I will again! Birding Prince George's County, especially its lesser-visited southern corners, is always a joy.

**Editor's note: Russ Ruffing compiles the [MOS Annual Birding Report](#), which documents milestones and achievements of Maryland birders.*

See next page for Kevin and Menachem's bird list.

Prince George's County Big Day List
Observers: Kevin Bennett and Menachem Goldstein
Date: May 9, 2021

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. Canada Goose | 43. Eastern Wood-Pewee | 83. Chipping Sparrow |
| 2. Wood Duck | 44. Acadian Flycatcher | 84. Field Sparrow |
| 3. Mallard | 45. Eastern Phoebe | 85. White-throated Sparrow |
| 4. Wild Turkey | 46. Great Crested Flycatcher | 86. Savannah Sparrow |
| 5. Rock Pigeon | 47. Eastern Kingbird | 87. Song Sparrow |
| 6. Mourning Dove | 48. White-eyed Vireo | 88. Swamp Sparrow |
| 7. Yellow-billed Cuckoo | 49. Yellow-throated Vireo | 89. Eastern Towhee |
| 8. Chimney Swift | 50. Warbling Vireo | 90. Yellow-breasted Chat |
| 9. Ruby-throated Hummingbird | 51. Red-eyed Vireo | 91. Bobolink |
| 10. Killdeer | 52. Blue Jay | 92. Eastern Meadowlark |
| 11. Spotted Sandpiper | 53. American Crow | 93. Orchard Oriole |
| 12. Solitary Sandpiper | 54. Fish Crow | 94. Baltimore Oriole |
| 13. Greater Yellowlegs | 55. Common Raven | 95. Red-winged Blackbird |
| 14. Laughing Gull | 56. Carolina Chickadee | 96. Brown-headed Cowbird |
| 15. Ring-billed Gull | 57. Tufted Titmouse | 97. Common Grackle |
| 16. Double-crested Cormorant | 58. Northern Rough-winged Swallow | 98. Ovenbird |
| 17. Least Bittern | 59. Purple Martin | 99. Louisiana Waterthrush |
| 18. Great Blue Heron | 60. Tree Swallow | 100. Northern Waterthrush |
| 19. Green Heron | 61. Bank Swallow | 101. Black-and-white Warbler |
| 20. Black-crowned Night-Heron | 62. Barn Swallow | 102. Prothonotary Warbler |
| 21. Yellow-crowned Night-Heron | 63. Cliff Swallow | 103. Kentucky Warbler |
| 22. Black Vulture | 64. Ruby-crowned Kinglet | 104. Common Yellowthroat |
| 23. Turkey Vulture | 65. White-breasted Nuthatch | 105. Hooded Warbler |
| 24. Osprey | 66. Blue-gray Gnatcatcher | 106. American Redstart |
| 25. Northern Harrier | 67. Marsh Wren | 107. Cape May Warbler |
| 26. Sharp-shinned Hawk | 68. Carolina Wren | 108. Northern Parula |
| 27. Cooper's Hawk | 69. European Starling | 109. Magnolia Warbler |
| 28. Bald Eagle | 70. Gray Catbird | 110. Bay-breasted Warbler |
| 29. Red-shouldered Hawk | 71. Brown Thrasher | 111. Yellow Warbler |
| 30. Red-tailed Hawk | 72. Northern Mockingbird | 112. Chestnut-sided Warbler |
| 31. Barn Owl | 73. Eastern Bluebird | 113. Blackpoll Warbler |
| 32. Great Horned Owl | 74. Veery | 114. Black-throated Blue Warbler |
| 33. Barred Owl | 75. Swainson's Thrush | 115. Pine Warbler |
| 34. Belted Kingfisher | 76. Wood Thrush | 116. Yellow-rumped Warbler |
| 35. Red-headed Woodpecker | 77. American Robin | 117. Yellow-throated Warbler |
| 36. Red-bellied Woodpecker | 78. Cedar Waxwing | 118. Prairie Warbler |
| 37. Downy Woodpecker | 79. House Sparrow | 119. Summer Tanager |
| 38. Hairy Woodpecker | 80. House Finch | 120. Scarlet Tanager |
| 39. Pileated Woodpecker | 81. American Goldfinch | 121. Northern Cardinal |
| 40. Northern Flicker | 82. Grasshopper Sparrow | 122. Blue Grosbeak |
| 41. American Kestrel | | 123. Indigo Bunting |
| 42. Merlin | | |

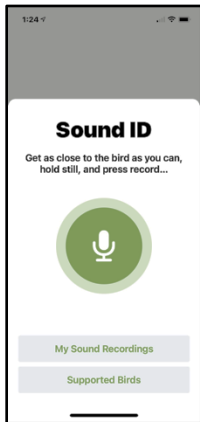
For information on most of the birding sites visited by Kevin and Menachem, check out the entries for Prince George's County on the *Birder's Guide to Maryland & DC* at <https://birdersguidemddc.org/explore-birding-sites/by-region/the-southern-region/prince-georges-county/>.

Merlin Sound ID: A Review

By Marcia Watson

If you're like many birders, you probably wish that you had a better ability to identify birds by ear. Now there is a pocket helper that you can take into the field. In late June, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology added a significant new feature to Merlin, the free bird identification app that runs on smartphones and tablets. **Merlin can now help you identify bird songs.**

Designed to be used in the field, Merlin is focused on bird identification and is a companion app to eBird Mobile, which is built to report detailed lists of birds from the field.

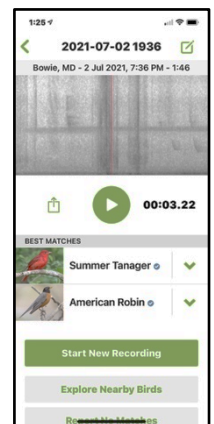


For its **Sound ID module**, Merlin uses the microphone that's built into smartphones to make a recording that it will compare to its extensive bird song database, and then will make suggested identifications of the species that you're hearing. All summer, I've been testing Sound ID in the field to explore how it works. While it's not foolproof, Merlin is a lot of fun to use and can help you with songs that you may be overlooking or that you just don't recognize at all.

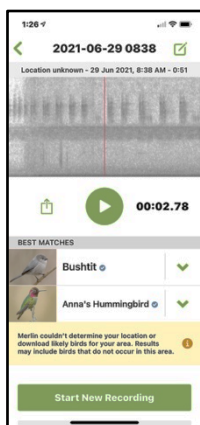
The Merlin Sound ID module is simple to use. While you're out birding and hearing birds, you simply open the Merlin app and touch "Sound ID," then press the big green circular microphone button to start recording the birds that you're hearing. As the recording is being made, the software will display a **sonogram** (aka spectrogram) of the sounds (a sonogram or spectrogram is a graphic representation of the sounds you're hearing) and Merlin will begin working on a list of the possible bird or birds that are making the sounds. It's pretty magical.

As it makes tentative identifications, Merlin will list possible bird species below the sonogram, and those identifications will appear one by one, with a little thumbnail photo of each species for extra help in identification. Clicking on the little down arrow to the right of a bird species will reveal a list of links to recordings of that bird, which you can play to confirm that's what you're hearing.

In many cases, Merlin will offer several possible suggestions for what an individual bird might be. You need to apply your judgement to determine which is correct. If Merlin has listed the correct bird, you can tell Merlin that its selection is correct by pressing the "This is my bird!" button at the bottom of the screen (not shown in the screenshot). Or, you might need to press the "Report No Matches" button if, in your opinion, none of Merlin's choices are correct (also not shown in the screenshot). This feedback from you helps Merlin "learn" when it is correct and when it has missed the mark in identification.



Merlin is pretty good at sorting through multiple birds that may be singing all at once, something that the human ear often struggles with. When presented with a mixed group of bird songs, Merlin will list all possible species that it recognizes. When you finish recording, you can click on a species name and Merlin will show you where in the sonogram that bird is singing. This is a good learning opportunity for you – you can easily review what each bird sounds like.



One thing to know about using Merlin's Sound ID is that you should **limit your recordings to two minutes or less**. Longer recordings use a lot of memory and are more difficult for Merlin to process.

Another aspect to bear in mind: **Merlin must know where you are birding** in order to make good suggestions of bird species. When Merlin is working, it is not only comparing the bird songs to those in its database, it's also looking at the eBird database to determine what species are expected at your exact location on that date. That means for best results, you must turn on "location services" in your smartphone to allow the app to use the phone's GPS system.

What happens if Merlin doesn't know where you are? One day, I was birding at a wildlife area in Carroll County, MD, and for some reason my phone wasn't picking up a GPS signal. Merlin was telling me that I was hearing Bushtits and Anna's Hummingbirds, which might have been correct if I was in chaparral habitat in the southwest, but not in Carroll County. The real ID for the sounds was much simpler: field crickets!

Continued next page

Merlin App, continued

Which brings up another aspect of Merlin use that you should be aware of: most smartphones have very sensitive microphones, and **Merlin will pick up every little sound** – the rustling of your clothes, the stamping of your feet, heavy breathing, coughing, human voices, insects singing, planes overhead, the lawnmower down the street – anything you can hear, it can hear – and such extraneous sounds produce a muddy sonogram that can make it difficult for Merlin to do its work accurately. For best results, you should find a place relatively free of human-created noises, stand still, hold the phone up high, and strive to make no extra noise – certainly no talking.

It's interesting that Merlin's sound identification module works in somewhat of an indirect way. Merlin is not attempting to make an identification based directly on the sounds that it "hears" through the microphone. Instead, it's **analyzing the features of the sonogram** of the sounds – that graphic representation of the sounds – and using software similar to facial recognition software to compare the features of the sonogram to sonograms in its vast database. Every correct identification that you report back to Merlin helps Merlin learn how to improve its use of the sonograms in its database.

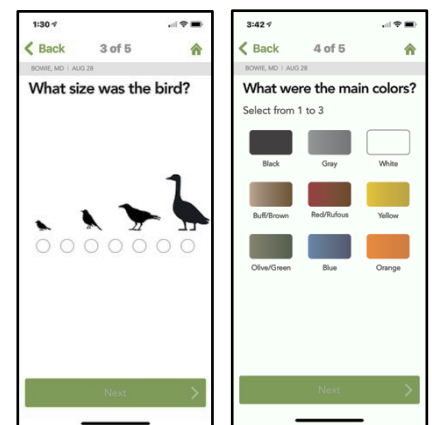
I should point out that at this time, Merlin is designed to work with **bird songs** rather than **bird calls**. I found that it was able to identify a couple of calls for me in the field but most of its database is built on songs. What's the difference? A song is usually a longer and more complex vocal expression with a certain repeated structure. Songs are used by birds to establish their territories and to attract mates. In contrast, a call is short, often a single note, that birds employ as a brief form of communication. They are sometimes called "chip notes." Some species have multiple calls, such as contact calls, begging calls of juveniles, flight calls, alarm calls, and so on. An example of a song versus a call would be the musical "Drink your tea!" song of the Eastern Towhee, as opposed to the short emphatic "to-weet" call. Read more about songs and calls at <https://academy.allaboutbirds.org/birdsong>.

How well does Merlin work? Merlin is not foolproof and as mentioned earlier, must be **used judiciously**. I have been seeing some eBird reports where the birder is reporting a bird that is rare for the area and makes a comment such as "I heard this bird and had no idea what it was but Merlin identified it as a Chestnut-backed Chickadee. MEGA rarity!" I would never suggest using Merlin Sound ID in this fashion. It's simply not accurate enough. When a rarity is being suggested by Merlin, I would recommend attempting to get a visual identification and a photo, or confirmation by other nearby birders, before reporting that bird on eBird.

Can Merlin Sound ID help you to learn bird songs so that you can identify them on your own? Maybe, but you'd have to approach it in an organized way. If you simply go out into the field and let Merlin do all the work, you're not going to learn much. But let's say you want to focus on warbler songs in the spring. You could go into the woods, let Merlin pick out, say, a Chestnut-sided Warbler, and then every time you *think* you hear a Chestnut-sided Warbler, you could test yourself with Merlin. As with any learning, repetition and organization are the keys to success.

Merlin has long had two other built-in aids for bird identification. The **basic Bird ID module** asks you five questions:

1. Where did you see the bird?
2. When did you see the bird?
3. What size was the bird? – with pictographs of a goose, crow, robin and small songbird for scale.
4. What were the main colors? – choose up to three colors from simple color swatches on the screen.
5. What was the bird doing? – a multiple choice item with 6 possible answers, ranging from "eating at a feeder" to "soaring or flying."



Merlin also has a **photo identification tool** that allows you to take a photo of a bird through the app, or upload an existing photo from your photo library. Merlin uses software similar to facial recognition software to attempt to identify the species. I was a beta tester of this feature when it was first being developed: my task was to look at a series of photos that Merlin was showing me, and to identify the bird to assist Merlin in its machine learning. Now, the Photo ID feature of Merlin is well-developed and amazingly robust, with the ability to accurately identify thousands of species from all over the world. I often use it after returning from an overseas trip to help me identify the birds in the hundreds of photos that I've taken, but for which I've already forgotten the names of the birds.

Continued next page

Merlin App, continued

In addition to offering these identification aids, Merlin also functions like a **pocket field guide**, with a list of species found in a designated area. For each species, Merlin provides a selection of color photographs showing different plumages, a range map, a brief written description, and a selection of recordings of songs and calls. The list of birds is searchable by species name or part of a name – for example, you can enter “blue” in the search box and for this area, you’ll get Blue-winged Teal, Great Blue Heron, Little Blue Heron, Eastern Bluebird, Blue Jay, and so on. This is helpful if you can’t remember the full name of the bird or aren’t sure of the spelling. You can also enter the standard [four-letter codes for species names](#), if you know them, to quickly jump to a species; for example, EABL takes you to Eastern Bluebird.

And did I mention – **Merlin is free!**

To learn more about Merlin or to download it, go to <https://merlin.allaboutbirds.org> or <https://support.ebird.org/en/support/solutions/48000450743>.

Your Submissions Invited

Do you have an idea for an article you would like to see published in a future issue of *News from the 'Hood*? Send a note with your suggestion or, better yet, a draft article to the editor, Marcia Watson at [REDACTED]. Concerned that you’re not a good writer? No worries – Marcia will happily help with your article. Deadline for submission of completed articles is the 20th of even-numbered months (August, October, December, February, and April). If your article is just a rough idea, please allow more time to develop the text and to seek illustrations, if appropriate.

Notable Bird Sightings in Prince George’s County March through August, 2021

This article includes bird sightings from March and April 2021 as well as the summer season, since time constraints precluded the inclusion of the Notable Birds feature in the May-June 2021 newsletter.

The star of the show over the past few months was indubitably the **Roseate Spoonbill** that appeared in the wetland at the National Park’s Service’s [Oxon Cove Park](#). It was found by Liz Leininger and Douglas Hovland on the morning of August 15th and quite a few birders managed to see it throughout that day. Frustratingly, the bird was in a location that was not easily viewable from within the park, and many birders resorted to attempting to get a view from the shoulder of busy Route 295, which passes west of the wetland. Needless to say, this created a dangerous situation for the birders and for passing motorists on the high-speed road. A few hardy birders did make an overland trek to obtain a good view of the bird, a hike that required bushwhacking through dense vegetation and across a small stream. On the next page, you can see some excellent photos. The spoonbill was a one-day wonder, not found on subsequent days. It may have been the same individual that was reported from sites in DC and the Virginia side of the Potomac starting around August 1st. This was the second documented Roseate Spoonbill for Prince George’s County: one appeared briefly in the Patuxent River marshes near Billingsley House in June of 2018.

A pair of **Trumpeter Swans** have now become a fixture at [Patuxent Research Refuge](#), appearing almost daily at either North, Central, or South Tract. The usual pair was seen at South Tract on April 19th by Karen Atwood and on April 22nd by Stephanie Catino, and on many dates between then and now by additional observers.

Christina Yuan had a **Common Nighthawk** over a neighborhood near [Patuxent’s Central Tract](#) on August 8th.

Continued next page

Notable Birds, continued

Jack Saba found a **Common Gallinule** at [Governor Bridge Natural Area](#) on May 4th. An American Coot has been hanging out at the [Patuxent South Tract](#) lakes and ponds since May 4th, when found by both Christina Yuan and Debi Talbott. While common during the winter, coots usually disappear from our area in the summer.

Michel Cavigelli reported six **Sandhill Cranes** heading north over the [Beltsville Agricultural Research Center](#) (restricted access) on March 26th.

A **Willet** – quite uncommon for our county – was at [Oxon Hill Farm/Oxon Hill Park](#) on July 21st, found by Dan Rauch.

Joe Hanfman found a **Black-headed Gull** in Prince George's County waters along the Potomac near National Harbor and the Woodrow Wilson Bridge on August 19th. In subsequent days other birders saw the bird resting on a barge in the river. The bird was also seen at several locations on the Virginia side.

Elaine Hendricks saw a group of five **Caspian Terns** at [Lake Artemesia](#) on June 30th, an unusual date for this species. Alina Martin found a **Royal Tern** along the Patuxent River near the mouth of the Mataponi Creek (between [Selby's Landing](#) and [Merkle NWRA](#)) on July 7th. While Royal Terns are regular on the lower Patuxent, they are rarely seen north of Cedar Haven.

A **Snowy Egret** – an elusive bird in Prince George's – was at [Colmar Manor Park](#) on May 13th, sighted by Kent Fothergill.

It's been a good year for sightings of **Glossy Ibis**, which can be difficult to find in our county. A flock of 17 Glossy Ibis were seen by Nick Tepper flying over [Greenbelt \(National\) Park](#) on April 17th. Just a few days later, on April 20th, Elaine Hendricks had a flock of 14 ibis over the [South Tract of Patuxent Research Refuge](#). Michel Cavigelli found a single ibis at the [Beltsville Agricultural Research Center](#) on July 14th. Stephanie Dalke reported seven ibis at Magruder Park in Hyattsville; note that the park has had a recent name change and is now known as David C. Driskell Park.

The **Short-eared Owl** show at Konterra fields (restricted access) continued into March and early April, with many birders accompanying Jay Sheppard on his guided tours to see these winter visitors. The last date that the owls were reported was April 8.

Also at Konterra, a **Rough-legged Hawk** was found by Jay Sheppard on April 3rd, and lingered until May 9th, delighting many viewers. A Rough-legged was previously seen at Konterra in 2015 – they don't show up very often.

A latish **Merlin** was at [Rosaryville State Park](#) on May 22nd, seen and photographed by Kevin Bennett. Kevin also found a **Mississippi Kite** flying over the College Park Metro Station on May 26th.

Two late **Evening Grosbeaks** were found by Marisa Rositol at [Fort Washington National Park](#) on April 30th.

Marisa Rositol found two **Vesper Sparrows** at [Oxon Hill Farm/Oxon Cove Park](#) on April 10th. As Marisa remarked, these sparrows are "uncommon, but annual at many locations in the county." Proving the truth of Marisa's remark, both Hans Holbrook and Elaine Hendricks saw two Vespers at [Patuxent's South Tract](#) on April 12th, and Mikey Lutmerding found a single Vesper at Central Tract (no public access) on April 13th. Elaine scored another Vesper at Mt. Calvert on April 14th. Additional sightings were at [Beltsville Agricultural Research Center](#) and [Oxon Hill Farm](#) later in April.

Three **Bobolinks** were at Konterra Fields on May 31st, reported by Jay Sheppard and Marcy Stutzman.

A **Lark Sparrow** was found by Ben Jesup at [Oxon Hill Farm/Oxon Cove Park](#) on August 26th.

A **Dickcissel** was at [Beltsville Agricultural Research Center](#) on May 8th, found by Josephine Kalbfleisch, and another was there on June 19th, found by Michel Cavigelli.

A selection of photos is on the next page.



Roseate Spoonbill, photo by Marisa Rositol, Oxon Cove Park, 8/15/21, Macaulay Library ML361564391



Roseate Spoonbill, photo by Fred Shaffer, Oxon Cove Park, 8/15/21, Macaulay Library ML361481391



Roseate Spoonbill, by Frank Klotz, Oxon Cove Park, 8/15/21, Macaulay Library ML361446191



Black-headed Gull, photo by Todd Kiraly, Potomac Barge National Harbor, 8/21/21, Macaulay Library ML362987881



Rough-legged Hawk, photo by John Shaw, Konterra Fields, 5/4/21, Macaulay Library ML334066031



Merlin, photo by Kevin Bennett, Rosaryville State Park, 5/22/21, Macaulay Library ML341157981



Vesper Sparrow, photo by Maria Rositol, Oxon Hill Farm, 4/18/21, Macaulay Library ML327759161



Vesper Sparrow, photo by Maria Rositol, Oxon Hill Farm, 4/18/21, Macaulay Library L327759031



Vesper Sparrow, photo by Maria Rositol, Oxon Hill Farm, 4/10/21, Macaulay Library ML324827611





MOS/Patuxent Bird Club Membership Application



REQUEST TO ALL CURRENT AND NEW MEMBERS: If at all possible, please join or renew your membership online at the MOS website (<https://mdbirds.org/>), even if you haven't done so in the past. This will streamline our database maintenance and bookkeeping procedures, and make things easier for our volunteer workforce. At the website, you will be able to choose the Patuxent Bird Club as your local chapter for membership registration and dues payment - and also make charitable donations to the Patuxent Bird Club or to MOS. If, however, you prefer to remit your membership dues by check, please print and complete this form and mail it with your check to the address below. Thank you for your assistance!

Name(s): _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip code: _____

Phone(s): _____

E-Mail Address(es): _____

Full dues include Chapter and MOS State membership, and subscriptions to *Maryland Yellowthroat*, *Maryland Birdlife*, and the Patuxent Bird Club Newsletter. (The Patuxent Bird Club newsletter will be sent by email unless US mail requested). Dues are tax-deductible; see note below.

Choose Membership category:

Chapter and State combined membership: <input type="checkbox"/> Household \$33 <input type="checkbox"/> Individual \$26 <input type="checkbox"/> Junior (Age < 18) \$6	or	Chapter membership only: (must be a full-paying member of another MOS chapter - indicate primary MOS chapter: _____) <input type="checkbox"/> Household \$8 <input type="checkbox"/> Individual \$6 <input type="checkbox"/> Junior \$1
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In addition, I have enclosed a tax-deductible contribution

- ☐ to Patuxent Bird Club in the amount of _____
☐ to Maryland Ornithological Society in the amount of _____

Please make check payable to **Maryland Ornithological Society** and mail with this completed application to:

Carol S. Daugherty, MOS Treasurer
11925 Oden Court
Rockville, MD 20852

"The benefits received from Maryland Ornithological Society membership dues are not considered to be substantial, as determined by criteria in IRS Publication 526. Therefore, members can claim a tax deductible charitable contribution for the full amount of their membership dues."

THANK YOU AND HAPPY BIRDING!