



# *The* **OSPREY**

January/February 2014— Vol. XXXIX No. 1

Dear Readers,

I do apologize that this issue of *The Osprey* is so late. My hard drive crashed and left me floundering for a few weeks right around Christmas time.

Good timing, I guess, since our next event is not until Monday, February 2 when Seth Ausubel will be speaking to us at Quogue. Wildlife Refuge about Reptiles and Amphibians. The January Bird Walk to the Lakes Around Patchogue was cancelled due to the snow storm, record low temperatures and bad roads. But don't forget we have some great opportunities on LI to see a great many wintering waterfowl. So pick a nice day and go birding. Go to Birding on the net if you want to see if there are any rarities around.

Back to my crash, I am now the proud owner of a new computer, updated programs and a storage system devoted solely to back up. So I hope this will not happen again. Ok, lesson learned. Now back to birding.

The recent irruption of Snowy Owls is a curious event, with no real answers. Ebird has set up a special project to track the owls and is asking for reports in an attempt to understand our visitors.

Please remember, to treat these birds with respect, and don't approach too closely.

May the new year be a good one for all, and bring many wonderful birding surprises.

Sally Newbert, Editor

## ***We have been invaded!!!!***

**Eileen Schwinn**

**W**e have been invaded!!!! **DON'T PANIC!!!** They are friendly visitors from the North. No, not the Canadian Mounted Police — it's *Nyctea Scandiaca*, better know as the Snowy Owl. This winter has been what is termed an "invasive or irruptive year". For some unknown reason, great numbers of Snowy Owls have traveled to our barrier beaches, as well as other parts of the U.S. Most are young birds — not the snow-white of a full adult, but the dark-capped, heavily barred first year bird. The first reports came in just before Thanksgiving then as many as four Snowy Owls were located between the Shinnecock Inlet and the Quogue Bridge. Orient Point, Jones Beach and Fire Island, have been the winter vacation spots for these magnificently beautiful animals as well. Their appearance at JFK caused an overwhelming outcry from all sectors of the birding community, including Harry Potter fans. The Port Authority caved to the pressure, and abandoned its decision to hunt the birds down, in favor of a capture and release option. Score a Big One for common sense!

I think back a few years, when I tried and tried and tried to find a Snowy Owl along Dune Road — frequently reported, but I missed it each time I tried. Finally, on a cold January day, I saw one. I wrote a short essay for this Newsletter, on the Two yellow eyes I saw staring at me from across the Shinnecock Inlet, near sunset. Finally, I had found my bird! I was ecstatic!

You never forget your first Snowy — nor your most recently seen one either, for that matter.



PHOTO BY ERIN KING



## The President's Corner

Byron Young

I have been enjoying the birds at my bird feeders over the past several days. It seems that a new group of birds has found my feeders. I have a nice flock of Dark-eyed Juncos, and their companion flock of White-throated Sparrows that stop by a couple of times a day. Then there is the pair of Northern Cardinals, and a large flock of Mourning Doves. I have had a single House Finch, several Chickadees and a very busy group of Tufted Titmouse. Around the suet I have had several White-breasted Nuthatch and to my surprise and delight the other day I had three species of woodpecker (Downy, Hairy and Red-bellied). Least I forget, I do have the requisite Grey Squirrels. They need some food as well.

I will spend a good deal of time over the next couple of months catching up on some overdue reports, working at the computer and sipping a nice warm cup of coffee. One of my bird feeders is just outside my computer room window so I can catch a peak at the birds as they come in to feed, while sipping coffee. I know it will probably take me longer to complete my reports.

I remind everyone who feeds to fill out our monthly feederwatch report for John McNeil. It does not take long and helps us understand the comings and goings of our winter friends. John is always looking for these reports and a new find to report.

I hope everyone gets a chance to search for some of our rarer winter visitors such as the Snowy Owls that have been reported around the Island, and to visit the local ponds to see the overwintering waterfowl.

We look forward to seeing folks on one of our winter birding walks and at our next meeting on February 2, 2014 (Ground Hog Day). May the winter be short and mild, I spent some of today getting the snow blower out and started. I am preparing for winter yet thinking spring already.

I hope your New Year comes in bright and full of good cheer.

Enjoy your winter birding.

Cheers.



## East End Ponds

Larry Penny & Vicki Bustamante

Long Island is blessed with a plethora of freshwater ponds. The South Fork has its share. There are brackish coastal ponds, fresh coastal ponds, morainal ponds, kettlehole ponds, vernal ponds and quite a few man-made ponds with liners to retain water. The ponds are either groundwater ponds reflecting the top of the water table or "perched" ponds, those that reside well above the true water table and depend solely upon precipitation and runoff to keep them wet. Montauk has more perched ponds than any other community on Long Island.

In Southampton Town there are two north-south trending chains-of-ponds, and an eastern chain running from Sag Harbor on the north to Sagaponack Pond on the south. The largest of the 10 exclusively fresh ponds in this chain are Long Pond, Crooked Pond, Little Long Pond and Poxabogue Pond. The groundwater divide is situated at the north end of Crooked Pond. South of the divide the freshwater aquifer moves at about a foot a day towards the ocean, north of it, it moves at about the same rate towards the Peconic Estuary.

The lesser known chain-of-ponds is situated a couple of miles to the west, beginning on just south of the moraine with Shorts Pond on the north, then Haines Pond, Goldfish Pond, Long Pond, Little Long Pond and, finally, Kellis Pond, south of Montauk Highway in Bridgehampton. The

groundwater that feeds these ponds runs south to the ocean. All of the ponds in both chains are owned by Southampton Town's Trustees and an out-of-towner needs a local guide in order to shoot waterfowl on them.

Shorts Pond is on the north side of Scuttlehole Road. The road's name might well be derived from the word "kettlehole" a hole formed by a big chunk of ice melting and pressing down as the glacier retreated to the north in the last Ice Age, or from scuttle hole, a pit to dump your garbage.

Of all of the ponds in the two chains-of-ponds, Shorts Pond is the one that perennially has the largest waterfowl population, in particular Canada Geese. One can almost never drive by in daylight from September to April without seeing a large congregation of geese gathered there. Even when the pond is iced over, geese will gather there en masse.

Funny, as a boy growing up on the North Fork, which too has its share of ponds, geese were scarce, there were hardly any Mallards. Now Canada Geese and Mallards abound throughout the East End. Shorts Pond is a wonderful case in point. Before the 1950's the bountiful crop fields on both Forks were not always planted with rye grass after the harvest, so that the soil was held down by a green sward all winter long. It's the rye and now, oat grass, and

*continued next page*



*Shorts Pond is a favorite spot for waterfowl in winter*

## The Great Back Yard Bird Count

The Great Backyard Bird Count is an annual four-day event (from Fri., Feb. 14 through Mon., Feb. 17, 2014) that engages bird watchers of all ages in counting birds to create a real-time snapshot of where the birds are. This will be the 17th annual count.

Everyone is welcome—from beginning bird watchers to experts. It takes as little as 15 minutes on one day, or you can count for as long as you like each day of the event. It's free, fun, and easy—and it helps the birds.

Participants tally the number of individual birds of each species they see during their count period. They enter these numbers on the GBBC website. Just google Great Back Yard Bird Count for more information.

New participants must set up a free GBBC account to submit their checklists or use login information from an existing account for any other Cornell Lab citizen-science project. You'll only need to do this once to participate in all future GBBC events. Click "Submit Your Bird Checklist" at the top of this page or see How to Participate for more details.

## Join a Nature Walk for GBBC

Saturday, February 15th @ 9:00 am

### William Floyd Estate Walk

**Trip Leader: MaryLaura Lamont**

In cooperation with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society's Great Backyard Bird Count we will be walking and recording every bird we see on the Estate. This citizen science project is important as it documents what birds are around an area and if their numbers are increasing or declining. Plus, it is just good plain fun to be outdoors in winter with people who enjoy nature. Call MaryLaura Lamont at (631) 399-2030 at the William Floyd Estate office for details and or more info. Rain or snow date will be Sunday, February 16th.



*East End Ponds continued from previous page*

other cover crop grasses that keep the geese and some of the other waterfowl going all winter long. Why fly south and risk ending up on the dinner table when you can spend a peaceful winter on Long Island while eating nutritionally without getting shot at.

On Tuesday afternoon, December 3, I met Vicki Bustamante on the Atlantic Golf Club land where Shorts Pond is situated. True to form, the pond was alive with waterfowl of all kinds including about 1,750 loudly cackling and milling Canada Geese. There were eight Snow Geese and two Mute Swans in the background. Among the geese were two Northern Shovelers, 20 Ruddy Ducks, 8 Coots, 13 Mallards and a Wood Duck or two. Usually at this time of year there are

Black Ducks, Scaup, Wigeons, Teal, Buffleheads and Ringnecks, as well, but not a one was present. The Ruddy Ducks were busy diving.

At 4:20 the Canada Geese began flying out of the pond, presumably to visit the nearby farm field cover crops where they would spend the night. At this time of the year some geese use the day shift to feed, ponding up at night, while others, pond up during the day and feed at night. With a more-than-ample amount of grass leaves and shoots present why not take advantage and utilize them "24-7" as some working men like to say.

Oh, yes, the surface of the pond was covered with feathers. Presumably, the geese were still molting and gaining new feathers to keep them dry and warm in the winter months.



## Meetings

Meetings are held at Quogue Wildlife Refuge, 3 Old Country Road in Quogue, NY. All are welcome, there is no charge.

**Mon., Feb. 3, beginning at 7:15 pm**

### Reptiles & Amphibians of the New York/New Jersey Region

**By Seth Ausubel**

Reptiles and amphibians, collectively known as "herps", are a fascinating and misunderstood group. A surprising diversity of herps can be found in the New York and New Jersey region if one is willing to look closely. Seth will share some of his experiences field herping in the region. He will discuss the unusual life histories of various species, and conservation issues for these often highly vulnerable animals.

Seth Ausubel is an environmental scientist and an avid birder and herper. He was the "main-man" responsible for the success of this year's NYSOA Meeting on Long Island.

The program will begin at 7:30.

**Mon., March 3, beginning at 7:15 pm**

### ECUADOR

### Land of Toucans, Hummingbirds, Parrots, Mot-Mots, Tanagers and other exotic birds!

**Matt & Cathy McCluskey**

Matt and Cathy will present a digital slide show and tell of their journey to beautiful Ecuador in November 2011.

They will show photos of all the amazing birds, butterflies and other wildlife found in this South American birding hot-spot as they trekked from the highest peaks of the Andes Mountains to the lowlands of the Amazon Basin.



CONSERVATION COLUMN

# Unused Medicine? Don't Flush It!

*"Nobody can do everything but everyone can do something"*

Beth Gustin

Many people have medications in their homes that go unused because of expiration dates or just not being consumed. What should we do with these medications? The old advice by public health and environmental officials was to flush them down the toilet. It is now agreed that this is definitely **NOT** the way to go.

Low levels of all kinds of drugs including antibiotics, steroids, painkillers, and hormones have been found in our waterways. I have personally seen evidence of acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and phenobarbital in groundwater at my job at an environmental testing lab. A nationwide study conducted by the US Geological survey found traces of drugs in 80% of rivers and streams.

Although the levels of drugs found have been low we need to keep in mind that even very low levels can have big impacts on small organisms such as fish, crustaceans, and invertebrates, all of which are food sources for birds. Studies have discovered male fish that have become "feminized", meaning they have produced eggs. Other fish have grown both male and female anatomical features. This may be due to hormones from oral contraceptives that are found in the waters that the fish live in. Another concern is that antibiotics in our waters may increase the development of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

For those of us living on Long Island, medicines in our waters should be of utmost concern. Not only do we enjoy fish and shellfish from our beautiful bays, but the water we drink comes from the ground. With many of Long Island homes having septic systems, the drugs that we flush down the toilet may end up in our drinking water. With as many as 3 billion prescriptions written annually in the US, the potential for more medications to end up in our waterways and groundwater increases.

So what should we do with our unused medications if not flush them? The best way is to bring them to official drop boxes. Group for the East End (GEE), a local environmental or-

ganization with which many of us are familiar, recently announced the East End Medication Disposal Program. This program allows east end residents to bring their medications- both prescription AND over the counter to a drop box located at several local police departments. It is free and you can drop off anonymously; you don't have to speak to anyone at the drop box. There are several locations including Riverhead, Westhampton Beach, Southampton, Southold, and Shelter Island. Check the Group's website [GroupfortheEastEnd.org](http://GroupfortheEastEnd.org) for specific locations. There are also drop boxes not affiliated with GEE's program at the Fifth Precinct in Patchogue and the Seventh Precinct in Shirley. If it is just not possible to bring your medications to one of these locations, they should be removed from the bottle, mixed with dirt or sand, kitty litter, coffee grounds, or fireplace ashes,

hidden in a plastic bag or other container, and placed in your garbage.

And don't forget your pet's medications- these can also be brought to the East End drop boxes (but are not accepted at the Shirley and Patchogue police precincts). Some veterinarians also accept unused medications so check with your vet.

Although this is one of those environmental problems that we don't actually see, we must remember that what we flush doesn't just go away. It may take a small amount of effort to properly dispose of medications but our waterways, groundwater, and drinking water depend on us to do so.






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## The 66th New York State Ornithological Association Annual Meeting

### Part I

#### Bob Adamo

The 66th New York State Ornithological Association (NYSOA) Annual Meeting, hosted by the Queens County Bird Club (QCBC), was held from Nov. 1 to Nov. 3 at the Marriott Hotel in Uniondale. It was a very well run convention, with outstanding poster presentations, workshops, field trips, paper session and banquet dinner topped off with a dynamic, keynote speaker, James Currie!

A much deserved note of thanks has to go to the QCBC (from all of NYSOA and all in attendance) for volunteering to take on the this sizable task, in spite of having just a core-group of only nine workers! For the last decade or so, host clubs have been hard to come by, culminating twice in a one day affair, when NYSOA's B/O/D's had to organize these events to satisfy it's "by-laws", which requires at least one "business-meeting" a year to elect officers, board members and committee members. Hopefully, this highly successful undertaking will inspire confidence in more of our member clubs to put on their "hosting hats"!

The "Poster Presentations" were available from the start of the meeting on Friday, along with presenters to answer any question you might have had regarding their displays. They were:

- 1) Red-headed Woodpecker Nest-site Selection and Reproductive Success at the Northern Limit of Its Range: Jacob L. Berl, West Virginia University, Jeffrey S. Bolsinger, Fort Drum Military Installation, John W. Edwards, West Virginia University.
- 2) Project Safe Flight: Making New York Safe for Migratory Birds: Kaitlyn Parkins, Fordham University, New York City Audubon, Susan Elbin, Adriana Palmer, David Perry, Darren Klein, New York City Audubon.
- 3) The Effect of Climate on the Spatio-temporal Distribution of Four Irruptive Species: Max Pine, Pelham Memorial High School and Andrew Farnsworth, Cornell Lab of Ornithology
- 5) Lepidopteran Phenology and the Potential for Climate change Induced Phenologi-

cal Mismatches in Migratory Birds: Ashley Ozelski, College of Staten Island/CUNY Graduate Center

4) Geographic and Temporal Variation in Body Size in Red-bellied Woodpeckers (*Melanerpes carolinus*), a Species Undergoing Dramatic Range Expansion: Kathryn J. Schnieder, Hudson Valley Community College and Jeremy J. Kirchman, New York State Museum

6) Mercury Accumulation in a Wetland Songbird, the Red-winged Blackbird, in the New York Metropolitan Area and it's Effect on Nestling Development: Allisyn Gillett, Columbia University and Chad Seewagen, Pace University

In the afternoon, there were 6 workshops offered, but since 2 were being presented at the same time, you could only attend 3. They were:

- 1) Environmental Advocacy 101: Sean Mahar, Director of Gov't Relations, Audubon New York
- 2) Birding Optics 101: How to Choose Binoculars: Carl Zeiss Sports Optics
- 3) Warbler Workshop: Using Often Overlooked ID Points to Identify Confusing Warblers: Tom Stephenson and Scott Whittle, authors of *The Warbler Guide*
- 4) Digiscoping Workshop: Swarovski Optik. This was followed with a field session on Saturday
- 5) Growth of the NY State Bird List: Predictions vs Outcomes and Thoughts for the Future: Doug Gochfeld.

6) QCBC CBC: 80 Years of the Queens Christmas Bird Count: Bob Dieterich

I attended #'s 1, 3 & 5 and respectively: appreciated Sean's strategies for helping to achieve environmental successes; appreciated Tom & Scott's approach to identifying tough warblers so much, that I bought their new book; appreciated Doug's recounting of predictions made for new species to NYS by the birding community of our state from years past, plus making predictions for the next addition to our current state bird list.

In the evening after dinner, there were two workshops presented, but again you could only choose 1. They were: 1) You,

Me, Our Birds, and Climate Change: Dr. Kimberly Bostwick, Curator, Birds and Mammals, Cornell University Museum of Vertebrates & Research Associate, Dep't. of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, Cornell University.

2) How do Avian Hosts Recognize Brood Parasites?: Dr. Mark Hauber, Animal Behavior and Conservation Program, Dep't of Psychology, Hunter College: Editor, *The Auk*.

I chose # 2, learning quite a bit about nest predation, and being amazed by the following fact of life. It seems that in Central and South America, when land/trees are altered/removed to grow shade-grown coffee beans, it makes it easier for the local cuckoo species to locate host nests, which without the middle story, are more exposed to the parasitic birds, waiting and watching in the upper story.

On Saturday, the non-delegates had 6 Field Trips to choose from, while delegates were only able to go on the early morning field trip in order for them to return in time for the Business Meeting, held from 10:30 am to 1 pm. The non-delegate trips were all scheduled from 7:30 am to 12:30 pm, and spread out in all directions:

- A) Jones Beach SP, led by Doug Futuyma (Birding).
- B) Sunken Meadow SP, led by Mary Normandia.
- C) Alley Pond Park, led by Ian Resnick.
- D) Kissena Park, led by Eric Miller.
- E) Robert Moses SP, led by John Gluth.
- F) Jones Beach SP, led by Clay Taylor of Swarovski Optik, Inc., & Corey Finger (Photography/Digiscoping).

The delegates' field trip was literally "a stone's throw away." The G. Francis Purcell Preserve is located right across the street from the Marriott. We had great weather, and some nice birds at this combination of woods and meadow, which is fenced in and normally locked, with entry only by appointment. Our leader, Steve Schellenger had arranged for our visit. Those who had never been there before were quite impressed with its size, wildness and habitats. This land was once part of the

Hempstead Plains. I remember Gil Raynor telling me about bird trips to the Hempstead Plains to look for all of the breeding grassland species, highlighted by Upland Sandpipers, Bobolink, Henslow's Sparrow and I seem to remember him including Short-eared Owls. Although we didn't get any of those species during this outing, we did get an American Pipit, Eastern Meadowlarks, and the best bird of the day, an Audubon's Warbler; the western race of Yellow-rumped Warbler. This whole general area was once known as Mitchell Field.

The Business Meeting that followed, consisted of a roll call, approval of the minutes from last year's meeting, reports and elections. Old and new business, was dispatched with efficiency, dedication, and good humor! Some of the reports given, discussions carried on, and actions taken, were as follows:

Outgoing President Gail Kirch spoke on the main issues our organization has addressed during her term in office. She acknowledged the long, unpaid hours put in by the officers, board members, committee members, publication personal and all the people involved with ebird NY, the State, Regional and County Bird Lists, the NYS Waterfowl Census and our newly completed Organizational Handbook. She thanked them all for their dedication and intrepidity (many wear more than one hat)!

The Treasurer's Report was given by Andy Mason.

A vote to accept The South Shore Audubon Society as the newest member club of NYSOA was taken, and affirmed.

Election of Officers, Board Members, and Committee were conducted, with the following results: President: Kathryn Schneider, Vice-president: Carena Pooth, Recording Secretary: Janet Allison and Treasurer: Andy Mason

The only new Board Member is Jeff Bolsinger, elected to serve for 2 years until '15. Serving Board Members are: Seth Ausubel '15, Tim Baird '15, Mary Beth Warburton '15, Joan Collins '14, Mike DeSha '14, Kevin Griffith '14, Shai Mitra '14, and Bill Ostrander '14

Nominating Committee: Mike Desha, Chair, Andy Mason and Bob Adamo

Auditing Committee: John Cairns Chair, Irving Cantor, Peter Capainolo

The New York State Dep't. of Environmental Conservation sent an employee who spoke about some of the issues they have dealt with since our 2012 Annual Meeting.

The following committee reports were given: Auditing; Archives; Awards; Conservation; State, Regional and County Bird Lists; Field Trips; Finance; New York State Young Birders Club; Organizational Handbook; Publications, Website, Nominating.

Old Business concerning The Elon Eaton-Memorial Award and NYSOA was brought up to date with the dissolution of this partnership.

Under New Business, the best possible news was given and warmly received - both the 2014 & 2015 Annual Meetings have been spoken for...yesss! In '14, the Cayuga Bird Club and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology will co-host the meeting on September 19-21, in Ithaca, at the Ramada Inn. In '15, the Mohawk Bird Club will be our host, with full information to follow. What a way to end our business meeting — *do I hear an amen!*

*The second half of this report was delayed due to another computer problem, this time with Bob's computer.*



**Get Involved**

Would you like to submit  
an article or a photo?

We would like  
to hear from you.

Contact:  
[eliasosprey@optonline.net](mailto:eliasosprey@optonline.net).

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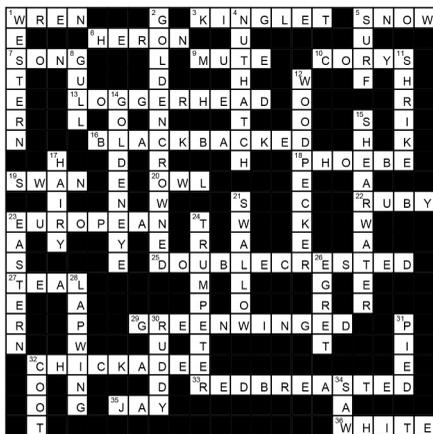
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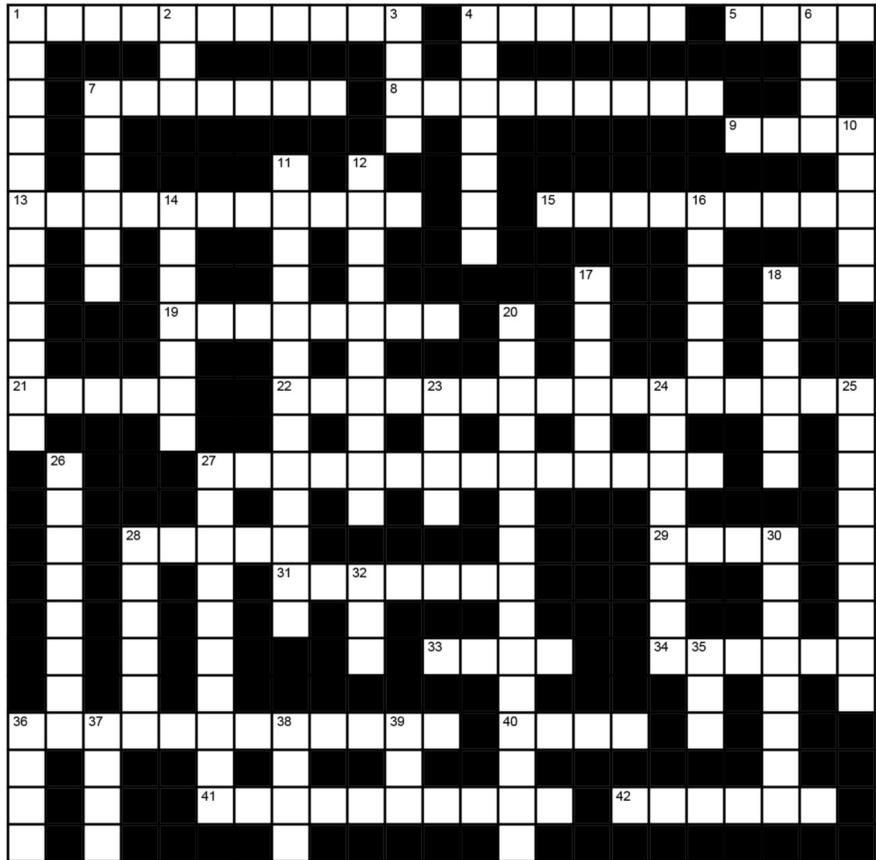


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 to programs and  
 other notices.

Answers to last issue's Nov/Dec 2013 puzzle  
**Winter Birds by Tom Moran**



## Stay Warm Looking for These in the Winter Tom Moran



**Across**

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_ Cowbird
- 4. Winter birds found in small flocks on the ground
- 5. The one with the nasal caw
- 7. It can do short imitations of other birds and a cat!
- 8. Go to southern Jersey to see the Carolina one
- 9. \_\_\_\_\_ Eider; you can see one if you're lucky at Montauk Point
- 13. \_\_\_\_\_ Sparrow
- 15. \_\_\_\_\_ Heron
- 19. Mountain \_\_\_\_\_, maybe she'll return to 25A in Wading River this year
- 21. Common \_\_\_\_\_, duck with a long sloping bill/forehead
- 22. A Tufted Duck made an appearance here last year
- 27. Eaglefest is held here in February
- 28. Tricolored \_\_\_\_\_, go to Florida this winter to get one
- 29. \_\_\_\_\_-billed Grebe
- 31. \_\_\_\_\_ Bluebird
- 33. Bonaparte's \_\_\_\_\_
- 34. \_\_\_\_\_-crested Cormorant
- 36. The one with the thinner bill
- 40. Runs on water to take off
- 41. \_\_\_\_\_ Owl, hopefully will make an appearance at the grassland at EPCAL
- 42. \_\_\_\_\_ Bunting

**Down**

- 1. Spirals up a tree looking for insects then begins again at the base of another tree
- 2. Red-breasted \_\_\_\_\_ Hatch
- 3. Black, Mallard, Gadwall...the list goes on
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_ Bunting
- 6. Trumpeter \_\_\_\_\_, take a look at Upper Yaphank Lake to see one
- 7. \_\_\_\_\_ Goose
- 10. Plural of 7 down

11. \_\_\_\_\_ Kinglet

- 12. \_\_\_\_\_ Flycatcher; a bird of southern arid country, reddish, hence the name
- 14. Lays eggs in the nests of other species
- 16. \_\_\_\_\_ Swan, seen this fall at Hook Pond
- 17. \_\_\_\_\_ Grebe, has golden ear tufts in breeding plumage
- 18. Eared, Horned, Pied-billed, for example
- 20. Red-Shafted is a west coast bird
- 23. \_\_\_\_\_ Bunting, appropriately named for a weather event of the season
- 24. Good place to get winter waterfowl in East Hampton
- 25. Late winter, early spring bird at Captree last year, \_\_\_\_\_ Grebe
- 26. Admire the Hoodoos here while winter birding these bluffs
- 27. Great \_\_\_\_\_, white chin and flank patch (plural)
- 28. \_\_\_\_\_ Merganser
- 30. \_\_\_\_\_ Ducks, not divers, the ones with their butts in the air!
- 32. Seen at North Fork Preserve late last fall, Northern \_\_\_\_\_-Whet Owl
- 35. Maybe you saw the Snowy one along Dune Rd in November and December
- 36. \_\_\_\_\_ Hooded Gull, seen at Coney Island in the summer of 2011
- 37. \_\_\_\_\_ Sparrow was seen at Floyd Bennett Field in November
- 38. Common, Red-throated and maybe even a Pacific one can be found around here in the winter
- 39. Barrow's Golden-\_\_\_\_\_, seen on Montauk Lake last winter

## A Summer Fling



**By Vito Gentile**

Charlie looked up from the corner of his eye and slowly, cautiously, he crossed sideways towards me. We'd known each other since early June, but this was the first time he came to me without any protest or pretention of fear.

The day we met I was out in the back garden with a cup of coffee and the morning newspaper, and Charlie was chasing a wood pigeon away from the bird feeder. Since it was my bird feeder and not his I didn't care much for what he was doing, and in no uncertain terms, I chased him from my garden too!

Did I mention Charlie was a wood pigeon too? Well he is, even if he doesn't consider himself to be one. Perhaps he should take a look at his reflection the next time he goes for a drink in the large terracotta saucer, filled daily with fresh water, which other birds use and he rarely seems to notice. If he did, he'd notice that he has feathers and I don't – three shades of grey feathers with creamy-brown tips down his back and at the tips of his wings, to be exact.

Perhaps he'll notice that he has light grey breast feathers, but then again, I must admit I have unfortunately acquired some of that grey these past few years. Then there's that slight touch of pale lavender that comes and goes when the noonday sun catches it. And then there are those two clumps of small white feathers on both sides of his neck, which again I must admit I also get when I don't shave. No wonder Charlie is confused – now I'm confused. Could we be brothers? I know we're kindred spirits – perhaps I should lay off eggs!

Charlie's greatest feature, and the easiest one to recognize him by, is a short white

feather just above his right eye. To my knowledge I have not seen another pigeon with this marking.

The reason I bring this up is that since Charlie's markings are so recognizable I could always tell when he was in the garden, and I'd rush out of the house and shoo him away so other pigeons could come into the garden and enjoy the treats below the bird feeder while the twenty-eight or so small bird species that inhabit the garden are feeding.

Over those next few days I started to consider my options; big wood pigeons – I'd say the size of a small Butterball Turkey – make big droppings and require a lot of garden. If I leave the persistent Charlie alone, not only will he reduce that problem, but also allow for enough food for all the little birds to feed. And the best part is I'll be spared the morning ritual of cleaning up after his turkey-sized friends.

So, from being adversaries, Charlie and I embarked on a friendship, which I suspected wasn't too much of a challenge since we were both sort of wild in our own way. And the best part was that my rushing around the garden, doing this and that while whistling half-baked tunes seemed to agree with him.

In a matter of a few days I found Charlie always underfoot and the garden soon became "our" garden – well, that was only when Peter, my partner, wasn't out there digging a big hole for some new flowering plant he'd discovered at the garden centre, changing the direction a branch had to take, rotating a dozen pots for optimum sunshine, and best of all, banging his ladder down like a jackhammer here and there while he grappled with the Jack-and-the-Beanstalk-length grape and rose vines that surrounded the entire garden. In this case Charlie and I were totally in agreement; Peter was a pest!

One day when I was out there having, as the British call it, a spot of lunch, for some unknown reason I tossed Charlie a crust of bread from my lettuce and tomato sandwich. He took his time about it but eventually crossed to the bread, kicked it over a few times, then ate it. Our relationship took a new turn.

The next day when I arrived in the garden with another sandwich, he was there waiting.

But this time I was prepared and brought along an extra piece of bread which I tossed piece after piece to him and he slowly ate during our hour-long visit. I admit I never had such fun. Oh, I've been to parks and I have thrown bread at pigeons, ducks, even turtles, but in my own garden this had the element of tossing a ball to a friend, and was as much fun.

Each time he picked up a piece I tossed the next one nearer until by the end of the slice the pieces were dropping right next to me. He never seemed afraid of walking around underfoot while I was doing this or that in the garden, but the fact that I was sitting at a table was for him too risky an adventure to take for a small crust of bread.

Once I realized this I picked up all the pieces of bread and tossed them out of harm's way and he went off and ate them.

Over the next week I varied Charlie's diet by offering various types of crackers, biscuits, and breads until we finally settled on slices of whole grain – five-seeded bread. Once that was settled we were the Darby and Joan of the garden set and we'd be out there – with the shining sun's permission – from morning to night, sometimes eating, and more often than not, just enjoying the day together.

Sure, twice daily I would toss him small pieces of bread, and when up to it, a fist-full of bird seed. I truly believed Charlie liked me for me and not because of the generous slices of whole grain five-seeded bread I was supplying. If it was the bread surely he'd fly off once he'd have his fill. Why, we'd spend hours enjoying each other's company in silence. Oh, let the experts decide why he stayed!

Years ago back in New York City I had a cockatiel. His name was Ascensione and he loved to sing, he loved to do tricks, he'd love to give me a kiss on my cheek and say "I love you!" Yes, I miss him and Charlie is far from a substitute. I'd say Charlie is more of what one would call a distraction – a distraction from my writing, which I had been pounding away at since the entire bleak rain-drenched spring and first part of a cold and nasty London summer. In his way, Charlie perhaps made up for those missing months of sunshine and all those eccentric moments that only come to one when in a quiet outdoor place during an enchanted summer afternoon.

*continued*

Perhaps Charlie represented hope – he gave me hope that I still had the ability to communicate with the uncommunicatable. For an artist, let alone a writer, to have that knack is very important. To sustain it is nearly impossible. It's what critics commonly refer to as "universal appeal!" Whatever it was it made me feel good, and more importantly, kept me off Peter's back while he was trying to work on his show reel.

Did I mention Peter was a film editor? He's also a painter, loves to grow flowers, loves to dig into all sorts of cook books, and his greatest love this summer has been to restore and repaint all of the windowsills in the house, which are many. Somehow I believe Charlie was an answer to Peter's summer's prayers, if not always Charlie's.

Life with Charlie has had its up and downs. Take for instance the day little Joseph, the three year old from across the street came to visit. I took Joseph out into the garden and called Charlie who came flying in and landed right down in front of us as if on cue. Joseph got so excited he started waving his hands at Charlie, but Charlie, knowing I was there, didn't run away. Joseph even threw bread to him and Charlie ran and fetched it and ate. It was only when Joseph felt that chasing Charlie was more fun than feeding him that things got tricky and it took a few days for Charlie to calm down.

*Sometimes I come out  
and he's up in a tree  
or on our  
next door neighbor's  
terrace looking down.*

Then there was that awful weather at the beginning of August – a storm that raged for four days straight. There was no way I could go out in the garden and read a newspaper, and as for putting down a piece of bread... And then, even if I could, where was Charlie? I looked out of the windows every chance I got, but no Charlie. Don't think the thought of taking Charlie into the house didn't cross my mind. I bet it crossed Peter's too. I sometimes suspect Peter was out there in the garden in the rain and was using little Joseph as a decoy to help scoot Charlie away. Sure, once Charlie was in the house Peter's freshly painted windowsills would make pigeon-pecking history.

I must admit I was worried where Charlie was and if he was OK. Sometimes I find it hard to distinguish between human beings

and other forms of life and when I say "life" I'm talking in the full St. Francis use of the word which includes not only humans, but also animals, trees, fish, and I suppose even rock, which St. Francis was fond of talking to and I find no problem with.

During that storm my concern for Charlie was real, but after a few days of not seeing any of the regulars in the garden I figured they're all holed up in some bird sports arena and waiting out the storm. I wondered if that included the large light grey squirrel who hangs from the enormous sycamore tree at the back of the garden, and the small field mouse with the broken tail that lives under some shrubs near the large potted hydrangea.

That little mouse is smart living near that hydrangea. Why, it's like having a room with a bath when one considers the amount of water held in the hydrangea's saucer. And because the shrubs lean onto the base of the saucer she can have a drink or take a bath without a cat or a dog, or even that light grey squirrel even noticing that she's around.

That little mouse was Charlie's friend. One day I was tossing Charlie a piece of bread and this brazen little field mouse came running out and grabbed a piece of bread almost the size of herself and rushed off behind that big hydrangea. Charlie just looked at her as she rushed off and so did I. And you know what, I tossed another piece of bread towards the hydrangea and out she came and off she went again.

When all was said and done that little mouse, brazen as can be, came out and stayed out and ate alongside Charlie – no, I never fed a mouse and it took some time to get used to. But since she was Charlie's friend, who was I to make a situation out of it. Finally when she'd had enough to eat she turned her back on us and slowly ambled back to the hydrangea, got up on her hind legs and took a healthy drink from the saucer. I watched Charlie watching her, and before I knew it, Charlie walked over to the saucer and stood next to the little mouse and had a healthy drink himself.

As to the little mouse, she comes out every so often and although she likes a piece of crusted bread she prefers greens, which doesn't bode well with Peter who is the one who cares for every stick of green in the garden. You know, all summer I had wondered where Charlie found his water. It's not that we don't have water in the garden for the birds.

We fill large saucers every day with fresh

water and leave them next to the bird feeder so all the little birds can have a drink – some even wash, but not Charlie. He never goes near them. I suppose Charlie would rather follow the advice of a field mouse than a small bird. Since that day Charlie continues to drink from the hydrangea saucer, and I suppose along side the field mouse that lives underneath it.

Speaking of water; I was relating the story of the big August storm and I cut myself off – sorry about that! After four days the sun finally came out. I went out into the garden and called to Charlie as I always do the first thing in the morning, but he didn't come.

Later I went back out again and again I called and even tried whistling the little melody I usually whistle while feeding him, and he still didn't fly in. Finally, after a frantic day worrying what could have happened to him, I went back out just before twilight and he showed up as if nothing had happened. Perhaps pigeons have a different temperament when it comes to storms than we mortals? Anyway, I was relieved and ran back into the house, retrieved a big chunk of bread and broke it up and tossed it to him, and that nasty Charlie just flew away without even taken one crumb.

Like a dejected child I stormed back into the house heartbroken, and poor Peter – who was busy scraping away at one of his windowsills and had not time for me and antics with Charlie – had to stop his work and deal with my sense of rejection. This went on for two or three days and finally I gave up. "I'll show him what rejection is all about!"

Sure enough, the next afternoon there I am out in the garden enjoying my lunch and a puzzle under the blazing sun and who do you suppose comes along and is underfoot tapping on my sneaker? Charlie! No, I didn't rush into the house to get him a piece of bread. It wasn't going to be that easy to forgive and forget. I waited ten minutes and couldn't stand it any longer and ran and retrieved the bread. Before long we were back to our normal routine.

It's strange; every day he waits near my back door but the minute I come out he crosses to the far end of the garden near the bird feeder and patiently waits for my introduction, which as always is my tossing a crusted piece of bread his way. Sometimes I come out and he's up in a tree or on our next door neighbor's terrace looking down. Where ever he is, once I whistle he glides down next to me. Once I toss the first piece of bread and it is eaten all bets are off and

*continued*

he's at my side or following me around at a safe distance – which I respect – for the rest of the day. I suppose we have finally gotten used to each other's company, which I'm grateful for.

But relationships change, some grow and some die. In the case of Charlie and me, it was still growing. It all started on the last Saturday in August to be exact. I was out in the garden holding a small handful of bird seed ready to toss to him but instead, for no apparent reason, I bent down next to him and slowly opened my fist. Usually I just drop it and step back, but for some reason this time I didn't and instead put my open hand down on the flagstone and waited.

Charlie approached, stepped back, then approached, and then stepped back again. I felt my action was cruel – how can anyone enjoy a meal when the stakes are so high? So I dropped the seeds on the flag stone and went about my business and he quickly had his meal.

Later I came back out into the garden. The sun was still shining brightly and it was hot and truly the most enjoyable and the best London summer's day I've ever known. I sat with a newspaper doing the puzzle and while doing so planned to enjoy every moment of this blissful day. I suppose Charlie felt the same because there he was at my side enjoying it too.

Then an idea sprang to mind, and I went and got another small handful of seed, sat back down, leant over the side of my chair and opened my fist. This time Charlie didn't hesitate and quickly ate the few seeds that had fallen from my hand onto the flagstone. I held my ground, and before I knew it, there was Charlie eating from my hand.

After three months of tossing food to him, feeling his tiny little gentle pecks on my fingers and palm felt so enriching that I wondered who was feeding who. Seven times I ran back into the house to replenish my supply of breads, crackers, seeds, and seven times Charles ate. Our relationship had reached a new dimension! This feeding frenzy continued until almost eight in that evening under candle light and a setting sun.

The next few weeks flew by. The weather was great as it always is during a London September and all my time was spent out in the garden with Charlie at my side while I worked. Even Peter was amazed how tame Charlie was and how well-behaved. But something started to worry me. Do wood pigeons fly off somewhere for the winter? I wonder? I wish they did. I wish Charlie would. For I must fly off – fly to New York

to see family, see friends, see about getting a new agent. The glass and steel of the Manhattan skyline that tugs at my soul, tugs at my pocket, beckons me near.

Who was going to watch over Charlie while Peter and I were gone? I thought back to the day when the large light grey squirrel first appeared in the garden. At first glance I thought it was a cat. Well, it was the biggest squirrel I ever saw and I jumped up to protect Charlie and chased it off. Only until the squirrel was half way up the tree did I realize my mistake. The thing was, during that entire altercation Charlie had stayed put.

Did Charlie understand that I was protecting him? Or did Charlie think he was so tough that he could even take on a big squirrel? Perhaps he did, because since then that light grey squirrel and Charlie have become constant companions along with his drinking partner, the broken-tailed mouse.

I'm glad the three of them get along. Sure, my feeding them together offers a certain amount of commonality, but I think with or without me they'll stay friends. Since the mouse and the squirrel both have homes in my back garden, I'm positive they'll remain friends. As for Charlie, he was more my friend. I mean we practically play fetch.

How do I explain "New York" to Charlie? How do you tell a little creature like Charlie that you'll be gone and will come back?

While I'm away will he pine away outside my back door? I mean I can't send him a postcard. And if I tried a carrier pigeon he'd chase it away before it had a chance to land. What am I worried about? He'll most likely go off and find another garden to poach in. Is that too honest and sad a conclusion?

Peter's left instructions to have the bird feeders filled while we're away so if Charlie shows up there'll be enough for him to eat from what falls out of the feeders. He's tough – tough enough to kick all those other wood pigeons out of the garden so he must be tough enough to forge a new life for himself somewhere else. Time will tell.

What am I thinking? It just can't be all about food! Back in August after that storm his

sense of rejection was terrible. And when he turned around and rejected me I felt even worse and that all happened because of a four-day storm. I'm going to be away six weeks and I'm already feeling miserable. So how do I explain "New York" to Charlie? How does anyone ever explain going away? Better yet, how does anyone explain after they've spent a wonderful summer together – that their summer fling is over?

Our last meeting was sort of strange. I was all packed and ready to go. I came out into the garden with a fresh loaf of bread and broke off a few pieces and left them on the flagstones in front of the fountain. I whistled and a few moments later Charlie flew in, and for the first time hovered in front of me then landed at my feet.

As he went for the bread I went back into the house and returned with a handful of bird seed, placed a few kernels down in front of him and before I knew it he was eating out of my hand. But there were distractions; the men working on the house next door were drilling, and worse than that, Charlie's former wood pigeon friends seemed to be all out and hovering overhead.

I dropped the seeds and let him finish on his own. Once done he followed me. I thought he wanted more seed, but it wasn't that. So I went and retrieved the loaf of bread again, and here's the kicker, although the ground was covered with bread I already thrown down, Charlie waited for the small piece I tossed to him.

Here we were back where we started, back to when the sun was so bright and all the flowering plants were busting to bloom. So as I tossed he fetched and this went on and on until another pigeon flew in and Charlie flew after it and chased it off. And there we were; Charlie up on the next door terrace looking aloof and me standing forlorn in the garden – ah, summer flings! © Vito Gentile



*Vito Gentile is a frequent visitor to Eastern Long Island and a friend of Eastern Long Island Audubon Society.*



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# Feeder Survey for February and March

**John McNeil**

The Survey will be conducted the first full week of the month starting on Sunday and ending the following Sunday. This survey takes place from October to June.

**INSTRUCTIONS FOR FEEDER SURVEY**

- Define an area containing feeders that you can see all at once from a window. The area should be one you glance at frequently during your daily routine.
- Don't include birds seen off premises.
- Predators perching in or swooping through the count area (not just flying over) may be counted if you feel that they were attracted by the birds at the feeder.
- Record the largest number of each species that you see in your count area during the eight-day count period.
- Do not add counts from previous days together. Be specific with the species name, e.g. we can't use just the name Sparrow, Blackbird or Gull.
- At the end of the count period, record your final tallies and send in the form immediately.

Personal observations and comments are welcome as are suggestions to improve the surveys and reports.

**Please send your report to:**

John McNeil  
168 Lexington Rd  
Shirley NY 11967-3212

*A Brown Thrasher after a snow storm.*



SALLY NEWBERT

Survey Dates: <b>Sun., Feb. 2 to Sun., Feb. 8</b>	Survey Dates: <b>Sun., March 2 to Sun., March 8</b>
Name _____	Name _____
Address _____ _____	Address _____ _____
Town _____	Town _____
Phone _____	Phone _____
_____ Mourning Dove	_____ Mourning Dove
_____ Northern Cardinal	_____ Northern Cardinal
_____ Blue Jay	_____ Blue Jay
_____ House Finch	_____ House Finch
_____ Black-capped Chickadee	_____ Black-capped Chickadee
_____ Tufted Titmouse	_____ Tufted Titmouse
_____ Downy Woodpecker	_____ Downy Woodpecker
_____ White-throated Sparrow	_____ White-throated Sparrow
_____ Dark-eyed Junco	_____ Dark-eyed Junco
_____ House Sparrow	_____ House Sparrow
_____ White-breasted Nuthatch	_____ White-breasted Nuthatch
_____ Song Sparrow	_____ Song Sparrow
_____ Red-bellied Woodpecker	_____ Red-bellied Woodpecker
_____ American Crow	_____ American Crow
_____ European Starling	_____ European Starling
_____ Common Grackle	_____ Common Grackle
_____ Carolina Wren	_____ Carolina Wren
_____ Northern Mockingbird	_____ Northern Mockingbird
_____ American Goldfinch	_____ American Goldfinch
_____ Red-winged Blackbird	_____ Red-winged Blackbird
_____ Hairy Woodpecker	_____ Hairy Woodpecker
_____ Common Flicker	_____ Common Flicker
_____ Rufous-sided Towhee	_____ Rufous-sided Towhee
_____ American Robin	_____ American Robin
_____ Brown-headed Cowbird	_____ Brown-headed Cowbird
_____ Sharp-shinned Hawk	_____ Sharp-shinned Hawk
_____ Rock Dove (pigeon)	_____ Rock Dove (pigeon)
_____ Gray Catbird	_____ Gray Catbird
_____ Yellow-rumped Warbler	_____ Yellow-rumped Warbler
_____ Red-breasted Nuthatch	_____ Red-breasted Nuthatch
_____ Other _____	_____ Other _____

# The OSPREY

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