

HOWARD

MARYLAND ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY
NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 1980 VOL. 9 NO. 2

RUFFED GROUSE SIGHTED IN HOWARD COUNTY - Mark Wallace

On Saturday, 20 September, 1980, I was walking along a dirt road adjoining a weedy area near a corn field at Waterford Farm off of Jennings Chapel Road in western Howard County when I observed a gray phase Ruffed Grouse (Bonasa umbellus). It was about 6:30 p.m. and partly cloudy. About 50 feet ahead of me and to the right in a 20 foot high Sycamore, I noticed a chunky bird which was sitting on a lower limb perhaps 4 to 4½ feet above the ground. With 7 x 50 binoculars I observed the proportion of small head to larger body, the small crest, a pronounced white line through and extending behind the eye, the overall grayish color of the bird, and the broad black band near the end of the tail. After I watched it for a couple of minutes, it hopped off the limb with extended wings and sailed into the adjoining scrub. I made no attempt to follow it into the dense growth. I believe this represents only the third sight record of this species in Howard County in the last 50 years. It had previously been reported in 1931 near Woodstock (Patapsco River Valley--A. Mahlmeister & T. Rocks) and in 1948 on Reservoir Road (Patuxent River Valley--R. Munro).

BARN OWL BANDED IN HOWARD COUNTY FOUND IN PENNSYLVANIA

For those members of the Howard Bird Club who have observed a Barn Owl banding at Fran Nahrgang's, the following information should be of interest. Woody Martin, the biologist from the Patuxent Research Center who had banded most of Fran's owls received a return on one of them. He was notified that an owl he had banded as a nestling in late June of 1977 at the Nahrgang's had been found dead in a barn near Wexford, Pennsylvania (a town north of Pittsburgh). The owl was discovered in late April 1980 and did not appear to have sustained external injury. Poisoning is suspected. According to Woody, the skin was preserved as a specimen for a museum or nature center in the area.

1980 HOWARD COUNTY BIRD LIST TO BE COMPILED

David Holmes will, for the second year, tabulate a list of all the bird species recorded by observers within Howard County during 1980. Your cooperation is needed. Please submit your lists to David at 5643-A Harpers Farm Rd., Columbia, MD 21044, by January 15, 1981. This is NOT a contest to see who has the longest list--it is an attempt to record the occurrence of a wide variety of species. It means that despite your having a very short list you may have recorded the only Wilson's Warbler, Golden Eagle, or Pectoral Sandpiper seen all year. No Great Horned Owl sightings were recorded in 1979; in 1980, however, a nest was located so that that species was well noted. Can we match the Buff-breasted Sandpiper, Short-eared Owl, and Yellow-headed Blackbird of 1979, while still recording most of the expected species? Go over your yearly records; then send them to David.

BLUE JAY RAMPAGE - Eva Sunell

Ed. Note: Sometimes one makes bird observations that may seem senseless, even frightening; however, nature is neither benign nor bloodthirsty. Incidents such as the one here described can shed new light on bird behavior or aid in understanding the life history of a species. Moral judgments should be avoided.

* * * * *

When two chickadees successfully fledged from a coconut shell in my yard near the end of May, 1980, I was pleased to see House Wrens taking up residence in the other shell located in the apple tree. From nesting to fledging takes about a month so I avidly watched the entire process. After several weeks, increased activity in the vicinity of the nest indicated that the eggs had hatched. To look into the shell and see those three gray haloed heads was a feeling close to total joy. Every day brought them closer to the opening. The adult wren's parallel stick guard was rapidly giving way. My peeks from the ladder now revealed at least four bobbing heads.

One Saturday in the middle of June at about 8:00 a.m. I sat on a rock near the wren nest and waited. The nestlings' little heads had been pushing until they were almost falling out. Eventually they made their exit one at a time. The adults were all a-flutter trying to keep up with their tumbling twittering young. In half an hour, not four but rather six young had left the old coconut shell. The last one was so puny that an adult encouraged it to go back into the nest. By the time it emerged the rest of the family was 50 feet away in a forsythia shrub. By noon the noisy family had worked its way around the perimeter of my yard and all were 20 feet from my back door in a neighbor's chestnut tree.

By this time I was inside the house and gradually had adjusted to the constant clamor outside when I heard loud bird calls for help. Robins, cardinals, catbirds, titmice, and wrens were all squawking. Running outside I could see a Blue Jay throwing itself into the chestnut tree. I watched the jay fly toward a neighbor's maple clutching a fledgling wren in its "talons," but it dropped the wren on the neighbor's lawn before reaching the tree. I tried to help by yelling and waving my arms in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue the wren which was on the other side of the fence. Like a harpy the Blue Jay dove and grabbed the wren again. This time it flew to a high Tulip Tree where, within my view, it picked at the wren's neck until it was dead and then dropped it again.

This activity on the part of the Blue Jay(s) continued throughout the day until all six of the fledgling wrens had been killed. The jays did not take the dead birds to their nest for food. Earlier in the week one of this same pair of jays dived on an immature cardinal in mid-flight dropping it with a broken neck. Also, two week-old catbirds in the top of a rosebush disappeared one morning.

There may have been an explanation for what, at first, seemed to be a senseless rampage. This activity lasted less than two weeks. By July 14th a pair of Blue Jays was at my feeder with two fledglings of their own. I think it possible that these jay's eggs had hatched just about the time the young of the other species were fledging, and, for some reason, the adult jays felt threatened by the noise of the other fledglings. By "clearing out" all the noisemakers, the Blue Jays were able to tend their own brood in peace and quiet. Whatever the scientific explanation may have been, I found the experience gruesome, frustrating, and sanguinary.

* * * * *

C A L E N D A R

Meeting place for programs and field trips is the Grempler Realty Building on Little Patuxent Parkway in Columbia unless otherwise indicated. From the south entrance of Columbia, turn left. The building is beyond Symphony Woods and the Fire House, but before you reach Howard Community College on the east side of the street, across from the Wilson Garden Center.

PROGRAMS - 7:45 p.m.

- Nov. 13 - Thurs. - "Wetlands of the Chesapeake Bay" - Chick Rhodehamel, ecologist for the Columbia Association. Find out how a law comes alive. In order to make the Maryland Wetland law a reality Chick and others were involved in surveying, inventorying and mapping vegetation types of the marshes of the Chesapeake Bay for the Department of Natural Resources. This is positive conservation news in an area where some of the best birding in Md. is centered.
- Dec. 11 - Thurs. - "Gull Identification" - Jim Stasz. Whenever there are rare gulls in the vicinity of Baltimore, Jim is there. He has studied and banded them. Some members may remember field trips he has led for us. Circle this on your busy December calendar.

FIELD TRIPS

Eva Sunell, 995-0029, is in charge of field trips. Severe weather conditions can result in trip cancellation at the leader's discretion. If in doubt, call first. Carpooling efforts will continue. Riders are expected to share gas & toll costs.

- Nov. 15 - Sat. - WATERFOWL COMMITTEE WALK AT WILDE LAKE - 2:00 p.m. Leader: John Bascietto, 992-0075. Meet at the dock off Hyla Brook Rd. in Columbia.
- Nov. 22 - Sat. - BOMBAY HOOK NWR - co-sponsored with Howard Co. Rec. & Parks. Bus trip. Call Bill Eckert for information, 992-2483, or refer to fall circular. All day. Leaves from George Howard building in Ellicott City. Bill Eckert & Chuck Dupree, 796-1086, will co-lead.
- Dec. 7 - Sun. - WATERFOWL COMMITTEE WALK AT LAKE ELKHORN - 2:00 p.m. Leader: Steve Simon, 730-4619. Meet at the large dock at Swan's Point off Gradlerock Way in Columbia.
- Dec. 14 - Sun. - WATERFOWL COMMITTEE WALK AT LAKE KITTAMAQUUNDI - 2:00 p.m. Leader: David O'Neill, 997-2241. Meet at Oliver's Carriage House on Vantage Point Rd. in Columbia.
- Dec. 27 - Sat. - TRIADELPHIA CHRISTMAS COUNT. Dawn to dusk count (or any portion of the day) to census wintering birds. Call compiler Danny Bystrak for information or to volunteer; Patuxent Research Center, 776-4880, ext. 279 (day) or 776-8020 (evenings).

Board Meeting

A Board meeting will be held on Thursday, November 20th, at 7:30 p.m. at Jo Solem's, 10617 Graeoch Rd. Call 725-5037 for directions.

DEADLINE for the January-February newsletter is December 1. Submit material to Editor Jo Solem, 10617 Graeoch Rd., Laurel, MD 20810. Submissions welcome.

This was reprinted in Birding News Survey - Winter 1980-81 as the lead article.

WALL STREET JOURNAL SHOULD STICK TO BUSINESS - Jo Solem

One of our members has drawn my attention to an article that appeared on the front page of the March 14, 1980, Wall Street Journal entitled, "Thanks to Handouts, Birds Go to Seed, Not to the South" by Terri Minsky. I'm afraid that people who normally trust the Journal's fine coverage of business affairs will also consider them experts in the field of ornithology.

The article reveals a lack of adequate research as well as a superficial treatment of a complex subject. Among other things the reporter accuses feeding station operators of detaining certain species thereby altering migration patterns that date to the last Ice Age. "As a result, the birds are subjecting themselves unnecessarily to the rigors of harsh weather." In order to make her point she mentions the Carolina Wren, ^{Northern} Gray Mockingbird, Downy Woodpecker and Northern Cardinal among others. Even along the northern borders of the range of these species, they are either year round or semi-permanent residents who do not have established migration patterns. It is quite true that in some areas and during certain winters the widespread availability of food at feeders may make a difference in how many of certain species survive, but, for the most part, the weather itself and the availability of natural foods are much more significant factors. Ask Danny Bystrak, the Triadelphia Christmas Count compiler, what happens to the population of Carolina Wrens during severe winters--despite numerous feeders in both Howard and Montgomery counties.

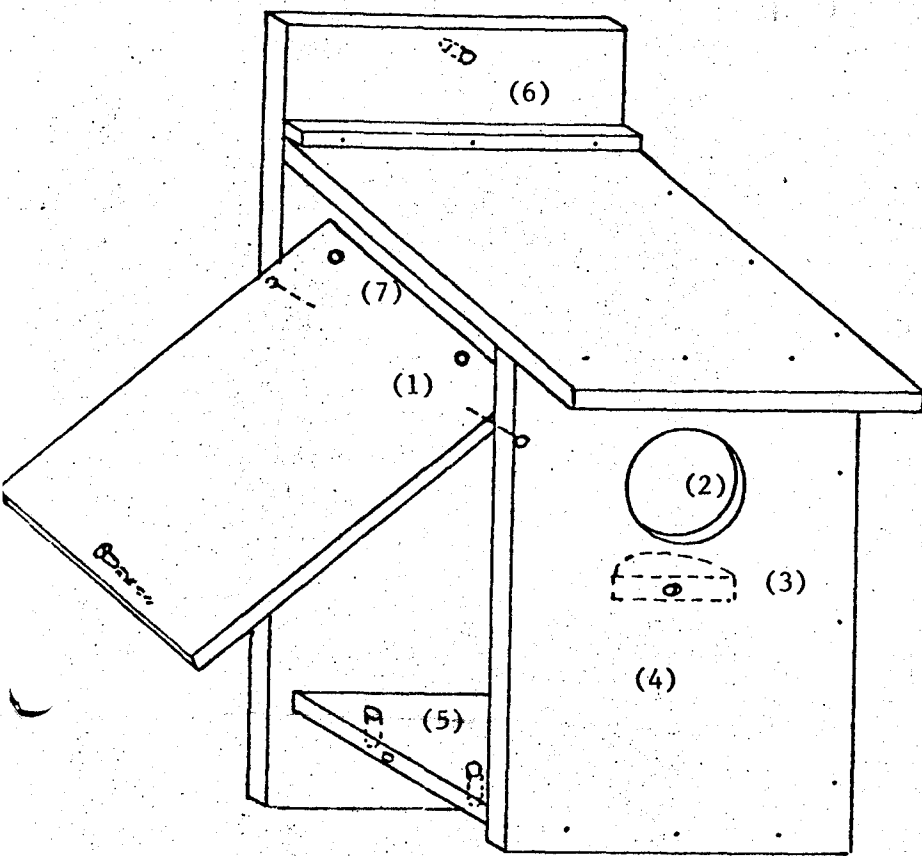
Ms. Minsky also attributes a diverse population of birds in cities to bird feeding claiming, "If it weren't for birdseed, there probably wouldn't be many birds except pigeons in large cities." Not only does this indicate a woeful lack of knowledge (or research) regarding the variety of habitats found in even our largest cities, but she naively assumes that most species present would eat feeder food if it were offered to them which, of course, is not the case. New York City has a bird list numbering in the hundreds and the same is true of most of our major metropolitan areas. Closer to home, both Washington, D.C. and Baltimore, Md. have numerous choice birding spots. Interested city residents can look forward to an astonishing parade of species in the course of a year, most of which would find little or nothing at a feeder to interest them.

The reporter also points out that cracked corn and peanut hearts can develop the carcinogen aflatoxin through incorrect storage. This threat is small at best. Her point loses credibility when she quotes a Mr. Christian Herter, Maine-based marketing consultant for the Audubon Society, as saying birds choose peanuts at feeders because "they like the way peanuts smell." Although there is no unanimity among ornithologists as to the ability of birds to detect odors, generally the more primitive orders have the most developed sense of smell, while the highly evolved passerines that frequent our feeders seem to have little or no ability to differentiate food in that fashion.

I am willing to agree that there are many facets to bird feeding. One could build a case for discontinuing it on the basis of cats or rats in the neighborhood, the expense involved, the presence of alien or feral species, or an inability to provide an uninterrupted supply of food all winter. To claim that feeding is a significant danger in upsetting the ancient migration patterns of numerous species, could be a cause for widespread cancer, or is substantially changing the mix of species in areas is an exceedingly large seed to swallow--at least not without some documented studies cited. The article is not totally negative nor completely inaccurate, but it contains enough half-truths so that it is a pity that it appeared in so widely distributed and prestigious a publication. When I need business reports I can consult the Journal with some confidence, but when I need accurate bird information I go to ornithological journals, research institutions, books, or bird biologists. Let's hope that readers of the Journal will do likewise.

BUILDING A KESTREL HOUSE

HOMES FOR OUR SMALLEST FALCONS



GUIDE

1) Nails act as hinges to swing side open for cleaning and monitoring.

2) Entrance hole is 3" in diameter and 9-10" above floor.

3) An inside perch should be placed 3" from bottom of entrance hole. Use half of entrance cut-out and attach with screw.

4) Use a screwdriver or auger to make indentations inside the front and under the entrance hole to enable the young to climb to exit.

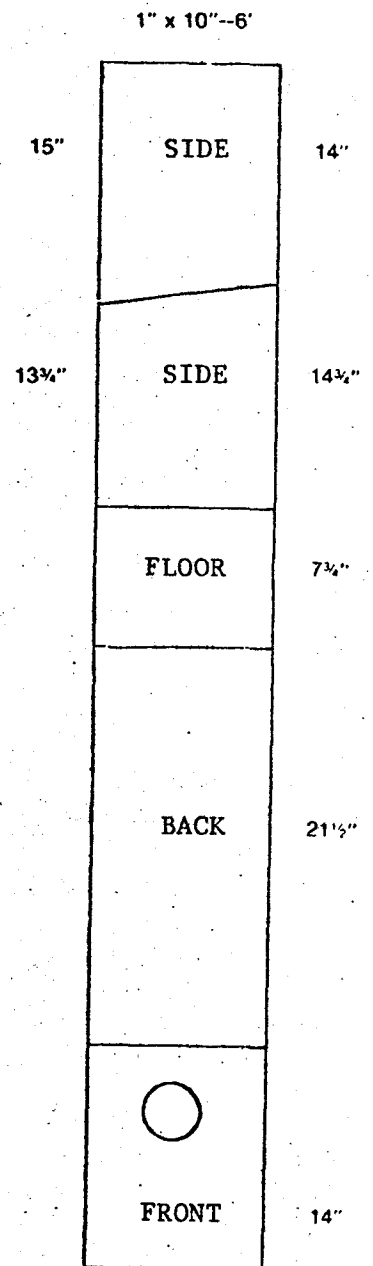
5) Five 1/2" holes should be drilled in floor for water drainage.

6) A cleat above roof is optional but may hold the roof better in place and prevent rain seepage.

7) Two 3/8" holes should be drilled at top of both sides for ventilation.

8) **CONSTRUCTION TIPS:** For easier construction, the roof should be put on last. First step is the side being nailed to back; then front to side; then floor; hinged side is next to last before the roof. **NOTE:** Hinged side is 1/4" shorter than other side to allow side to swing open. The roof and top of front could be beveled 5 degrees for a tighter fit.

9) A six foot board, 1" x 10" can be used with no waste. For the roof, a 1" x 12" board 13" long should be used.



(ROOF) 1" x 12"--13"

BE A KESTREL KARETAKER

A few words about our smallest falcon. . .

The American Kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) is our smallest falcon and the most brightly colored of our hawks. It is the only small hawk with a facial mask and rusty red back. Also known as the Sparrow Hawk or Killy Hawk, it is about the size of a robin or mourning dove.

The Kestrel is often seen hovering (hunting) over a field or meadow and frequents poles and wires along roadsides. Their principal diet is insects, grasshoppers and mice.

NESTING SITES

Kestrels have historically been cavity nesters but will also use secluded buildings and crevices. Unfortunately, man has removed many dead trees and old buildings, plus now the Kestrel must compete with millions of pesky Starlings for nesting sites. Fortunately, Kestrels take well to manmade houses and here's your chance to help out.

PICKING A HOUSE SITE

Good locations for a Kestrel house are open fields and meadows or along fence rows. Houses can be mounted on utility poles, buildings, lone trees, or your own post. The house should face in a south or easterly direction. Pick a location where a tall tree or pole/wires are within 100-200 yards, as Kestrels like a high perch near the house. The height should be 10-15' from the ground and the entrance should not be hindered by twigs or branches as the Kestrel prefers an uninhibited exit from the house.

TO AVOID LADDERS

When picking your house location, keep in mind that the house needs to be cleaned and checked periodically. Therefore, do not erect it where it is impossible to reach later--with a ladder or from your vehicle. An alternative to ladders is to put up your own post (a 4" x 4"--eight feet long attached to a 2" x 4"--twelve feet long) with six inch bolts which will enable you to swing the house down. It is often difficult to find a tree or pole facing the right direction which isn't miles from your car! With your own post, you can dig a hole wherever you find an ideal spot. The only tools you'll need later are a wrench (and a screwdriver for opening the box). The height of the box can be 14-15 feet from the ground (see diagram).

MONITORING THE HOUSE

It is very important to check the house weekly in the Spring to keep Starlings and other undesirables out of the house. Kestrels take no nesting materials into the house, so 2 - 3" of wood shavings or coarse sawdust should be put into the house. Straw or dry leaves are also acceptable. Screech owls will also use a Kestrel house and are desirable tenants. They also bring no nesting material, so any nesting material found in the box will 99% of the time be Starling and should be removed. And Starlings will be persistent, so at least weekly checks of the house are necessary in the nesting season. (Starling eggs are pale blue while Screech Owl's are white and Kestrel eggs are white/cinnamon colored with spots of brown.)

BUILDING A HOUSE

Kestrel houses are easy and fun to build. Ideal material is rough redwood or cedar which last longer but are somewhat expensive. Wood which is subject to warping can be stained or painted a natural color. See page for plans and building instructions.



BARN OWLS

Another raptor which is a cavity nester and takes well to manmade boxes is the Barn Owl. Also, the Barn Owl is suffering the same plight as the Kestrel (loss of nesting sites) as many old barns, silos, and buildings are falling or being torn down. The Barn Owl has a longer nesting season than the Kestrel and there have been instances where owls have taken up residency the next day after a box has been erected.

Two Kestrel Karetakers are also participating in a Barn Owl nesting program (Stiles Thomas, Allendale, New Jersey and Roger Jones, Falls Church, Va.) but we would like to encourage more persons to take part in this worthy project. In the next "news," we will include Barn Owl nesting results. If you have Barn Owl boxes in 1980, please include them on the back page of the Kestrel Nesting Form.

Dimensions for a Barn Owl box can vary, however a satisfactory size would be: 12" high, 18 - 24" wide, 28 - 36" long (top open). Boxes should have 2" of wood shavings or sawdust in them and be mounted high in an enclosed silo or barn--away from danger of predators (raccoons).

WE NEED YOUR HELP

Kestrel Karetakers is a new organization without any dues or visible means of support. To help defray postage and printing costs, a \$1.00 or more donation would be appreciated.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Keep me on the mailing list

Enclosed is a donation of (\$1 or more) \$ _____ towards printing/postage expenses.

I have active Kestrel houses.

Send to: Kestrel Karetakers
3549 Devon Drive
Falls Church, VA 22042

The American Goldfinch (Spinus tristis) is a year around resident here and was a popular selection as the official Howard County bird a few years ago. It is a lively and interesting bird, fun to watch and study in swooping flights with its companions all calling "per-chic-o-ree," "per-chic-o-ree" or feeding, often two or three at a time, on one thistle plant. However, here I will discuss only the identifying features. The jet black and brilliant yellow colors so common in summer give way to a rather dull yellow-olive in fall and winter.

The summer male is difficult to confuse with any other bird because it is the only small (smaller than a House Sparrow) bright yellow bird with black wings and crown. The bird nearest to it in appearance which is also here in the summer would be perhaps the Yellow Warbler which is yellow all over and does not have the stubby finch bill. Male and female goldfinches in winter are generally much like the summer female in plumage. These birds are unstreaked above and below and a light dull olive-yellow with brown edges to black wings and tail. Sometimes a yellow shoulder patch can be seen on the males. (Pine Siskins may show yellow but are definitely streaked.) In the very early spring when molting, the males will appear with yellow blotches all over their body.

Listen this winter for the two winter songs. The flight song is "per-chic-o-ree" (some say it sounds more like "potato chip") and a soft, ascending whistle sound, something like "sweet" or "sweeet" when the birds are at the feeder. They definitely will be a visitor at winter feeders, especially if their favorite thistle (niger) seed is offered.

CAVITY NESTING BIRD ENTHUSIASTS PLEASE STAND UP

Accompanying this issue is a nestbox diagram suitable for an American Kestrel. Several years ago we published plans for a bluebird box; dimensions for various other cavity nesting species boxes are available in the club publication Attracting Birds in the Maryland Piedmont. The Board has indicated an interest in knowing what species of cavity nesters you are particularly interested in, what species you erect boxes for, and which ones you would like more information about. Is there sufficient interest, for instance, in tallying the number of bluebirds or chickadees fledged for the club? Make known your interests to President Mike McClure, 531-6170; Vice-pres. Steve Simon, 730-4619, or Treasurer David Pardoe, 531-6452.

Native cavity nesting species found in Howard County during the breeding season include not only the American Kestrel and Eastern Bluebird, but also various species of woodpeckers, Carolina Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Wood Duck; Barn, Barred, & Common Screech Owl; Tree Swallow, Purple Martin, Great Crested Flycatcher, House Wren, Prothonotary Warbler (very small numbers) & White-breasted Nuthatch. Not all of these species have been found nesting in boxes in this county, but at times they are certainly candidates for using what we provide.

DIRECTORY TO BE COMPILED

As usual we plan to issue a directory for club members around the first of the year. The Board has requested that this year those individuals who are interested in rare bird sightings in the county be shown on the listing. If you did not indicate your interest when you filled out this year's questionnaire and membership application, call Mike McClure, 531-6170, before December 1 and ask to be listed as part of the Rare Bird Alert. Please also make any name, address, or phone changes known to him by that date.

COMMITTEE HEADS NAMED

President Mike McClure has named the following individuals to chair committees for the 1980-81 year: Bookstore, Brenda Ericsson; Field Trips, Eva Sunell; Newsletter, Jo Solem; Programs, Nan Rhineland; Publicity, Brenda Bell; Seed Sale, Eileen Clegg; Waterfowl Committee, Pat Birnie. These individuals along with the elected officers and trustees make up the Board of Directors. They welcome suggestions and ideas from the membership.

YES, THERE REALLY IS A MARYLAND BIRDLIFE AND NOW ALSO THE YELLOWTHROAT

Inevitably questions are raised by relatively new members who claim that they have been MCS members for a year or more and have yet to receive a copy of the state journal. Regrettably Maryland Birdlife has been running considerably in arrears. A recent change in policy will, we hope, allow it to come out closer to schedule in the future. In addition, a newsletter was recently authorized on a trial basis which will come out bimonthly in an effort to keep members throughout the state in touch with one another. It will be called The Yellowthroat (couldn't it be The Maryland Yellowthroat to establish an instant state identity?) The editor is Dan Boone.

MIGRATION DATES NEEDED

Don't forget to pass along your fall migration dates (arrivals and departures) to Jo Solem, 725-5037 by Dec. 5th. They are compiled for Maryland Birdlife.

Howard County MCS
10617 Grae Loch Rd.
Laurel, MD 20810

