



howard county
BIRD CLUB
50th ANNIVERSARY • 1972 – 2022

MEMBERS' MEMORIES

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I came to birding from surfing. I have the habit of starting hobbies late in life that are ideally started at a younger age. Surfing is one of them. I read a three-part article in the New Yorker Magazine entitled “Playing Doc’s Games” by William Finnegan in 1992 and was hooked. I wasn’t an outdoorsy person before that and, looking back, I didn’t have the physical strength to take on surfing. But take it on I did, and though surfing has not been a part of my life since before the pandemic, pursuing waves placed birds and birding in a place that was nearly guaranteed to catch my attention. The place has a name familiar to many birders: Chincoteague, Virginia. Or, more precisely, the beaches of the Virginia part of the Assateague Island National Seashore. As a beginner surfer, Ocean City Maryland was my go-to destination; but as the years passed, Ocean City, especially in the summertime when the water is warm enough to surf without a wetsuit, became more and more crowded, both in and out of the water. A search for quieter destinations led my wife Meg and I to Chincoteague, Virginia. At first the main focus of our visits to Chincoteague was the surf and the charm of a small, interesting community. But a grand spectacle was hiding in plain sight. If you have ever visited the refuge and seashore near Chincoteague with the eyes of a birder, you know what I mean. Hint: amazing birds are everywhere. During the summer months, the National Park Service offers bird walks which start at the Tom’s Cove Visitor Center, a few hundred yards from the surf and end along the beach. Once or twice, after I exited the water after surfing, the Sunday morning walks would still be underway. I had some interest in birds then, but birding was not a thing that I saw myself as doing. One is supposed to sign up for these walks, but when I asked the leader if I could tag along, she said “yes,” and my birding journey began in earnest. Since then, Meg and I usually took the opportunity to go on these walks when we visited Chincoteague. We have come to know the ranger, Gretchen Knapp, on a once-or-twice a year basis. Gretchen is a delightful person and is an excellent birder with a gift for teaching, and I credit her for cracking open the door to birding for me. As my passion for birding slowly tightened its grip on me, while surfing I eventually had to be mindful to not get too distracted by seabirds for fear of being caught in the wrong place by sometimes powerful set-waves breaking outside of me. It was a hint of things to come – the birds were slowly becoming more interesting than the waves.

So, with the door slightly open, a bright-green Howard County Bird Club rack-card at a local bird-supply store was my entry ticket. I picked one up and asked the proprietor about the club. The response was very positive and soon after I attended my first club meeting. This was in May of 2013. When I walked into the room at the Robinson Nature Center, I immediately felt welcome. What happened next is likely a familiar story for those that remember attending their first meeting. It was well attended, and not long after Meg and I arrived, Bob and Jo Solem introduced themselves and welcomed us to the club. This would have been the Thursday before the May Count. Jo quickly asked me if I would be interested in participating in the count, which was just days away. Having absolutely no idea of what I was signing up for, I said “yes.” Jo introduced me to Kevin Heffernan, then the May Count Coordinator. Kevin made me feel right at home and assigned me to count at Centennial Lake with three other experienced birders. My first count was an amazing and somewhat overwhelming experience. Many of the birds were new to me and looking back, I doubt that I contributed much to the day's tally. But it didn't feel that way. That's the thing about this club - from the very first club meeting, when it comes to birding and appreciation of nature in general, I have only experienced kindness and a culture of sharing and a level of enthusiasm that is remarkable. My first impression at my first club meeting set the tone, and that standard has continued to the present.

After my first “trial-by-fire,” I may have settled into a pattern of being an occasional birder – a few field trips, counts, and club meetings scattered here and there. However, as Wes Earp was concluding his tenure as President, Robin Todd, then the vice president, approached me about being a candidate for vice president, to follow after two years as president of the club. I responded to Robin by noting that my birding skills, at least in my mind, were not good enough

to assume this role. At the time, I did not understand that not only does this club include many highly skilled birders as its members, but, in my opinion, the club is highly regarded in the Maryland birding community. However, I didn't know those things then and Robin did a good job of convincing me that birding skills are not the most important skill set for this position. That is perhaps true, and hearing that was enough to convince me that I should consider accepting the position. I accepted. However, I could not reconcile being the president of any bird club, much less this club, with my skills as a birder at that time. So, I increased my solo-birding tempo, attended almost every field trip that I could, took part in seasonal counts, and occasionally birded with other club members. I found that the tone set at my first club meeting was part of the "DNA" of this club. Many of the tips and suggestions through the years that have been passed on by the skilled and experienced birders have stuck in my head and helped me improve. But, for me, the salient quality has been the gentle, non-judgmental and encouraging way in which new birders are welcomed and accepted into the fold. And, the remarkable thing is that this welcoming culture coexists with a subtle, but uncompromising expectation for the highest level of quality and ethics when it comes to observing and recording data about the objects of our passion – the birds.

As the years tick by, I'm starting to be aware that I'm no longer the "new birder" that I am accustomed to thinking of myself as. One of the delights about this is that I am now coming to notice how many new birders in our community have quickly gained high levels of skill and enthusiasm for birding. This group consists of unique individuals that are highly motivated and capable on their own, so it would be off-the-mark to attribute their progress, or mine, solely to the club. However, I do think that the club provides the foundation and resources that encourage growth and are supportive of those new to the hobby.

Unlike surfing, which requires high levels of physical and mental preparation to enjoy basic success and avoid injury, or worse, birding can be as demanding or as "easy" as you want it to be. It's a unique hobby that way; you can make it into almost anything that you want, and yet it still has the ability to provide deeply satisfying moments that I believe are good for one's soul. I must remind myself, this essay is about memories of the "bird club." But it could have been a case-study about how healthy community cultures are developed and maintained and how those that practice the rituals of this culture -- birding solo or in groups – benefit from what I see as a form of meditation that has the power to sustain and nourish the soul. I'll always be grateful that my life-journey coaxed me in the direction of the Robinson Nature Center on an evening in May.