



howard county
BIRD CLUB
50th ANNIVERSARY • 1972 – 2022

MEMBERS' MEMORIES

Wesley Earp

Middle Patuxent Restoration Project: I will always remember the sight of hundreds of birds moving over and about the Middle Patuxent River floodplain, looking south from my work truck on Carroll Mill Rd. It was the spring we completed the project. Rising ground water under 15 acres of what had been drained aerated old pasture, then cropland and finally ten years of fescue sod, was forcing worms, grubs and other soil organisms to the surface. For me, the birding highlight from that spring was a flock of dozens of Wilson Snipe that flushed on occasion as we wrapped up the site plantings.

Snowy Owl: In December of 2017, five days before Christmas, having had reports of a white owl visiting a local farm, I left for work early heading up to Air View Farm, the source of the sightings. On the first major westward ridge, before reaching Mt. Airy, the family has an airfield and I hoped to find the bird somewhere in that vicinity.

Parking on the air strip I spotted a white object on the chimney of one of several homes spread over the farm. I pulled out our spotting scope to get a better look and as I turned toward the home, a second white object appeared in the crop field below. The chimney proved fruitless but as I drew focus down in the soybean field, a Snowy Owl came into view. It only rested in view a couple of seconds before taking flight and flying to the edge of the main building complex. There it was rediscovered sitting on a wagon tongue. It cooperatively sat for quite a while allowing available birders a close look and good photo opportunities.

Raptors of the Central Maryland Research and Education Center (UM Farm): Sue and I have had the pleasure of spending many hours birding with Mike and Grazina McClure. For several years we did multiple Christmas counts together including the Triadelphia Count, and we always walked the count portion of the UM Farm. With a resident Rock Pigeon population 300 strong, along with as many European Starlings, there were always raptors present. Cooper's Hawks were common, but we could also normally rely on a Merlin hanging about and often a Peregrine Falcon. We kept our eyes on the flock and, whenever it took flight we would scan the sky for raptors.

On one occasion, we watched a Peregrine Falcon dive repeatedly on a group of pigeons holding tightly to the roof of one of the farm buildings. They did not dare take flight and the Peregrine was unsuccessful in frightening any of the birds aloft. Its hunting instinct and technique prevented it from striking perched birds. The pigeons must have sensed this for shortly afterward, a Cooper's Hawk flew over and the flock erupted. It was clear the pigeons differentiated between the two raptor species. I assume Cooper's have no problem striking resting birds. Almost immediately we observed the return of the Peregrine, its prey now more accessible.

On December 15, 2007, while walking toward the pond near the traffic circle, one of us pulled an accipiter out of the gray overcast sky. The usual discussion of Coop vs. Sharpie ensued. But, the bird was much too large for a Sharp-shinned Hawk and did not quite look like a Cooper's Hawk. I asked Sue to get some shots as it departed north over the farmstead. It was not until we got home and took a closer look that we concluded it was an immature Northern Goshawk.

A goshawk sighting is a hard sell anytime. The call was suspect, for the distant grainy pictures were not the quality required to definitely show the regional requisite field mark – dark spots on the undertail coverts. The sighting went in to Audubon as a Northern Goshawk, but within the club it was left undecided.

The matter subsided until the following Mid-winter Count when a volunteer, working under Mike McClure, found an immature Northern Goshawk sitting in a tree along Carroll Mill Road, on the north side of the UM Farm, about a mile from our sighting. The report was met with the usual skepticism at the evening tally because spotting on the undertail coverts had not been observed.

As it turned out, the program for the following club meeting was a presentation by Maryland Department of Natural Resources biologist David Brinker. He spoke on his research from the banding of Northern Goshawks during a prior eruption year. After his talk, Jo Solem, Sue, and I discussed the pictures with him. He saw some semblance of Northern Goshawk but could not be certain of an identification. We decided to send the pictures to Hawk Mountain Sanctuary to see if they would volunteer an opinion. The photos were emailed the next day. The response the following day, from their senior biologist Dr. Goodrich was that the bird did indeed have the traits of a Northern Goshawk.