



howard county
BIRD CLUB
50th ANNIVERSARY • 1972 - 2022

MEMBERS' MEMORIES

Tim Ray

I grew up on a tidal creek in Baltimore County. My family did a lot of fishing and crabbing. After college, I was lucky enough to get a job at NASA and meet Tom Feild, who invited me on backpacking trips and introduced me to the joy of watching all aspects of nature. Trips with Tom eventually led to a connection with the Howard County Bird Club.

One set of highlights involves wonderful discussions about nature with people like Jo Solem, Bonnie Ott, Tom Feild, and Chan Robbins. I got to spend a whole day with Chan at the MPEA when we were teamed up for the 2002 May Count. We met at 5:00 a.m. and walked for over 13 hours straight, with only a short lunch break. Chan called out birds by ear constantly. At one point, he fell pretty hard while crossing a creek on wet rocks. He got right up, sort of chuckled, and within a few seconds was back to calling birds by ear.

Another set of highlights involves experiences related to searching for bird nests. When I first started finding an occasional bird nest, each nest was a little treasure, and I became hooked on trying to unlock the mysteries of nesting.

Here are a few Howard County nesting highlights:

In June 2000, there was a picnic at Cedar Lane Park for my son's elementary school class. While sitting at a picnic table with other parents, I noticed a Belted Kingfisher fly by with a fish in its beak. After this happened several times, I excused myself and took a short walk in the direction that the bird(s) had been flying. It led to a large dirt pile. A burrow had been dug in the dirt pile, and I could hear the calls of the nestlings!

Speaking of kingfishers, their level of wariness and awareness is pretty amazing. Once, I found a likely nest burrow along the Patapsco River. I climbed to the top of a high hillside at least 50 yards away, and waited for activity at the nest. Forty-five minutes later, I gave up, came back down to the riverside trail, and continued the walk. As soon as I was out of sight of the nest, a kingfisher flew by, making loud (taunting?) calls as it flew toward the presumed nest hole.

My first Breeding Bird Atlas was in 2002-2006. We were told to "drive every street in the block, even if it doesn't look promising." In my block, there was a community called Gaither Farm. I lived five minutes from Gaither Farm, but had never gone in, because it seemed to consist solely of million dollar houses on large immaculately-groomed lawns. Thankfully, I followed the instructions. It turns out that a small section of the Gaither Farm property had not been developed, and it was heavenly. A couple of giant sycamore trees grew along a small stream, surrounded by meadows, with a pond nearby and forests as well. Every year, that sycamore tree had Eastern Kingbirds, Baltimore Orioles, and Orchard Orioles nesting in it. For many years, Gaither Farm was my favorite place to watch nature.

Knowledgeable naturalists say that Great Horned Owls typically take over old hawk nests. My wife (Grace Cheng) and I have found a lot of hawk nests. Each year, we visit many of "our" old hawk nests in early spring, hoping to see a Great Horned Owl on one of them. Year after year, we struck out. Then, in March 2021, we visited an old Red-tailed Hawk nest about a mile from our house, and saw a Great Horned Owl sitting on it! It was quite a thrill to watch the nestlings grow up and eventually leave the nest and hang out on nearby branches