



# Howard County Bird Club

A Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society

## *In Memoriam*

### Martha Chestem (1923—2016)



Martha "Marty" Chestem died in Boulder, Colorado, October 2016. She was one of the last two active Howard County Bird Club member who had been part of the original organizing group in 1972. She continued to attend meetings until she moved from the area in December 2015.

Marty was a native Nebraskan. She graduated from Hofstra University, New York majoring in history. She did graduate work at Denver University and George Washington University with an emphasis on the history of the American West. Early in her career she was a stewardess for Braniff Airlines. After joining the Social Security Administration, she worked at a series of regional sites before spending the latter part of her career at the Baltimore headquarters. In this 50th anniversary year of Columbia's founding, it is pertinent to note that Marty was a Columbia pioneer. She moved to The Cove apartments on Wilde Lake when that was the only village. It was an ideal location for a birder. After a few years, she bought a townhouse on Faulkner Ridge Circle which she owned until her death.

Although her mother had been interested in birds, Marty didn't connect with them until she was assigned temporarily to an office in Texas. One weekend a co-worker invited her to join her on a birding field trip. That trip proved to be the necessary spark; within a short time Marty was hooked. Soon she began joining tours to birding "hot spots." Although such tours were in their infancy, Marty embraced them with enthusiasm. She visited Adak, Alaska during one of the first birding trips to that location and endured the primitive conditions with stoic good humor. The first American Birding Association convention was held in Kenmare, North Dakota in 1973. Marty was there. She arranged her business travels to always include a weekend, and sometimes vacation days, in order to bird. It was not long before she had visited all 50 states, as well as all of the premier birding sites in North America—some of them several times. By the mid-1970s, her North American life list had soared to well over 500, but at some point she lost interest in listing. Although she continued her bird-oriented travels and still enjoyed seeing new birds, she steadfastly refused to divulge any totals. Her interest had swung to "bird watching" in the oldest sense of the term, along with a wider interest in natural history. Her focus became observing nesting birds and bird behavior. Although her urge to visit special birding sites or chase rare birds slowed, she continued to return to her Midwestern roots. Almost every year she traveled to Nebraska in March, both to visit relatives and to enjoy the thousands of Sandhill Cranes massing along the Platte River—one of the country's wildlife spectacles.

Marty's contributions to the Howard County Bird Club and to the Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS) are almost endless. She volunteered to be the initial chapter newsletter editor. What that actually meant was that she

designed the publication, wrote most of the articles, typed the ditto master, mimeographed the copies, hand-addressed, stamped, and mailed them. In those initial years, she also led an occasional field trip. She continued as editor until 1975 when she was elected chapter president. In 1976 and 1978 she was elected as chapter delegate to the MOS board, and became chapter program chair in 1977. She also became involved in MOS leadership roles volunteering as convention chair for several years while the conventions were still being held on the Eastern Shore. She was elected as an MOS first vice president from 1979 to 1982, president from 1983 to 1985, and served on the executive council as past president from 1986 to 1988.

For the local chapter, Marty participated in seasonal annual counts (usually covering Wilde Lake, Lake Kittamaqundi, and Vantage Point), participated in the bird club's spring wildflower project (even took a botany course at Howard Community College to better understand the subject), frequently staffed public exhibits, was an avid supporter of the local cavity nester project, and contributed seasonal bird records. After her retirement in the early 1980s, she became one of a small group of individuals who used the club's mounted bird specimens to give dozens of talks to garden clubs, school classes, and scout groups. In 1985, she produced a picture bird book for a nursing home. Marty was a recipient of Valued Service Awards from both the Howard County Bird Club and from MOS.

Marty collected bird cartoons. An autographed Gary Larson panel was one of her treasured possessions. Many current members knew her as the creator of the engaging bird cartoon place mats she created annually for the club's potluck. Almost as treasured was her Karmann Ghia, which she eventually traded for the more practical (for birding) Hondas of her later years. She was a fan of classic movies—"Casablanca" being her all-time favorite. NPR talk shows were on all day as she avidly followed current events. She was a strong supporter of many conservation and social organizations.

Two birding days with her stand out in my memory. One morning Chan Robbins called. A colleague at Patuxent had just visited his office and mentioned that the previous day he had had a Marbled Godwit in a field bordering Linden Church Road. This would have been an exciting, albeit wildly out-of-place, species. Chan compiled state bird records so he was obviously interested in the record, but he was always dubious until such reports could be verified. I called Marty, who was often available on short notice. With directions in hand, we proceeded to the field. I don't remember whether it was late fall or early spring, but it was a raw, overcast day. We scanned the field for some time, but eventually had to report that the only long-billed shorebird we had seen was a Wilson's Snipe. So much for a new county record.

Another rare bird search had a happier ending. On May 28, 1985, a woman who lived in central Howard County contacted the Baltimore Bird Club. She reported a Limpkin along Lake Way Drive on May 26, 27, and 28. Having checked the range of the bird, she realized it was far from its Florida haunts. Her concern was not in letting anyone know about the rarity, but in trying to find a way to capture it! It appeared to be so tame she was afraid that it would be killed by a local cat or dog. By evening the call filtered to me, so I contacted Marty who agreed to search the following day. The morning of May 29 she picked me up; we then added Grazina McClure, who lived not far from where the bird had been seen. We started at a house at the end of a long lane near the end of the street. A woman there told us she didn't know the person we asked about, but did add that she had seen a two-foot tall, brown-speckled bird in a horse pasture at the end of the street a day or two before. That morning the pasture was empty. We drove up another driveway. I got out to knock on the door, but before I got to the house Marty called out that she and Grazina had seen the bird on the lawn. They had watched it fly a short distance to a small stream where it began to feed. That was the first Limpkin record the county has ever had. It was last seen on June 10—by Marty Chestem.

It would be hard to overstate Marty's contributions to the Howard County Bird Club or to the Maryland Ornithological Society. Her pleasant personality, quick wit, and fund of bird stories were enjoyed by her circle of friends. Many will long remember her quiet competence, responsible leadership, and innate enjoyment of the natural world.

With her passing, a chapter has closed in the Howard County Bird Club's history.

*The Howard County Bird Club is grateful for Marty's generous bequest.*

— Joanne K. Solem

