



Howard County Bird Club

A Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society

In Memoriam

Connie Bockstie (1932—2023)

Connie was an active member of the Howard County Bird Club from 1987 into the 2000s. After becoming an empty nester, she discovered the bird club and soon turned her considerable talents and enthusiasm to birding. She connected with a group of women who served as mentors and cheerleaders on her birding journey. Her dry wit, willingness to ask questions, and insatiable curiosity made her a welcome addition to any outing.

She lived not far from Centennial Park so that location was her focus, though the birding group introduced her to other areas as well. Her county list grew rapidly and topped out at 244; she proudly joined the ranks of the 200 Club by notching 209 county species in 1994. Connie regularly contributed seasonal sightings, assisted at seed sales, and was a regular participant in counts.

Field birding was only one aspect of her bird interests. She was a talented artist. Three times she won the MOS pin design contest, including in 1990, at her first statewide convention. Her entertaining poems about people and birds appeared in the club's newsletter (see one below). One of her poems was published by *Bird Watchers' Digest*.

My memories of birding with Connie are many; three quickly come to mind. At a time when Wild Turkeys were rare in Howard County, she called one morning insisting I pick her up and drive to Henryton Road to look for a turkey a friend had told her was walking along the road. Of course, the bird was nowhere to be seen when we arrived an hour later, but it was a pleasant morning and we enjoyed the outing even without the desired bird. Other trips were more successful.

One early May morning we walked the Savage Mill Trail searching for migrants. The trail deadended on the floor one of the area's old granite quarries. As we paused to look and listen, I heard a Least Flycatcher at the top of the quarry wall 50 feet or so above us—and made the mistake of mentioning it. For Connie, it was a life bird. A faint trail beckoned on the steep slope, so she suggested we try to get closer in hopes of seeing the bird. Using saplings adjacent to the trail, we slowly pulled ourselves up—navigating the last few vertical feet by my lying on my stomach and grabbing her hand as she scrambles to the top. Not one, but two of the small flycatchers were her reward.

A third memory was one that even years later we laughed about. In late August 1988, Nancy Magnusson found a Red Knot at Pigtail, Triadelphia Reservoir. It had never been recorded previously in the county and, even today, 35 years later, it is the sole record. The bird stayed four days but was frustratingly difficult to see, sometimes disappearing for long periods. I finally saw it the evening of August 29. It was not the best look in the setting sun, so I decided to go back the following morning hoping for better light. I knew that this was probably Connie's only chance to see this species in the county, so asked her to join me. When we arrived, we were surprised that there were no other birders present. A scan of the mudflats turned up a few shorebirds, a Green Heron at the water's edge, and the desired knot off by itself. I quickly set up my scope, trained it on the bird, and made sure Connie could see it describing the field marks and emphasizing how unusual the sighting was. She looked at it briefly, thanked me, jotted it on her list, and then turned to scanning the area. I took advantage of the morning light and began taking notes between bouts at the scope. As I stared at the knot, Connie said, "Hey, Jo, there's a Green Heron out here." "That's nice," I said, and continued staring at the shorebird. After a few more minutes, she repeated the comment and, again, my answer was noncommittal. The third time she excitedly mentioned what the heron was doing. I turned, scanned briefly with my binoculars until I saw the heron, and then went back to looking at the knot. She was crestfallen that I took so little interest in her discovery. It was only years later that she confided how embarrassed she was thinking about how little she had appreciated the rarity of the knot.

Bonnie Ott also has vivid memories of birding with Connie. One particular incident stands out.

Connie and I were birding at Centennial Park when a passerby stopped when he noticed our binoculars. He mentioned he had seen a beautiful bird that was glossy black with red on its wings. Connie piped up with "That's a Red-winged Blackbird!" He then mentioned he had seen a small bird in the meadow that was bright yellow. Connie again said "That's a goldfinch." He then asked about what a small blue bird would have been and Connie again answered, "Bluebird or Indigo Bunting." Then we saw a heron fly in and he said, "Oh my! What's that great big one there?" And, of course, Connie again replied, "Great Blue Heron." At that point, the gentleman said to Connie, "Boy,-there's not too much to birdwatching is there?" and strolled on.

Connie and I looked at each other and burst out laughing!

The following poem was published in the November/December 2003 issue of *The Goldfinch*. Although it was based on "The Night Before Christmas," it describes a fanciful May Count with Martha Chestem, one of the Howard County Bird Club's founders as the main subject. Despite a highly imaginary story, only someone who had participated in numerous counts (and tallies) could have captured the essence of the day so well.

'Twas the Night Before Bird Count

by Connie Bockstie (with apologies to Clement C. Moore)

'Twas the night before Bird Count--suffice it to say
every birder in Howard was primed for the day.
Binoculars hung by the front door with care
In hopes that those warblers soon would be there.
There were birders aplenty all snug in their beds
While visions of "avians" danced in their heads.
And Marty in her 'jammies and blue birding cap
Was deeply engrossed in a long peaceful nap.

When out on the street there arose such a clatter
She fell out of bed seeing what was the matter.
She ran to the window and tilted the blind.
(She wasn't too certain just what she would find.)

The day was just dawning as she squinted to see
What all the commotion could possibly be.
When what to her sleep-weary eyes should appear
But Helen, her buddy, in top birding gear:
With her 10x40 Zeiss and her scope at the ready,
Attached to a tripod-'twas sleek, strong and steady.

More rapid than eagles, MORE birders now came.
As their numbers increased, Helen called them by name.
"On Marty," she shouted, "On Suzy and Connie,
On Nancy, on Jo and Jane, Emy and Bonnie.
To the fields, lakes and woods-north, southeast and west,
Go birders! Go birders! Now give it your best!"

As rare birds that before the wild hurricane fly
When they meet with a "lister" mount up to the sky,
So those birders dispersed-off this way and that.
First one had a Red-tail; another a Chat.
Then warblers a-plenty and grosbeaks ... a bunting!
And sparrows and towhees, all there for the hunting.
Birds flying and soaring on thermals in air;
Birds perching and bathing--all noted with care.
Birds skulking and hiding and so hard to see
Just what in the world they could possibly be.

Birds flaunting and strutting and clearly in sight;
Birds down on the ground and birds at a great height.
There were birds seldom seen and birds that were dull:
Like hundreds of Mallards and one White-winged gull.
Some birds were expected and some were surprises.
There were birds of all colors, all shapes and all sizes.
And the birders themselves were great to behold:
Some birders were young and some birders were old.
Some birders were loners and some liked a crowd.
Some birders were quiet; some birders were loud.
Some birders were veterans and some were beginners.
(But BIRDING is such that all birders are WINNERS!).

Their lists grew and grew as the birds came and went
And before they all knew it--the whole day was spent!
They wearily trudged to the tally at last.
Though dirty and tired--it'd sure been a blast!
All ate, drank and laughed, 'twas a wonderful party.
But wait, just a sec--where were Helen and Marty?
Then suddenly at the door both of them stood. You could
Tell by their smiles that they'd found something GOOD!
"Well," Marty exclaimed in her soft little way,
"We saw lots of birds. 'Twas a wonderful day!
And then I stopped home just to drop off my pack,
And there in my backyard I saw something black.
You wouldn't believe it--so I brought in the bird!"
(And in a small bag "birdy" sounds could be heard.)
She opened the bag to reveal a short tail,
And then a red eye, and then--a *Black Rail!*

In all that large crowd not a sound could be heard—
Every eye in the place was upon that small bird.
Marty opened the door then and off the rail flew,
And all that was left was his loud "Kik-kee-do."

*And there is a legend that exists to this day:
The Black Rail still shows up at Marty's each May!*