



# Howard County Bird Club

**A Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society**

**Founded 1972**

Annual Report,  
June 2023 – May 2024

Highlights of the 52<sup>nd</sup> year of the club included the county's addition of its 313<sup>th</sup> and 314<sup>th</sup> new species in December: A Black-legged Kittiwake for a very brief time at Triadelphia Reservoir identified by Kurt Schwarz and an Ash-throated Flycatcher spotted by Bonnie Ott that lingered for eight days at Rockburn Park. Then, during our May Count Lisa Colangelo spotted a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher on a private property. That was our 315<sup>th</sup> bird in county records (pending review board approval).

Birders reported 238 species for 2023 in Howard County, 12 more than were spotted in 2022. This was mainly due to the attraction of an approximately 55-acre mudflats that appeared temporarily for the year as the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) lowered the Triadelphia Reservoir for dredging activities through the end of November. This mudflats area between the Pig Tail and Big Branch recreation areas had the effect of attracting 18 shorebird species. In June, I negotiated the approval for all Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS) members access to observe the birds at closer range from formerly restricted watershed areas through November 30<sup>th</sup>. For 2024, the WSSC Watershed Manager again granted access from March 15<sup>th</sup> through November 30<sup>th</sup>, for MOS members.

## *Organization*

Full club membership rose from 305 in early March of 2023 to 390 in March of 2024 and was up to 439 as of the end of May, representing a 43% membership increase over that overall period. Young birder membership was more than 20. This significant full membership increase was mainly due to three factors: 1) Each member of the club was encouraged to carry the club business card with the club website QR code to give to interested parties when out birding, 2) Vice-President Val Swan began a series of new birder and train the trainer field trips, and finally, 3) Webmaster Bob Solem publicized MOS's 18-month membership deal for the price of a year. Starting in March, board approval of the purchase of 10 sets of loaner binoculars allowed us to improve the quality of our beginning birder trips. We found that often our attendees did not have good quality binoculars and the provision of them helped the novice birders to decide to commit to more birding and perhaps join the club. In the past, field trip leaders often had their own sets of loaner binoculars, but having this club set of loaners allows us to more reliably have them on hand.

In early June '23, an ad hoc board group met to update the club constitution and bring the committee structure into compliance with the constitutional requirement that the number of elected board members must exceed the number of appointed committee members. Webmaster Bob Solem had done most of the hard work to provide a near-final draft of a revised constitution which was approved by the board, then approved by the club membership in September.

The resulting eight standing committee chairs were Joe Hanfman – Field Trips, Jo Solem – Records, Mary Lou Clark – Programs, Kelsey Wellons – Publicity/Outreach, Megan Bolcar – Newsletter, Sue Probst - Habitat, Kevin Heffernan - Butterflies, Robin Todd - Conservation. Our (non-voting) Working Group Chairs as of the end of the report year were Bob Solem - Webmaster/Membership, Meghaan Lane (outgoing was Sherry Tomlinson) - Potluck –and Sue Muller (final year) - Breeding Bird Atlas 3.

During the year, Sue Probst’s Habitat Committee grew significantly once she assumed the previously long vacant chair in October. In addition to the existing Sharps at Waterford Flats (SAWF) sub-committee chaired by Russ Ruffing, we added a Purple Martin sub-committee also chaired by Russ, the Motus sub-committee chaired by Sue Probst, and the Meadow/Pollinator sub-committee also chaired by Sue Probst. We have plans in the works for additional nest box/habitat efforts in the future.

At the April business meeting, the following slate of officers was elected for the 2024-25 year: President Gregg Petersen; Vice-President Val Swan; Secretary Chuck Stirrat; Treasurer Tim Thompson; Past President Mary Maxey; State Directors Sherry Tomlinson, John McKitterick, Tom Seivert (new) and Guy DiRoma (new) (David Sandler and Donna Carollo outgoing) and Chapter Directors Lauren Crocker, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, and Yi Ying Lee, 1<sup>st</sup> year (Nancy McAllister outgoing).

We also used the occasion of the April meeting to make several MOS-approved awards: Distinguished Service Awards were made to Wes Earp and Eva Sunell (given at the May meeting). Co-Rookie of the Year Awards were made to Lauren Crocker and Tom Seivert and finally a Blood, Sweat, and Tears Award was made to Tim Thompson.

#### *Meetings and Programs*

Hybrid monthly club meetings continued to be held at the Robinson Nature Center (RNC) on the second Thursday from September through May with average virtual plus in-person attendance at around 66. We updated our Memorandum of Understanding for continued free use of RNC for club meetings and the annual potluck through 2028. John McKitterick, Kelsey Wellons, and David Sandler were key to helping us work through a myriad of multimedia challenges for our hybrid presentations and recordings.

Mary Lou Clark coordinated a fascinating and diverse array of speakers headlined in September by world leading birder Peter Kaestner’s “Zero to 9900 – A Lifetime of Birding” presentation and a fascinating “Explore the Macro World” presentation by Bonnie Ott. Mary Lou’s technique of attending several other club meetings to observe their processes and speakers paid off in the selection of proven, quality speakers and many other recommendations to me and the board about best practices for our club’s consideration.

For our annual potluck, Sherry Tomlinson and Meghaan Lane helped us welcome 54 attendees including Chuck and Denise Sharp of Sharp’s Farm and Shannon Davis, the RNC Manager as our VIP guests. The meal was followed by our usual display of select club members’ favorite bird pictures to the delight of the audience.

In May of 2023, Howard County Conservancy asked that we conduct a Merlin app class for April 2024. Club member Steve Luke who the previous year developed our Beginning Birder curriculum for our website, developed a Merlin presentation from scratch with assistance from Chapter Director Lauren Crocker. In October, they gave their first presentation at the Robinson Nature Center and of course followed that up with the requested April 2024 class at HCC.

#### *Club Field Trips and Annual Counts*

As a result of a membership survey, we conducted in August to start our program year, we made an intentional effort to increase the number of our Field Trips in response to member interest. After conducting 36 trips the previous year, under Joe Hanfman's supportive leadership, we increased our trips this year to 56, resulting in a 55% increase in our outings. Of special note, Vice-President Val Swan, Bonnie Ott, and John and Meg Harris's efforts focused on significantly increasing opportunities for our beginning birders which I previously mentioned as a key factor helping us to increase (and retain) our membership. The club participated in the Fall (125 species), Mid-Winter (90 species), and May Counts (143 species) with an average of 86 participants for each count. In addition, club members again supported the December National Audubon Society Triadelphia Christmas Bird Count (90 species and 77 participants) cosponsored by our club and the Montgomery County Bird Club.

Also, Sue Muller and Mary Lou Clark led efforts to publicize, train, and garner HCBC support April 26-29<sup>th</sup>, 2024 to participate in the bioblitz of the iNaturalist app-based City Nature Challenge.

To reward current field trip leaders, other club contributors, and incentivize new trip leaders, I designed a club appreciation coin and obtained board approval for it in August. The coin can be recommended for award by any club member to another club member or person that helps advance the goals of the club and can be approved and awarded by any club officer. The awards of the coins are made in group situations for maximum awareness and publicized on Facebook. As of the end of May '24 we had awarded 76 coins. While there are existing MOS awards, the process to award these coins is shorter and they allow us to say thanks to many more club and community members that help our club.

#### *Fund-raising, Conservation, and Habitat Preservation*

Conservation: Conservation chairman for both our club and the MOS, Robin Todd presented us with monthly conservation challenges and causes for us to engage our community leaders, conservation agencies, and state legislature for the good of our environment and birds. From neonicotinoids, to saving Oxbow Lake, to challenges for Osprey in the Chesapeake Bay, and many other issues, Robin and MOS and HCBC Conservation Chairman Emeritus Kurt Schwarz developed recommendations and helped us to advocate on the side of nature throughout the year. I will only highlight two of our major victories here: 1) The preservation funding for the sole environmental educator position in the county for HCC member Ann Strozyk and 2) the defeat of a county Trap, Neuter, (Vaccinate) and Return (TNR) bill. Club members testified at the respective hearings and sent many letters facilitated by a position provided by our Conservation team to their council persons and the council. Ultimately, Ann's position was retained and remarkably, the TNR bill did not pass due to an unanticipated abstention by one of the bill's two

sponsors, making Howard County the only one in the state without a TNR bill according to Robin Todd's research. Our position was not only for the birds, but for small animals preyed on by cats and for the welfare of the feral cats as well. Our "win" was facilitated by a recommendation by Sue Muller approved by the board that we donate \$5000 for the adoption of a "TNC" (Trap, Neuter, and *Contain*) approach for the cats using the catio concept or if we had no takers, we would donate the \$5000 for the adoption of the cats. As of the end of May, I was continuing to methodically reach out to county feral cat advocates to find a person or organization willing to support a catio pilot project.

Sue Muller's energy and support of the final year of the Maryland Breeding Bird Atlas 3 was remarkable. She constantly updated and assisted members on blocks to be completed on at least a weekly basis and then went so far as to extend assistance to incomplete counties outside of Howard. When the state BBA3 coordinator repeatedly refused to commit any of his authorized funding for lodging or mileage compensation for our club members for atlasing efforts outside the county, Sue asked for and obtained HCBC board approval for lodging funding for block busting weekends in Somerset County. (Note: Later in June, after we had approved lodging funding in April, the state BBA3 coordinator advertised mileage compensation for BBA3 travel to priority blocks.)

In September '23, we celebrated funding support of HCC Safe Skies windows protection at Mount Pleasant with Maryland legislators Delegate Terri Hill and Senator Lam, the bird-safe building bill sponsors, Howard County Council member Deb Jung, and MOS Safe Skies Committee members led by Mark Southerland with a ceremony and a bird walk.

In early 2024, at the request of Tabby Figue of the Howard County Conservancy, our board approved funding of the installation of Safe Skies appliques for the upper windows of the Gudelsky Center at Mount Pleasant. We continued to work with Robinson Nature Center on their Safe Skies window appliques for their mezzanine level. We were prepared to fund any county shortfall of funding up to \$7000. It turned out that funding was unnecessary thanks to County Councilwoman Deb Jung's directive to accomplish the task with county funds. However, since RNC decided to install picture decals as part of their window remediation, in November we worked with Jaimie Wilder of RNC and our club members to provide over 275 high quality pictures of local birds, plants, mammals, and insects as candidates for the windows. The selection period for the decals took a long time, and as of the end of May '24, we are finally nearing completion of the mezzanine windows with a commemoration event at RNC soon to recognize Deb Jung and the bird club for supporting the effort. The upper windows of RNC remain to be done in the next few months with the major challenge being acquiring a lift truck that can reach the windows to apply decals.

#### Habitat Preservation:

With regard to grassland habitat, our Meadow/Pollinator sub-committee led by Sue Probst and significantly assisted by Jo Solem, continued to work with Tabby Figue of HCC to convert a six-acre grass area on the left of the entrance drive to a pollinator plot. We planned to assist HCC with funding and perhaps weed warrior volunteers in the future. HCC desired Chesapeake Bay Trust and perhaps other grant support to supplement our funding and getting grant approval has

been hindered by the need for three estimates for a project whose total cost may be up to \$53,000 total.

In the months of July and August the board approved funding for seed for a pollinator/grass planting next to the mudflats at Sharp's Farm. SAWF Liaison and Club Vice-President Val Swan led our efforts to support the planting to include driving a tractor for farmer Chuck Sharp. We also took time in August to commemorate former club member Marty Chestem's bequest to the establishment of the mudflat habitat, by conducting a ceremony and placing a sign in Marty's honor at the sign-in desk.

In March, Howard County Chairperson Deb Jung facilitated a meeting for club members Sue Probst, Ralph Cullison, and me with Mark Deluca of Howard County Department of Public Works (DPW) concerning better use of the over 825 acres of the Alpha Ridge Landfill. Mark agreed to consider additional areas of the landfill to avoid cutting in the breeding window of April 15 to August 15. We had also precoordinated with Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks for advisory assistance on planting of pollinator habitats with Dan McNamara and Brenda Lee. They did not attend the meeting but agreed to assist Mr. Deluca post meeting if he decided to proceed. At last check by Ralph, Rec and Parks was working with Mr. Deluca on pollinator plots.

In April, Sue Probst and Russ Ruffing organized the Purple Martin (PUMA) sub-committee and gained board approval for funding PUMA box installations at SAWF and Alpha Ridge Landfill. Ralph Cullison was instrumental in helping us gain approval by the Alpha Ridge Landfill management to install three houses near Alpha Ridge water sources. Russ personally built the boxes and installed had completed the SAWF box installation and one of the Alpha Ridge boxes with the help of his sub-committee by the end of this reporting period.

During the year, we formed a Motus sub-committee and began research as to the utility of building a "fence-line" of tracking stations in the county (the Motus Wildlife Tracking System is an international collaborative research network of automated radio telemetry receiving stations. Motus, which is Latin for movement, tracks insects, birds, bats, and other animals over the landscape using radio technology.). At the end of May, after confirming the utility of Motus installations in Howard County with the Maryland DNR, we are poised to flesh out our plans for funding and installing stations provided that our board approves this initiative.

### *Butterfly Activities*

During the summer months last year, seven butterfly walks were conducted by our Butterfly Committee led by Kevin Heffernan to include the Dick Smith Memorial Walk. Kevin presented the results of the Tenth Annual Butterfly Survey as one of our monthly programs and thanks to publicity generated by Kelsey Wellons, our Publicity/Outreach committee chair, Kevin was interviewed about his butterfly survey and the resulting article was featured on the front page of the Howard County Times April 18<sup>th</sup> edition. 100 volunteers throughout Howard County helped to conduct the annual Butterfly Survey last year and discovered 70 species.

The survey also found that monarch butterfly numbers had dropped from 928 in 2022 to 374 in 2023, the second-lowest number of monarchs recorded in the decade-long survey.

In October, our board authorized a group led by our talented graphic artist, Sue Probst to design an HCBC butterfly-themed table scarf for our tabling events. The final design was well-received by the club and the design was added to our member logo-wear clothing site for purchase on t-shirts.

### *Youth Birding*

At the September meeting we recognized Roshan Vignarajah for leading his YMOS team to victory in the May '23 World Series of Birding by finding 156 species. Then this May 11<sup>th</sup>, he again led his team to victory. This time with club member Vitus Li as a teammate. This year the team found 190 species with the runner up team finding 153.

For the second year in a row, we conducted the Young Birders MOS backpack essay competition with two backpacks from the MOS program run by George Ratcliffe as prizes. With Brittany Parsons running the competition with Kelsey Wellons' support, we more than doubled the number of entries from five last year to 13 this year. All young birders who entered were awarded a complimentary one-year membership to the club.

As this year ended, at the request of increasing numbers of interested parents, we were making plans to facilitate parent-led young birder trips starting with an inaugural event at Howard County Conservancy. This activity work group will be chaired by Terri Berkheimer and assisted by Ryan Salsman.

### *Publications and Web Site*

Starting last September, Goldfinch editor Megan Bolcar started a Beginning Birder section, and I started a president's summary section called "Chirps to the Flock" for our newsletter to improve our communications most especially with our burgeoning beginning birder membership.

Indefatigable webmaster Bob Solem continued to work to improve our website with his most important adjustments being the addition of an easily accessible calendar and a more apparent membership button in August.

### *External Relations and Outreach*

Kelsey Wellons Facebook posts of our field trips and appreciation coin awards were a key part of our engagement with our membership. Kelsey also was successful increasing our publicity by providing our event listings to the Howard County Times and to select community center and County Councilman newsletters. Her event posting was directly attributable to being contacted for the annual butterfly survey article. Councilwoman Christiana Rigby also indicated interest in a bird walk and planned to join a butterfly walk during the year.

Mary Lou Clark organized our support of our two traditional tabling events for outreach: the Robinson Nature Center annual Anniversary Open House in September and Greenfest hosted at Howard Community College in April. We also supported the October Sustainability Day also hosted at Howard Community College and a new event this year, the May Green Team of Oakland Mills event at the Interfaith Center. The Green Team event went well, and we will likely support this on an annual basis.

In January, Vice-President Val Swan and her husband Jeff were featured in multiple news broadcasts to include WTOP and WBAL and on-line articles for saving a Common Loon from a dire fate on a frozen pond: "Two Swans Save a Loon". Club members Russ Ruffing and Ryan Salsman were also key to observing and eventually saving the bird.

Starting in early 2024 we collaborated with Howard County Conservancy to lead a Black Birders Week Walk at Mount Pleasant with leaders Kojo Baidoo and Teresa Spencer, supported by photographer Desmond Johnson. The walk was scheduled for June 1<sup>st</sup>. Mary Lou Clark and Val Swan led our coordination for this event.

In May, because of my activism advocating on behalf of HCBC for grasslands at Alpha Ridge and West Friendship Park with the Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks, I was appointed by the Howard County Executive to his 15 member Howard County Public Garden Focus Group for a 97-acre property purchased for the county. This will give us another location to bird and to advocate for our birds and ecosystem. The focus group's recommendations are due to the Howard County Executive by early November 2024.

When I'm out birding, I want to be advertising this great organization. We did have a nice anniversary shirt, but I got tired of wearing other outfit's baseball hats and shirts at other times, so at the start of the year, Mary Lou Clark offered our club a solution. President Mike Spurrier of the Frederick Bird Club had partnered with local vendor Custom Imprints for on-line clothing and select other items with their club and the MOS decal. By the end of the year, thanks to Mary Lou, Kelsey Wellons, Sue Probst, Val Swan, and others, we had a full line of on-line logo wear that could be ordered at any time to include items with our embroidered logo and a very popular t-shirt featuring Sue Probst's Howard County Bird Club Butterfly Scarf design. So now our club members will not only carry our card, but if they wish, they can advertise the club with hats, shirts, jackets, coolers and other items.

#### *Financial Activity*

We have significant holdings in our treasury based mainly on the Ponce Estate award three years ago. Our biggest challenge this year was correcting our tax filings for 2021 and 2022 to a more detailed Form 990 filing because of the large estate award. Our new Treasurer Tim Thompson and Secretary Chuck Stirrat spent long hours with our newly acquired accountant to correct our filings. Despite the long hours spent, our accountant Betty Aylward treated much of the work as pro bono and saved our club significant preparation cost. As of the end of May, our 2021 filing had been approved by the board and submitted to the IRS and we had one last correction on our 2022 filing to allow it to be submitted.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregg Petersen  
President, Howard County Bird Club