



# Howard County Bird Club

**A Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society**  
***Founded 1972***

Annual Report,  
June 2024 – May 2025

## *Bird Records*

Bird records for the year were headlined by a Mountain Bluebird in Oakland Mills, county species no. 316! Although seen by just one observer a few days after a major snowstorm, it was photographed helping to establish the record.

Among other records of note were the following: a Common Teal (sub-species of Green-winged) on 3/30 (second record); a Lesser Black-backed Gull on 3/5 (the first since 2013); a fourth record Least Tern on 5/22; two wintering Red-necked Grebes after a species' absence of 11 years; a White Ibis on 7/20 (eight-year since the previous one); new nest sites for Osprey (including a lamppost in downtown Columbia), Bald Eagle, and Common Raven; six well-documented Yellow bellied Flycatchers (four in fall '24); a major new Cliff Swallow colony found during May Count; a Pine Siskin (ph.) arrival date of 9/9/24 breaking a record that dated to 10/3/55; a Nashville Warbler present periodically at a peanut feeder 3/7 - 4/9 (only three previous state records for this species for Feb/March); and, finally, a male Western Tanager photographed at a feeder in Kings Contrivance 4/20 for the fourth county record

Thanks to Jo Solem for this annual report of bird records.

## *Additional County Birding Access*

- In November a local resident and former board treasurer in Highland granted us access to Highland Lake for birding.
- In January, I coordinated our [annual renewal access letter](#) with the WSSC Watershed Manager for approval for all Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS) members access to approximately 167 additional acres of formerly restricted watershed hunting areas at Triadelphia and Howard Duckett Reservoirs from March 15<sup>th</sup> through November 30<sup>th</sup>.
- On March 15, Howard County Recreation and Parks granted our club access to the 98-acre future site of the Howard County Public Garden in Glenwood for a field trip and we can continue to request and gain access for future field trips and counts.
- In April, Howard County Bird Club (HCBC) Member Terri Berkheimer coordinated access for us to the 16-acre [Ecoworks Holly Hills property](#) in the Glenelg area for field trips, butterfly surveys, and bird counts.
- In early May, at Butterfly Committee chair Kevin Heffernan's request, we gained supervised access to select parts of the 925 acres of the [Central Maryland Research & Education Center](#) (CMREC) specifically for partnering with their environmental staff on scientific surveys for birds and butterflies. This will facilitate our access to key farm habitats for butterfly surveys and for our periodic bird count activities and improves a what was nearly a complete off-limits area due to an incident at the CMREC property 12 years ago.

- We were also contacted in May by the grounds manager of the 160-acre [Mary's Land farm](#) to coordinate a joint public and club bird walk in addition to our existing access for birding and bird counts.

### *Organization Membership and Board Activities*

Membership: Full club membership continued rising, this year by 11% from 439 last May to 492 as of this writing. Our increase in membership over 400, authorized us a fifth MOS state representative. I attribute that continued increase mainly to three factors: 1) Each member of the club is 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 has continued 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. In addition, our 10 sets of loaner binoculars continued to allow us to improve the quality of our beginning birder experience on field trips. We found that often our new attendees did not have good quality binoculars and the provision of them helped enrich the novice birder experience to cause them to decide to commit to more birding and perhaps join the club. Young birder membership was doubled by 50% to around 40 from our number of 20 last year.

Annual Membership Survey: Last summer we conducted an annual membership survey as we did the year before. Below are the substantive comments made requesting specific improvements and actions taken by the club:

- 1) Start a board themed Wingspan gaming night. **Action:** Done. Our Young Birder group held an event in December and monthly gaming hosted by Wild Birds Unlimited Columbia for general membership started in 2025.
- 2) Upgrade our three seasonal counts to use eBird vice other manual methods. **Action:** An increase in eBird individual and trip reports continues to be emphasized but other formats are welcomed and accepted.
- 3) Get the word out about MOS Convention registration and especially field trip access in timely fashion. **Action:** Done-Field trip sign-up reminder sent the day before sign-ups and reminder made at general HCBC meeting before registration opened.
- 4) Allow members to post pictures to main HCBC Facebook and Instagram like Baltimore does. **Action:** Members cannot upload to the HCBC organizational Facebook page by design, however Guy DiRoma and Kelsey Wellons set up a new Howard County Bird Club: Birds, Butterflies, and Nature Group Facebook page. It has 89 members as of this date. The Instagram account setup was not feasible for the club; therefore, we did not establish one.
- 5) Have more youth birder activities. **Action:** Done-Youth Birding Working Group formed, and field trips and one Wingspan event conducted. Details in Youth Birding section of this report.
- 6) Streamline the HCBC website and content. Move Natural History content to another site. Don't post bird pictures with Field Trip reports, they are already shown on the eBird report link. **Actions:** Guy DiRoma redesigned the website homepage with Bob Solem. Bird pictures are no longer redundantly posted with the trip reports on the website. We decided not to separate the Natural History content in that it would have created an additional workload for our webmaster.

- 7) Board position duties should be better described and elaborated. **Action:** Done. Placed on file in board information folder.
- 8) Expand the pool of volunteers for club projects and activities. **Action:** Done and will continue to be done. Examples: new Fall Count potluck host, new A/V manager for meetings, multiple new field trip leaders, new butterfly committee members, new Backpack Competition chair, new Wingspan chair...etc.
- 9) Multi-year membership – renew for 3–5 years instead of annually. **Action:** Submitted to MOS for consideration-not implemented.
- 10) Consider more out-of-county, overnight trips for the club. **Action:** Linganore Creek Sanctuary (lightly attended-rain) and Conowingo Dam trips conducted and Hart-Miller Island (Hanfman) and Western Maryland (Ott) trips in planning.
- 11) More sedentary, fixed birding events not involving walking like the Nighthawk Watch event. **Action:** Birds and Beverages event at HCC, multiple Skywatch events at HCC (most lightly attended).

HCBC Appreciation Coins: The HCBC board officers and I continue to award HCBC Appreciation Coins to recognize members and community partners who help us advance the goals of the club and perform tasks for the good of nature. 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. We have awarded over 140 coins since they were designed and approved for use in July of 2023.

Habitat Hero Award: In December, club member Lisa Colangelo and Habitat Committee Chair Sue Probst devised, designed and awarded a special “Habitat Hero” award to Brenda Lee, Natural Resource Conservation Manager of Howard County Department of Recreation & Parks for her continued efforts to preserve key habitat in Howard County, such as the meadow restoration and preservation at West Friendship Park.

[HCBC Elected Board Positions:](#) At the April business meeting, the following slate of officers was elected for the 2025-26 year: President Val Swan; Vice-President Tom Seivert; Secretary Chuck Stirrat; Treasurer Tim Thompson; Past President Gregg Petersen; State Directors John McKitterick, Guy DiRoma, Mary Lou Clark (new), Hsiao (Mei) and Wen-Jong Shyong (new), and Chapter Directors Yi Ying Lee, 2<sup>nd</sup> year, and, 1<sup>st</sup> year Chen Chiu.

HCBC Standing Committees: Our eight standing committee chairs are Joe Hanfman – Field Trips, Jo Solem – Records, Mary Lou Clark – Programs, Kelsey Wellons – Publicity/Outreach, Megan Bolcar with Jamie Lynch incoming (September 1) – 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 - Potluck, Chuck Stirrat's - Count John Henri Rorabeck - Wingspan and Jo Solem over the Ponce Working Groups respectively.

Sue Probst's Habitat Committee continues to consist of the Sharps at Waterford Flats (SAWF) and Purple Martin working groups chaired by Russ Ruffing, and the Motus and Meadow/Pollinator working groups also chaired by Sue Probst.

We also used the occasion of the April meeting to make two well-deserved Valued Service Awards (VSA) to Mary Lou Clark and Jeff Culler. My selection of these two members was informed by the results of an evaluation of qualified candidates by a group of our previous VSA winners.

### *Board Operation and Records*

Implementation of Google Workspace for Nonprofits: Starting last July, after club member Mark Chandler recommended that we set up a shared space for Motus Working Group records using Google Workspace for Nonprofits. I found that was and is a powerful, free suite of collaboration and productivity tools available to eligible organizations, including workgroups, to enhance communication, collaboration, and data management. I realized it was an opportunity to populate a shared, accessible and controlled storage space for all our club records. Prior to this I had been concerned that many of our records were on respective personal computers of club officers and to some limited extent on our website which was not intended to be an end all archive. Board members had some initial concerns, but thanks to herculean efforts by MOS State Representatives Guy DiRoma and John McKitterick, Webmaster Bob Solem, and Secretary Chuck Stirrat we have transitioned most of our records to a space accessible by authorized board and club members. Board and General meeting materials are placed for viewing in our workspace and we have a group address for board mailings and votes among other conveniences.

### *Meetings and Programs*

[Monthly Club Meetings](#): Hybrid monthly club meetings continued to be held at the Robinson Nature Center (RNC) on the second Thursday from September through May with average in-person plus virtual attendance at 66 for the second straight year. 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. Member Matt Lustig volunteered to take John's place setting up and coordinating the program presentations with speakers next year.

Monthly Programs: VSA-winner and Program Committee Chairman Mary Lou Clark coordinated a fascinating and diverse array of speakers for our eight general membership meetings. Our most highly attended program (83) was: *An introduction to birding in the New World tropics*, given by Dave Ziolkowski in September. Mary Lou's technique of attending several other MOS chapter club meetings to preview potential speakers paid off in the selection of proven, quality speakers and in many other recommendations that she made to me and the board about improvement in our practices for our club's consideration. Some select other club programs follow:

Beyond Field Guides - Introduction to Birding Using Apps and Websites: In early September, Young Birder Working Group Chair Terri Berkheimer and Vice-President Val Swan taught a class about online resources to help identify birds, discover birding locations, and participate in the local, regional, and global birding community through participatory science opportunities. Resources covered included Cornell Lab's All About Birds, eBird, Project FeederWatch, Merlin Bird ID, and BirdCast. The classroom instruction was followed by a short bird walk.

**Birding Optics Demonstration Event:** In late September, MOS State Representative Tom Seivert and Secretary Chuck Stirrat organized an event for interested members and the public at the Gudelsky Center, Howard County Conservancy to orient them to different makes, models, and price ranges of binoculars and spotting scopes. His [orientation slides](#) are available on our website.

**Wingspan:** In fall of 2024, Mary Lou and club member John Henri Rorabeck started a Wingspan game Working Group for the winter months. Wingspan is a competitive, board strategy game about birds. Ultimately Mary Lou and John Henri partnered with Wild Birds Unlimited – Columbia for monthly events that started in January of this year, to provide our club members another fun way to gather to enjoy learning about birds.

**Annual Potluck:** For our annual potluck in March, Potluck Working Group chair Meghaan Lane and co-chair Kim Gross helped us welcome 62 attendees including an increased group of our community partners/VIPs: Howard County Councilmembers Deb Jung (District 4) and Christiana Rigby (District 3), Chuck Sharp, Sharp's Farm owner, Jaimie Wilder Robinson Nature Center Development & Exhibits Specialist, Kevin Cassidy owner of The Wildlife Authority, Scott Munroe, Park Planner, Howard County Department of Recreation and Parks, Brian Lockwood, Mary-Lynn Ragot, and Sarah Richards of Wild Birds Unlimited – Columbia. For the second straight year, the process was greatly facilitated by use of the Perfect Potluck sign-up app that Meghaan introduced last year. The meal was followed by our usual display of select club members' favorite bird pictures to the delight of the audience. Councilmember Jung was heard to say that she hoped she could attend every year for the bird slide show.

**GE Retention Pond Cleanup:** After coordination for permission with the Hughes Company for site access and coordination with Howard County Directorate of Public Works for bag pick-up, 10 club members and one club family member spent three hours collecting trash around the GE Retention Pond in the Gateway area on March 18. We did it because we could and it was a good thing to do in the long tradition of picking up trash in areas that we bird.

**Merlin Classes:** Following up on their classes given last year, club member Steve Luke and Chapter Director Lauren Crocker conducted two more Merlin classes at Howard County Conservancy (April) and Robinson Nature Center (May).

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

**Field Trips:** As our total membership continued to increase, we endeavored to increase our field trips offered. After conducting 56 trips last year, we increased our trips this year to 74, resulting in a 25% increase in our outings-this number includes 17 one-on-one mentorship walks organized by Vice-President Val Swan.

**Seasonal Counts:** The club participated in the Fall (130 species, 99 observers), Mid-Winter (91 species, 92 observers), and May Counts (143 species and 99 observers) for an average of 97 observers for each count. In the last couple years, we have enjoyed an approximately 25% increase in the number of our count observers. I find this trend heartening and an indication of an evolving perspective by our membership that our counts are not just for very experienced birders but a great opportunity for members of all experience levels to join, learn, and enjoy the count on



larger teams. In addition, club members again supported the 2024 December National Audubon Society Triadelphia Christmas Bird Count (95 species, 89 observers) cosponsored by our club and the Montgomery County Bird Club.

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

Conservation: Conservation chairman for both our club and the MOS, Robin Todd and emeritus Conservation chair Kurt Schwarz presented us with many 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.

The most alarming challenge this year was the government threat to close the Eastern Ecological Science (formerly Patuxent Wildlife Research Center). As of this writing, the status of continuation of this key conservation center remains threatened.

Feral Cats and TNR: In April last year, as part of our successful effort to stop a [Howard County Trap, Neuter, \(Vaccinate\) and Return \(TNR\)](#) bill, our board approved an offer of up to \$5000 to finance construction of catios to protect feral cats in Howard County or if we had no takers, we would donate the \$5000 for the adoption of the cats. Our position was to send a message that we not only advocated for the protection of birds and small animals preyed on by outdoor cats, but also for feral cat safety by keeping all cats indoors or contained in catios. Starting last May, I methodically emailed county feral cat advocates of record to find a person or organization willing to support a catio pilot project. In June, we were referred to and contacted by Laurel Cats to discuss the feral cat issue and possible takers for our catio offer-there is no “Columbia Cats” organization per se so Laurel Cats de facto tends to speak for Howard County feral cat welfare. In July, some members of our informal TNR Working Group met with Helen Woods and other Laurel Cat representatives to work on a possible alliance-after several iterations of the alliance document, it was not finalized due to time constraints on the part of Laurel Cats. They did find two takers for catio funding, but one household in Howard County never followed through with their request and our working group deemed the Prince George’s request not to qualify for Howard County funding. At the end of the year since our offer to provide catio funding, we still did not have any takers, so we donated the \$5000 to the Howard County Animal Shelter for the welfare of adopting indoor cats. Just before the donation, we had another requestor for catio assistance, but they wanted HCBC to build their catio vice fund one. The following board meeting we again approved an open authorization for up to \$5000 for the 25-26 HCBC year for anyone in Howard County requesting financial assistance to build a catio for their feral cats.

RNC Window Remediation Celebration and Social: Before our May general membership meeting at Robinson Nature Center (RNC), I organized an appreciation social for select Howard County Recreation and Parks, HCBC, and Safe Skies members and Howard Councilmember Deb Jung to celebrate our partnership that accomplished the completion of the [window remediation for RNC](#). This was a three-year project and some of the windows included pictures donated by HCBC photographers.

Habitat Preservation:

Howard County Conservancy (HCC) Pollinator Meadow: With regard to grassland habitat, our Meadow/Pollinator sub-committee led by Sue Probst and significantly assisted by Jo Solem, supported the beginning of the conversion of an HCC eleven-acre grass area on the left of the entrance drive to a pollinator plot. The initial installation and maintenance costs have been funded by a Chesapeake Bay Trust grant obtained by HCC. The HCC lead coordinator was Heather Johannes. HCBC will fund the second- and third-year maintenance costs of this effort.

Sharp's at Waterford Farm (SAWF) Shorebird Habitat: At the end of 2024, SAWF Liaison and Club Vice-President Val Swan renegotiated our shorebird habitat agreement with the farmer to set up a simplified and no cost rotating shorebird habitat approach. Val also negotiated Sunday access to the farm for birding in February during the shorebird off-season. Also, in February, the HCBC board approved the purchase and installation of an additional Purple Martin house and 3 Wood Duck boxes requested by Chuck Sharp, owner of SAWF. Working Group chair Russ Ruffing coordinated and conducted the box installation, plus another 3 Wood Duck boxes donated by an anonymous donor.

HCC Motus Tower: We coordinated a Memorandum of Understanding with HCC in December and contracted with US Tower Services (tower) and Asio LLC (antennae and termination devices) in March to install a Motus Tower at Mount Pleasant. The Motus Wildlife Tracking System (MWTS) 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 time of this writing, we are awaiting a long-delayed Howard County permit approval to proceed with the project.

### *Butterfly Activities*

In March, Butterfly Committee Chair Kevin Heffernan reported: Last year we completed the 11th year of the Howard County Butterfly Survey. A total of 928 surveys were submitted by 58 people and 44,909 minutes were spent in the field. We found 70 species this year and 21,278 individual butterflies. We now have seen a total of 81 species and 236,747 individual butterflies in the 11 years of the survey. The 482,380 minutes in the field = 8,043 hours or 201 40-hour work weeks, which are equivalent to 3.87 years of effort. We also conducted six butterfly walks which 165 people attended. Club member Terri Berkheimer has been actively seeking new sites for butterfly surveys and has added locations such as the Ecoworks property near Glenelg in addition to our recent supervised access to CMREC for surveys noted earlier in this report.

### *Young Birders*

Backpack Competition: For the third year in a row, we conducted the Young Birders MOS backpack essay competition with one backpack from the MOS program run by George Ratcliffe and an additional 10 sets of binoculars as prizes. With Terri Berkheimer running the competition with Kelsey Wellons' support, we again more than doubled the number of entries from 13 last year to 28 this year. All young birders who entered were awarded a complimentary one-year membership to the club.

Field Trips: Starting last summer, Terri Berkheimer and Chen Chiu coordinated and scheduled monthly Young Birder Field Trips led by parents with the inaugural event being held at Howard

County Conservancy and an early December Wingspan youth birder game event at the East Columbia Library.

#### *Publications and Web Site*

In April, for cost and other practical reasons, the board decided to stop sending our Goldfinch newsletter to a printer for a limited number of copies and mailing. For needed printed copies for exceptions to an electronic version, such as for tabling events and exceptional recipients, new Goldfinch editor Jamie Lynch will print those copies as needed and bill the club.

Website: Bob Solem continued to work to improve our website including the update of the Home page coordinated with Guy DiRoma and a small, but very important improvement to our “Contact Us” interface to allow the upload of files such as pictures with inquiries.

#### *External Relations and Outreach*

Facebook and Publications: Kelsey Wellons Facebook posts of our field trips, tabling events, meeting speakers, and appreciation coin awards were a key part of our engagement with our membership plus our new Facebook page enabled information exchange and wider publicity of club events past and future.

#### *Outreach:*

WSSC Orientation: Last June, I coordinated a joint Montgomery and Howard County Bird Club orientation visit to the staff at the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) Brighton Dam Visitor’s Center at the request of Jasper Sirk, WSSC Watershed Environmental Supervisor. Mark England, Vice President of the MCBC led the Montgomery representatives. The purposes of the visit were twofold: 1) Members will share their experiences with the wildlife that they are running into out on the watershed and 2) WSSC personnel will orient bird club members about what they do on the watershed. We will continue to liaise and exchange information with WSSC on subjects of mutual interest and support.

Rigby Bird Walks: In January and March, Councilwoman Christiana Rigby joined us for bird walks at Belmont and Elkhorn Lake. Her abstention vote on the Howard County TNR bill in April of ‘24 prevented its passage. This was a surprise since she was a co-sponsor of the bill.

Tabling Events: Mary Lou Clark organized our support of tabling events at Robinson Nature Center (RNC) Bird Bonanza in February, Greenfest hosted at Howard Community College in April, and Plant Palooza and RNC in May. In June, Kevin Heffernan organized our Pollinator Fest table and he and some of his committee members led an afternoon butterfly walk there.

Howard County Public Garden Focus Group Results: In May of last year, 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 98-acre property purchased for the county. The focus group completed its [final report](#) last November. There are many attractive features recommended by the group to include a large Skywatch and pollinator meadow area.



### *Financial Activity*

Thanks to the actions of Treasurer Tim Thompson and Chuck Stirrat, we are in sound financial shape and our tax returns are up to date.

Ponce Working Group: In October of last year, I asked the board for recommendations for “how we use our significant treasure to further the cause of birds, their preservation, their conservation, enrichment of our membership, education of our community, and any other things that help birds” or nature. I collected 37 recommendations and formed the Ponce Working Group with Jo Solem as the chairperson. We have approved five Ponce Committee recommended actions as of this document. Those actions include a \$5000 donation to the Patapsco Heritage Greenway for an educational watershed film, \$1000 for a Chan Robbins commemoration mural by Laurel for the Patuxent, a \$2000 annual donation for an additional Howard County-oriented Hog Island Scholarship for a teacher, \$2000 for iPad kiosks for Robinson Nature Center and Howard County Conservancy displaying Merlin’s Likely Birds, and a \$20,000 a year annual budget for our Bird Boxes Working Group.

I look forward to supporting President Val Swan as she takes over club leadership on September first.

Respectfully submitted,

Gregg Petersen  
President, Howard County Bird Club