



THE BELTED KINGFISHER

DELAWARE-OTSEGO AUDUBON SOCIETY, INC.

January Program: Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice

By Andy Mason

Our January 19 public program will feature Linda Melchionne discussing Richard O. Prum's Pulitzer Prize finalist book, *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World – and Us*.

An evolutionary biologist and ornithologist, Prum dusts off Darwin's long-neglected theory of mate selection in which the act of choosing a mate for purely aesthetic reasons—for the mere pleasure of it—is an independent engine of evolutionary change.

Mate choice can set the stakes for sexual conflict, in which the sexual autonomy of the female evolves in response to male sexual control. Most crucially, this framework provides important insights into the evolution

of human sexuality, particularly the ways in which female preferences have changed male bodies through evolutionary time.

The Evolution of Beauty presents a unique scientific vision for how nature's splendor contributes to a more complete understanding of evolution and of ourselves.

The program is scheduled for Jan. 19, 7:30 p.m. via Zoom. Registration is required at <https://tinyurl.com/h4ys2tv4> or visit www.doas.us/calendar/.

Linda Melchionne is a farmer's daughter who first studied horse husbandry at SUNY Cobleskill. She enrolled at Cal Polytechnic, where ornithology and zoology comparative studies created a



niche for her work concerning the California Condor at the San Diego Zoo research laboratory. She moved to Utah and studied biochemistry and nutrition with Nobel nominee Dr. Joe Street and worked as a veterinary researcher.

Now retired, Linda still enjoys reading research papers and listening to lectures about the latest developments in medicine and the environment.

Eagle Trip Scheduled for January 13

by Andy Mason

This winter's DOAS field trip to view wintering Bald Eagles in Delaware County is scheduled for Saturday, January 13. The trip explores area rivers and reservoirs where eagles concentrate around open water to feed. Past trips have resulted in viewing up to 25 eagles. Other raptors and waterfowl are usually sighted also. We will stop at a local restaurant for lunch for interested participants. This trip is mostly by car, with a small amount of walking on level ground. Conditions may be snowy or icy. The trip will leave the Dietz Street parking lot across from the YMCA in Oneonta at 8:00 a.m. Participants may join en route in Delhi and Walton. Return to Oneonta will be mid- to late afternoon. Carpooling is strongly encouraged. For further information, contact Andy Mason, (607) 267-8491, AndyMason@earthling.net

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Local Great Horned Owl Nesting

by *Becky Gretton, Co-President*

I heard a male and a female Great Horned Owl “hooting” nearby on February 13, 2023. (The male sounds lower in pitch than the female and the pattern is unique). I listened for quite a while, and determined that the female sounded stationary but the male changed location. This led me to believe that she was incubating. Searching for them might have invaded their woods and driven them away. Time passed without further evidence of nesting, but I was hopeful, of course.

My neighbors and I heard a very unique sound on July 25. I recorded the sounds and determined that it was a juvenile Great Horned Owl! The sounds continued for weeks, usually beginning late evening and continuing into the night. I heard one nearby and another quickly after from farther away, so two were confirmed. The recordings were shared with my neighborhood and some nights when things were quiet here someone further away would notify me of sounds. Eventually everything quieted down.

The “immature calls” on this site are



Great Horned Owl, Adult & Nestling

*Photo by Alan Toczydlowski
Audubon Photography Awards*

the closest to my recordings for those who wish to listen and learn:
<https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/great-horned-owl>.

Researching statistics about nesting timing and consulting the calendar confirms that these owls were right on schedule:

- Very early nesting in the north.
- Incubation: 30-37 days. 1-4 eggs
- Nestling: 42 days.
- Fly at 9-10 weeks.
- Tended to by parents for up to several months.

I hope that nesting will occur again nearby, but they rarely reuse a nest, so hopefully there's a suitable nest to steal or a large cavity for them in the area. Talons crossed for 2024!

February Program: Mark your Calendar!

by *Becky Gretton*

Join us on Friday, February 16, at 7:30 p.m. for a Zoom program featuring OCCA Program Director Jeff O'Handley presenting *Invasive Species: What to Watch for, What to Do*.

In this online program, Jeff will examine the problem of invasive species and will share some of his experiences battling yellow floating heart, hemlock woolly adelgid,

European frog-bit, and other invasives. He'll tell us how to identify them, where they're found, their impact locally--as well as some ways participants can help control the spread of invasives, and get involved with control programs in their area. Registration for the program is required at <https://tinyurl.com/yusenjvd> or visit www.doas.us/calendar/.

DELAWARE-OTSEGO AUDUBON SOCIETY, INC.

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To contribute notes or articles for The Belted Kingfisher, email: editor@doas.us.

Conservation and Legislation

By Andy Mason

Migrants on the mind

As we settle in to watch our bird feeders for the next few months, and perhaps get out to view winter visitors like Short-eared Owls and Snow Buntings, the September and October flights of southbound migratory birds are just a memory. And though we look forward to their return in April and May, that is more of a dream at this time.

But out of sight should not be out of mind. These neotropical migrants—warblers, tanagers, thrushes, vireos, orioles, and more, are one of the most at-risk groups of birds in the Western Hemisphere. For example, eastern North America's forest birds, which comprise a large proportion of these migrants, have declined by 27% over the past five decades, according to the State of the Birds 2022 report. Some species, including Mourning, Canada, and Cerulean Warblers, Wood Thrush and Black-billed Cuckoo have lost half of their population over this period.

At this rate, many species are

headed for endangered or threatened status, or even extinction. The best chance to protect them is now, before their numbers drop to these critical levels. It is difficult, expensive and often impossible to bring a species back from the brink.

There is ongoing research, planning, actions and solutions underway, in the US and other countries, that is critical to migration and wintering for these birds. These projects often involve coordinating partners--government agencies, conservation organizations, communities, landowners, indigenous peoples and others--to save and restore habitats these birds need. Other threats such as lighted buildings and towers, industrial activity, illegal shooting, and trapping are also being addressed.

Much of this work is funded through the federal government, mainly through the Neotropical Migratory Bird Conservation Act (NMBCA), the only federal grants program specifically dedicated to the conservation of migratory birds across the Western

Hemisphere. Since 2002, the NMBCA has supported more than 700 conservation projects in 43 countries, on more than five million acres of critical bird habitat. 75% of NMBCA funding goes to grants abroad for conserving critical wintering habitat.

As might be expected, this funding is always on the chopping block, despite its success. Congress is now considering the bipartisan Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act of 2023 (H.R.4389), an important bill that would provide a major funding increase to migratory bird conservation, as well as more equitable access to the funding. This new bill would boost the NMBCA and expand the much-needed work to protect our avian migrants.

What you can do

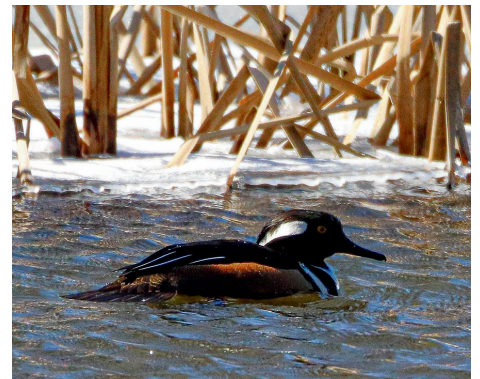
Let your member of Congress know that birds matter to you. Ask them to co-sponsor the Migratory Birds of the Americas Conservation Enhancements Act of 2023. Government contact information can be found in the Advocacy section of our website, DOAS.us

Statewide Waterfowl Count on January 14

by Andy Mason

The New York State Ornithological Association's annual statewide waterfowl count is scheduled for Sunday, Jan. 14. DOAS covers Otsego Lake and the Susquehanna River above Unadilla, the Unadilla River, Cannonsville Reservoir and the West Branch of the Delaware River. This effort involves surveying waterways where they can be seen, and identifying and counting ducks and geese. The totals are used by the Department of Environmental Conservation in managing these species over the upcoming year.

If anyone is interested in helping with the census, please contact Andy Mason, (607) 267- 8491, AndyMason@earthling.net.



Hooded Merganser
Photo by Landa Palmer

The mission of Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society is to protect our natural environment and connect people with nature to benefit birds and other wildlife through conservation, education, research and advocacy.

Finding Wonder

By Chris DeCesare, DOAS Director

When I graduated from college many years ago, I thought I was going to eventually become a field biologist. Life had other plans for me, though. I didn't get into the graduate programs I had hoped for, and so I looked for opportunities to build my resume. I was able to get an internship with NYSDEC's Rogers Environmental Education Center in Sherburne NY, and those twelve weeks changed my life. I found a passion for sharing nature with others, and a voice to do so.

This passion comes from finding wonder in the natural world with a childlike enthusiasm--a feeling that I hope to instill in others. It starts with getting outdoors and observing with all your senses. What catches your eye or your ears? Follow that movement, color, or sound. Curiosity leads to new discoveries! You don't need to know what things are to learn something about them.

I remember a lesson from my first week of classes in graduate school, when my professor brought in a dead bird that he'd found on the ground on the way in. He handed the bird in a plastic bag to a student in the front of the room and said, "Let's pretend that a child finds this on the ground and asks you what it is. What do you say?" One student responded, "I would get out my field guides and we would look it up together." The



Photo by Jane Bachman

professor said, "That's great, but what if you don't have any field guides with you?" The bird was passed to someone else. This student suggested that she would look at the color of the bird and ask the child where it might live. Another student volunteered that looking at its beak and feet might tell us what it eats or how it moves. As more students shared ideas, we got a pretty good idea about the habitat of this bird. If our professor had simply come in and told us that he found an Olive-sided Flycatcher, we may not have been curious enough to look beyond the name. Wonder isn't in the name. It comes from observing, and allowing yourself to see the "coolness" in things.

Winter is a great time to observe nature. Yes, it can be cold and sometimes snowy, but these conditions bring opportunities to discover things you may not

experience the rest of the year.

One of my favorite things to do is to walk in a pine forest after a fresh snowfall. It is so quiet. The smell of the pines is luscious and the snow crunches and squeaks beneath your boots. Often, you'll see and hear chickadees flitting from tree to tree or among understory plants. Listen for other birds. Do you hear the nasal sounds of a nuthatch? Watch how these birds move up and down the tree trunks.



White-breasted Nuthatch

Photo by Landa Palmer

Check out the snow as you walk. What kind of tracks do you see? Are they in a straight line? How far apart are they? Can you tell if the animal was walking or running or hopping? Where do they go--down a path or into the shrubs? Look closely at the base of trees and you may see tiny black insects hopping on the snow. What could they be doing?

Where is a place that interests you? I encourage you to go to that place with a sense of discovery. Invite a child. You never know what you might find to wonder about.



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October-December Bird Sightings

By *Sandy Bright*

Absence makes the heart grow fonder; thus, species that are a dime a dozen during breeding season become special sightings in late fall. In mid-October some Common Grackles and a Red-winged Blackbird visited Barb Palmer's yard, the blackbird continuing into early November. Barb later photographed a female Mallard and female Purple Finch.

On Halloween, Chipping Sparrows visited our feeders. Nearby in our neighborhood Marilyn Bailey observed an American Robin, and also spotted several Common Mergansers and Belted Kingfishers on Goodyear Lake. Another robin showed up foraging in her Mountain Ash around Thanksgiving. On a dark evening in early December, Lindsay McIsaac reported the unexpected sound of singing robins at BJ's in Oneonta.

Winter visitors began showing up early, with a Northern Shrike found by Randy and Carol Lynch on October 29th. November 8th brought the first Pine Siskin, reported by Mike DeWispelaere at the DOAS Sanctuary. Snow Buntings arrived in West Burlington on November 21st (Tom and Jo Salo), with Tree Sparrows



Northern Shrike
Photo by Randy Lynch



Female Purple Finch
Photo by Barb Palmer

following a day later in Harpersfield (Randy and Carol Lynch) and two weeks later in Delhi (Kathryn Davino). December 7th brought a big migration of Snow Geese, with Pam Peters reporting several hundred flying over Franklin, and Randy and Carol Lynch spotting a large mixed flock of Canada Geese and Snow Geese over the DOAS Sanctuary.

Driving near the Susquehanna, Charlie Scheim and I watched as a Sharp-shinned Hawk swooped in after a group of flying crows, very nearly connecting with one. A few weeks later, we spotted a Red-tailed Hawk perched on the peak of a spruce tree, looking for all the world like an angel atop a Christmas tree.

Gerianne Carillo observed a Cooper's Hawk "looking for breakfast" near her feeders. When Blue Jays sounded the alarm, potential meals cleared out quickly. The jays taunted the hawk, and it gave chase, without success.

Early one November morning Tom Salo heard an Eastern Screech Owl at his place. A few days later, he noticed its head sticking out of the duck box by his pond, tracking him.

A few of the more interesting sightings by the Franklin Mountain Hawkwatchers included Common

Loon, Wood Duck, a large flock of Brant, Double-crested Cormorant, Long-tailed Duck, Common Snipe, Horned Lark, Ruby- and Golden-crowned Kinglets, a red fox, and a determined Cooper's Hawk zeroing in on the owl decoy.

In December, Gerianne Carillo was treated to a visit from a Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Charlie Scheim watched a pair of Eastern Bluebirds at the Oneonta Country Club.

Late November is not generally thought of as breeding season, but larger birds especially must plan ahead. So it's not uncommon to observe, for example, eagles repairing nests, owls calling, or ravens' courtship flights. What was quite unexpected, however, was the pair of eagles that Dorian and Eric Huneke observed copulating. A discussion on the OSBirds* listserv ensued, with Cindy Staley reporting the same; Tom Salo suggested it might have been pair bonding or recreational. Randy Lynch shared a photo of a pair in their nest near Bloomville (below).



*Through OSBirds, you can share your bird sightings and see what others in our area are finding. To sign up, go to "groups.io", click "Find or Create a Group", search for "OSBirds", then click "Join This Group".

NYS Breeding Bird Atlas III Update - Fall 2023

By Charlie Scheim

The New York State Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA), a state-wide volunteer effort to document the birds that live and breed in New York, has finished four of five scheduled seasons. While a good deal of progress has been made, there is still much work to be done, and efforts of many birders is needed in our final 2024 season.

The BBA divides the entire state into blocks approximately 3 miles square, about one-third of which are designated as “priority blocks”.

Atlases not only record the presence of avian species, but also any breeding behaviors observed. They record their observations in various blocks, often returning to these blocks a number of times, perhaps over a few years, looking for breeding behaviors. Birds observed are coded as “Possible”, “Probable”, or “Confirmed” breeders, based on the behaviors observed.

While birders can contribute sightings from anywhere in the state, data from priority blocks is especially valuable for future scientific work. But, as different types of research require different types of data sets, sightings from all blocks are important and will be utilized.

At the end of the BBA's fourth season, 317 species have been coded as possible breeders statewide, with 231 of these confirmed as breeding in the state. Locally, in Otsego County, those numbers are 164 coded, 122 confirmed; in Delaware County, 162 coded and 113 confirmed; and in Chenango County, 165 coded and 129 confirmed. When a block has 20 hours of atlas time (some preferably during crepuscular or nocturnal hours) and all habitats in the block have been visited, BBA blocks are considered "Complete" if at least 45 species have been coded as either



Female Magnolia Warbler carrying food
Photo by Landa Palmer

Confirmed or Probable. One of the BBA's goals is to complete all priority blocks. So far though, only 35% of the state's priority blocks are Complete. There are large areas of the state, including northern New York, the Catskills, and southwestern New York, that still have seen relatively little coverage. Locally, however, our dedicated birders have achieved far better results. All of Otsego's and Chenango's priority blocks are Complete (the only two such counties in the state), and about 50% of Delaware's priority blocks are Complete.

Birders have so far invested a great deal of effort atlas-ing in New York, but clearly much work remains to be done. Unfortunately, the number of atlasers reporting results has steadily decreased, rather than increased, over the four years. In our final year next season, we need as many folks as possible to contribute to the atlas.

If you like to travel, you might consider atlas-ing in the less visited regions mentioned above. A bit closer to our area, blocks in Madison, Schoharie, and southern Delaware counties all need work. If you prefer to bird even more locally, you can work to increase results in an already completed priority block or visit

non-priority blocks. Blocks designated as Complete simply meet a minimum standard, and there are likely holes to be filled in every block. All the data contributed is valuable for the atlas.

Atlas data is submitted via eBird. If you currently use eBird, it is easy to contribute to the atlas: simply change the portal to “New York Breeding Bird Atlas” and then add a breeding code to every observation on a checklist.

Participating in an atlas is a wonderful way to improve your birding skills and enjoy beautiful areas of our state. The time spent in the field carefully observing birds and their behaviors is incredibly rewarding. Birders of all levels gain a deeper understanding of the lives and habits of our avian companions. The BBA asks you to consider joining our endeavor. If you want to volunteer or would like more information, contact me, Charlie Scheim, at scheimc@hartwick.edu.



Female Baltimore Oriole carrying nesting material (above); the nest (below)
Photos by Landa Palmer



Upcoming Activities

January

January 13- **DOAS Eagle Trip**: Field trip to view wintering Bald Eagles in Delaware County. This trip is open to the public. Contact Andy Mason if you are interested in joining this trip (see contact information below)

January 14 - **Annual Statewide Waterfowl Count**: This effort involves identifying and counting ducks and geese in our region. Anyone interested in helping with the census, please contact Andy Mason, phone (607) 267-8491, or email AndyMason@earthling.net

January 16 - **DOAS Board Meeting**: 6:30 p.m.

January 19 - **DOAS Public Program**: 7:30 p.m., via Zoom, *Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice*, featuring Linda

Melchionne (see article on page 1). Registration required at: <https://tinyurl.com/h4ys2tv4> or visit www.doas.us/calendar/

February

February 16 - **DOAS Public Program**: 7:30 p.m., via Zoom, *Invasive Species: What to Watch for, What to Do* presented by Jeff O'Handley (see article page 2). Registration required at <https://tinyurl.com/yusenjvd> or visit www.doas.us/calendar/

February 16-19 - **Great Backyard Bird Count** (see article below)

February 20 - **DOAS Board Meeting**: 6:30 p.m.

DOAS PROGRAMS ARE FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

In Case You Missed It — Past Webinars Are Available Online at <https://doas.us/webinars/>.

The Great Backyard Bird Count

By Charlie Scheim

The Great Backyard Bird Count occurs on February 16-19, 2024. It is easy to participate: simply plan to watch birds for at least 15 minutes on any or all of these four days, wherever you'd like, and record all birds you see or hear (the Merlin app is a great tool for helping to identify bird sounds!). If you're comfortable

with eBird on your smartphone, you can use it to record your observations. All checklists entered in this time period will be entered into the GBBC.

Alternatively, if you prefer to enter your observations via your computer, perhaps from a paper list you kept during this time while watching out your window or hiking through fields



*Purple Finch
Photo by Landa Palmer*

and forests, go to the eBird website www.ebird.org and use the Submit option (you will need an eBird account). For more information, go to www.birdcount.org

Is your Membership Current? Your mailing label on the back page of this newsletter will inform you of your membership expiration date. This is the only notice you receive to let you know you need to renew your membership. Thanks for rejoining when your membership expires.

DOAS Membership

Cost is \$25 annually or \$35 for two years; family memberships \$30 annually or \$40 for two years. Memberships can also be purchased online at <https://doas.us/membership/> or make your check payable to "DOAS" and mail payment to: DOAS Membership Chair, PO Box 544, Oneonta, NY 13820-0544.

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