



THE BELTED KINGFISHER

DELAWARE-OTSEGO AUDUBON SOCIETY, INC.

February Program: Invasive Species: What to Watch for, What to Do

By Becky Gretton

On Friday, February 16, 2024, the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society will host a 7:30 p.m. Zoom program featuring Jeff O'Handley, presenting on the topic of invasive species.

Whether you're taking a lazy paddle on a lake, seeking an elusive warbler in the treetops, even walking down a city street, invasive species are everywhere. Invasive species disrupt native ecosystems, cost our economy billions of dollars each year, and can directly and indirectly cause injury and illness. And it seems like there's always a new one making news.

In this online program, Jeff O'Handley 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. The program will include a broad overview of invasive species, including where they come from, how they get here, and why some introduced species aren't a problem.

Jeff will go into greater detail about several invasive species in our area, including how to identify them, where they're found, and their impact locally. Finally, Jeff will provide participants with some ways they can help control the spread of invasives, and get involved with control programs in their area.

Registration is required at <https://tinyurl.com/yusenjvd> or visit www.doas.us/calendar/.

Jeff O'Handley is the program director for the Otsego County Conservation Association, where he is frequently found butt-deep in a swamp or freezing in the forest—and loving it. A lifelong interest in science and nature led Jeff to study Wildlife Management at Cook College, Rutgers University, but he soon found great enjoyment in environmental education. Jeff's career has taken him from tiny museums and expansive state parks to the heart of New York City. Jeff and his wife, DOAS board

member and former co-President Susan O'Handley moved to Hartwick in 2003 and formed Wildlife Learning Company, which provided environmental education programs throughout the region. Jeff joined OCCA in 2013.



Jeff O'Handley
Photo by same

Mark your Calendars for the March Program

Dr. Alex Sweger will speak to the question: "What can Wolf Spiders tell us about the Ecosystem, Evolution and Animal Communication?" at the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society's Public Program via Zoom on Friday, March 15, 2024 at 7:30 p.m.

Registration is required; visit www.doas.us/calendar/

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Bird Sightings will return next month

Conservation and Legislation

by Andy Mason

Birds and Bees Act Signed Into Law

It's a pleasure to report that the New York State Birds and Bees Protection Act was signed into law by Governor Kathy Hochul in late December. This important legislation had been featured here several times over the past couple of years. Many thanks to those who wrote, emailed or called the Governor urging her approval. The Governor's signature came after a frenzied lobbying effort by conservationists and by organizations across the state. It was heartening to see this movement and to see the response from Albany. The legislation will largely eliminate the use of neonicotinoid pesticides on wheat, corn and soybean seeds and on ornamental plants in the state. These chemicals threaten pollinating insects as well as birds and other wildlife. There are less harmful replacements if needed, and even many users of neonics ended up supporting the bill. There was a last-minute change to the bill, delaying its effective date until Jan. 1, 2029 for agricultural uses and Jan. 1, 2027 for ornamental uses. This is disappointing, but likely necessary to gain the Governor's support.

Wildlife Hunting Contests Banned

Another positive piece of legislation OKed by the Governor was a bill ending the practice of contests for killing the greatest number of wildlife such as coyotes and crows. These unsporting events featured

prizes, award dinners, and children's activities. Most states had already outlawed these and New York was long overdue to do the same.

Exempted from the law are big buck contests and fishing derbies. These are more in line with traditional sporting—not a wanton waste of wildlife. This law takes effect in November 2024, and at least one nearby coyote hunt in Sullivan County will go on as planned this winter—but it will be the last.

Legislature Back in Session

Lawmakers have reconvened in Albany for the 2024 session. We'll stay apprised of proposed legislation—good and bad.

One bill back on the docket would ban the use of lead ammunition for hunting on state-owned lands, as well as on lands contributing surface water to the New York City Water supply. As we know, spent lead ammo is a significant cause of poisoning and death in eagles and other scavenging wildlife. The bill has passed each house of the legislature, but not in the same year.

What you can do

Let your state legislators know they need to get the lead out. Effective alternative ammo that reduces health risks for humans and wildlife alike is available for hunters.

Government contact information may be found in the Advocacy section of our website, doas.us.

DELAWARE-OTSEGO AUDUBON SOCIETY, INC.

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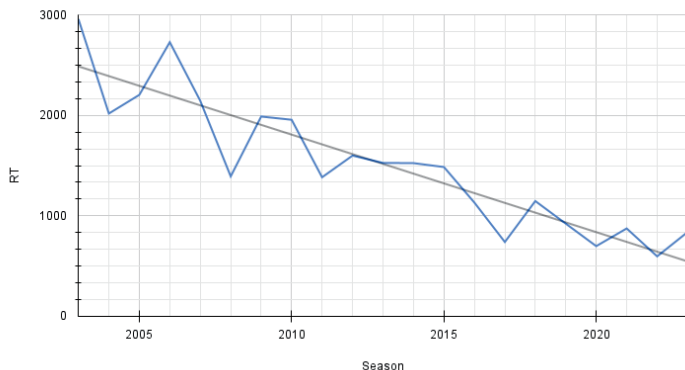
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Franklin Mountain Season Ends With Eagles Still Flying

By the FMHW Committee

The Franklin Mountain Hawkwatch ended its 35th season on January 1 with three Golden Eagles flying by the site. Those New Year's Day birds brought the season total to 143. While this was higher than the past two seasons, it is 81% of the most recent 10 year average. During this, the world's warmest year, Franklin Mountain, and other hawk watches in the east, saw a late season flight of goldens extend through December.

Red-tailed Hawk numbers did a slight rebound after last year's dismal showing. However, their numbers remain low by historical standards. The 838 counted in 2023 are 79% of the 10 year average (1065), and 54% of the 20 year average (1593).



Red-tailed Hawk numbers at FMHW, 2003-2023

Overall numbers this season followed the same trend. Our 3876 total migrants are 80% of the 10-year average (4826), and 75% of the 20-year average (5175).

The 1430 Broad-winged Hawks counted this season was 71% of the 10 year average of 2002. However, their numbers had been higher than average the past four years. Because Broad-winged Hawks prefer thermal lift, the numbers we get are somewhat a matter of luck. Their impact on our gross numbers can complicate understanding overall trends.

Other species that have been consistently low in recent years, compared to

15 to 20 years ago, include Osprey, Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, American Goshawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, and Rough-legged Hawk. According to the Raptor Population Index, many of these species are in decline. However, we don't know how much our changes are due to weather.

Climate and weather changes are affecting counts across the northeast. Red-tailed Hawks are staying further north in winter. These birds survive well in warming conditions at northern latitudes. This may also be the case with some Golden Eagles. Franklin Mountain - and a number of northeastern hawk watches - sees the most birds on moderately strong northwest winds.

Winds of 10 to 20 mph perpendicular to the ridge create great lift. In recent years, perfect winds have become less frequent. During fall 2022, we had a 35 day period from late September to late October without any moderate NW winds. This past season we had a number of good forecasts. Unfortunately, on many of those days the wind was lighter than the forecasters predicted. We didn't have a single day with 20 or more goldens.

Light NW winds move birds, but don't concentrate them here. At his backyard hawk watch in Burlington, Tom Salo has occasionally observed many more

Golden Eagles than are seen at Franklin Mountain on light NW winds. Golden Eagle passage rates recorded by Tom on a couple of his best days were 24 times the rate at FMHW the same days. It's a small data set but it suggests the birds are moving on those days. FMHW observers just aren't seeing them.

Ideal winds are apparently becoming less common. Professor David Brandes at Lafayette University has examined weather trends. In a recent presentation hosted by HMANA, Brandes concluded: "Temperatures have increased; wind speeds have decreased, in particular strong winds are less frequent; more light winds and calm conditions." (Watch at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMbrOAZjhVo>)

Visitors are an important part of the Franklin Mountain experience, and this year we had 787 visitors to the Hawkwatch between late August and December 31. This included students from all four colleges in the area who engaged in a number of projects at the Hawkwatch. Some students cleared trails, others helped spot birds, and a group from Cooperstown Graduate Program came to learn about citizen science. We thank our counters, who logged 714 hours this year: Jane Bachman, Peter Fauth, Fred Fries, Becky Gretton, Marilyn Leahy, Andrea Lodovice, Carol and Randy Lynch, Nancy New, Pam Peters, Tom Salo, and also all the spotters who helped out this season. Their time and skill is vital for our understanding of what is happening with raptors in our region.

All Franklin Mountain Hawkwatch data are available at hawkcount.org

House Finch Eye Disease

By Pam Lea, DVM, DOAS Director

As a veterinarian, and after seeing a House Finch with an infected eye at a feeder on a recent bird count, I was prompted to learn all I could about the disease known as House Finch Conjunctivitis. I thought a review of the condition would be a timely topic for this month's newsletter.

First, let me start with a little background on the bird itself. The House Finch was native to the desert regions of our western states. They came east in the 1940's as illicit "Hollywood Finches" and were sold in pet shops on Long Island. When the trade was reported to Audubon, the pet shop owners released the birds to avoid prosecution. The birds proved to be very adaptable to various habitats and that small inbred eastern population eventually spread over 40 years to join the population in the west, making the House Finch one of the top ten feeder birds nationwide.

House Finch Eye Disease is a conjunctivitis, namely an infection of the membranes surrounding the eye (much like pink eye in humans). It is caused by the bacterium *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, originally only found in chickens and turkeys. It can be spread through exhaled droplets, contaminated surfaces and feces. Researchers believe it "jumped" species through close association during feeding. It was first reported in Maryland in 1994 by citizen scientists involved with Project FeederWatch (Cornell Lab of



*Infected House Finch
Photo by Chris Bosak
Birds of New England*

Ornithology). It took two to three years for the disease to spread through the eastern population (thought to be more inbred, less genetically diverse and therefore more susceptible to disease). It was found west of the Rockies in the early 2000's. Though originally of epidemic proportion, the disease became self-limiting.

As the population of finches increased, so did the disease. The mortality rate increased and the population eventually leveled off. It now affects approximately 5-10% of House Finches. Other species of the finch family (Fringillidae) such as Goldfinches, Purple Finches and Evening Grosbeaks are rarely infected. It does not appear to be contagious to other songbirds. It is strictly an avian disease and does not affect humans or other mammals.

Affected birds show varying degrees of swollen, red, watery, crusty, or cloudy-looking eyes and may have a nasal discharge. They are often seen rubbing their beaks and faces on hard surfaces like branches or feeders. Some birds recover and may have

partial immunity for about a year. Individual birds have been treated successfully by rehabilitators with eye ointments and doxycycline in the water. As the disease progresses, however, and as their vision is compromised, they may be seen foraging on the ground alone, unable to see to fly, thus making them easy prey or subject to starvation.

Should you see an infected bird at your feeder, a few things can be done to potentially reduce the spread. Thoroughly clean and disinfect all feeders with a 10% bleach solution. Some people say to remove all feeders for two weeks, although others believe that that only causes the birds to go elsewhere and spread the disease more. Avoid moldy food and clean up under your feeders. Finally, use feeders with ample space to avoid overcrowding.

NOTE: Report any sick bird. Please consider becoming a participant in Project Feederwatch if you aren't already. This November-May survey of feeder birds of North America has been used to understand and document the numbers and distribution of winter feeder birds since 1987. It continues to give scientists and researchers a wealth of data and insights into such things as population dynamics, trends in winter ranges, preferred diets and epidemiology (where diseases are and aren't), some of which has been instrumental in human disease studies (eg. Zika virus).

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.

Co-President's Column

Audubon Name Change

By Andy Mason, Co-President

In April of 2023, the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society board of directors took up the issue of the Audubon name for our organization. This was prompted by controversy over the character and actions of John James Audubon, including his role as a slave owner and opponent of abolition.

In response to these same questions in 2022, the National Audubon Society had embarked on a thorough examination of J.J. Audubon's history, the original impetus for naming the organization for him, the effect of the name on members and the public, and the ramifications of a name change on the mission of Audubon. Ultimately, National Audubon decided to retain the name, but advised local Chapters that they were free to act on this matter individually.

A few Chapters have dropped the name, including New York City Audubon, Buffalo Audubon, and other primarily urban groups. The larger majority of Audubon Chapters have kept the name at this time.

In June of last year, we announced the availability of a questionnaire for our members to express their views on a possible name change for DOAS. In addition, board members reviewed articles and opinions on both sides of the issue, including materials from Audubon magazine, from other Chapters, and other publications.

The response to the questionnaire was very good: there were 92 entries, nearly one-third of our membership. In particular, the numerous anonymous comments from our members—on both sides of the issue—are impressive. They are cogent, well thought out, and indicative of the concern for DOAS and the importance of this issue. I recommend reading these. The results of the questionnaire and the comments can be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/yk4ktxah>.

The response to the question—"Do you believe the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society should remove "Audubon" from our name?"—was: "yes"—18, or 20% of the responses "no"—68, 74% "no opinion"—5, 5%, blank—1, 1%

On November 1, 2023 the DOAS board of directors met in a special session to discuss the name change issue. Following extensive discussion, which mirrored issues and views in the membership response, the board voted 8 to 4 to retain the Audubon name, with two directors expressing hope that the issue could be revisited in the future.

My own vote was to keep the name. I fully recognize that the name Audubon is rightfully tainted and hurtful to a significant portion of America, and can reflect negatively on our organization. However, I believe the work we and others under the Audubon umbrella have done and will continue to do is critically important in carrying out our

mission "... to protect our natural environment and connect people with nature to benefit birds and other wildlife..." Changing our identity would significantly set back our efforts and cost us the hard-earned recognition and respect that is necessary to remain effective.

I feel confident in saying that no one on our board and likely no one in our organization condones the beliefs and actions of John James Audubon that brought this issue to the forefront.

In December 2021, DOAS adopted a statement on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion which reads:

Diverse perspectives are essential for the effective achievement of the vision and mission of our organization. We respect the individuality of each member of our community, and we are committed to providing an environment that is free of any kind of discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, age, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, disability, national or ethnic origin, politics, income level, or veteran status.

In my 40+ year involvement with DOAS, this was one of the very few times a board decision was not unanimous. That speaks to the seriousness accorded the issue. I thank the board for its thoughtful consideration of the question. The board appreciates our members who weighed in with sensitive and perceptive viewpoints.

Oneonta 2023 CBC Summary

By Sandy Bright

The 55th Oneonta Christmas Bird Count took place on December 16th, starting out grey but clearing to partly sunny and calm, pleasant for humans but not the best conditions for finding birds. The 3057 individuals counted

was below the most recent 10-year average of 3810, and fewer species were found, 42 rather than the average 46.

Bob Donnelly's group discovered a Common Loon at the mostly frozen

Pine Lake, only the 3rd ever and the first since 1979. Bob gets a special mention for his persistence and stamina, devoting 11½ hours to the count and locating 11 owls. Notable

Continued on page 6

“Oneonta 2023 CBC” continued

finds by other participants included 2 Northern Shrikes and the first-ever Turkey Vulture, which added a new species to this count circle and was the only record set this year.

Some species were found in good numbers. Nine Bald Eagles were spotted, and the 32 Red-tailed Hawks were double the average seen. Randy Lynch photographed a juvenile, and his group watched a Cooper’s Hawk buzzing a feeder. The 32 Common Ravens was notable for a species that first appeared in 2004, as were 28 Eastern Bluebirds, first recorded in 2002. Canada Geese, occasional winter visitors in the early years, are abundant now, while Common and Hooded Mergansers, formerly rare, are now

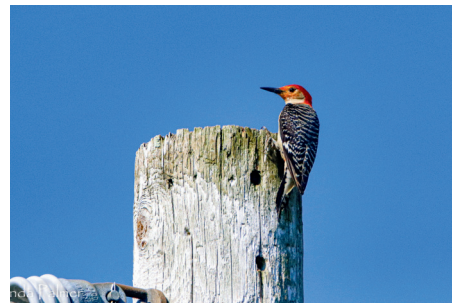


Red-tailed Hawk
Photo by Randy Lynch

regulars. Red-bellied Woodpeckers, first seen in 1999, have become year-round residents, with 11 found this year. Conversely, American Tree Sparrow numbers have declined significantly. Previously numbered in the dozens, only 3 were found this year. Hundreds of House Sparrows were counted on the early CBCs, but just 19 were seen this year. As they are invasive, this at least can be considered

good news.

Thanks to all our participants: Yolanda Bush, Bob Ciganek, Bob Donnelly, Janice Downie, Suzanne Gaynor, Margo Graham, Becky Gretton, Jennifer Hyypio, Ann and Dave Kiehm, Pam Lea, Carol and Randy Lynch, Andy Mason, Bruce Milavec, Linda Pearce, Meg Preston, Sarah Root, Charlie Scheim, and Caleb, Isaiah, and Samuel Weaver.



Red-bellied Woodpecker
Photo by Landa Palmer

Records Broken in Delaware County CBC

by Pam Peters

A mild New Year’s Eve with temperatures in the 30s was much appreciated by the NYDE teams. Rivers were rushing and the ponds had no ice. The only snow was 2” at higher elevations.

The day’s total of 51 species beats our previous high of 48, as did our record total of 4,162 individual birds. Highlights include 5 Belted Kingfishers plus one during count week, 21 Red-tailed Hawks (seen in every sector), 26 Eastern Bluebirds (found by 3 teams) and a record 1,025 Ring-billed Gulls found in Hamden and Downsville. Winter Wren made a first time appearance (two teams) as did an Orange-crowned Warbler in Downsville. A Great Blue Heron had been seen only once during count week, so we were glad to have one on count day. A pair of Red-winged Blackbirds and 6 Field Sparrows showed up for the second time in our CBC.

Pileated Woodpecker, Ruffed Grouse and American Kestrel are hard to find,



Dark-eyed Junco
Photo by Pam Peters

but observers found one of each this year. Cooper’s and Sharp-shinned Hawks are hit or miss, and this year we had both. Thanks to Lance Verderame’s pre-dawn efforts, we had an Eastern Screech-Owl, a Barred Owl, and a first for the count Northern Saw-whet Owl.

The little winter birds held their own this year, with good showings of Golden-crowned Kinglet, Brown Creeper, Junco, Chickadee, Downy, Hairy and Red-bellied Woodpecker, Tufted Titmouse, and White-breasted Nuthatch. Red-breasted Nuthatches were scarce (3). Sparrows were hard to find. And 24 Northern Cardinals was a low for this count circle.

Waterfowl numbers were overall low, with 58 Common Mergansers an exception. 78 Wild Turkey is not the lowest number, but it’s second lowest to 37 in 2021, another mild year.

Even though Purple Finches had been observed leading up to the count, none were found on Count Day or count week. Teams reported an overall lack of feeder birds, and in many cases, empty feeders. With the mild weather, the threat of bears caused some folks to delay putting up their feeders.

When I read about some count circles that have dozens, or as in New Haven, CT, 96 participants, I am really proud of the number of birds our 16 volunteers manage to uncover in our remote territory of Delaware County.

Thanks to our awesome counters: Lance Verderame, Renee Davis, Marge Gorton, Katherine Yard, Matt Walter, Kathy Mario, Kay Crane, Eileen Kline, Chris DeCesare, Landa Palmer, Linda Burkhart, Shirley Salton, Tom & Laurie Rankin, Pam Peters.

Fort Plain 2023 CBC Summary

By *Charlie Scheim*

Counters: Tom Salo, Jo Salo, Marianne Frier, Matt Montgomery, Bill Purcell, Kevin McGann, Paul Novak, Kevin Toomey, Kelly Toomey, Elliott Adams, Pete Fenner, Jen Fenner, Andy Mason, Bill Ralston, Randy Lynch, Carol Lynch, Mark Woythal, Pam Woythal, Steph Restuccia, Danielle Restuccia, Becky Gretton, Pam Lea, Sandy Bright, Charlie Scheim

The Fort Plain CBC was held on Saturday December 30 with temperatures in the high 30s, generally cloudy skies, occasional light rain/snow, but no significant snow cover. Although many counters remarked on the seeming absence of avian life, the group did find 16,859

birds. With still waters, streams, and the Mohawk River all open, waterfowl were plentiful, including over 8598 Canada Geese, 1 first-ever Cackling Goose, 4 first-ever Gadwall, and 3 Northern Pintail (first ever recorded on the count although one was seen during the count week of 2000). Twelve Black Vultures, a species seen on this count only in the last four years, were reported, along with 98 Turkey Vultures.

Besides the predictable crows, chickadees, and blue jays, there were 78 Eastern Bluebirds, 193 American Robins, and 98 Brown-headed Cowbirds, reminding everyone that birds often do what humans don't expect. Contrary to historical counts and probably due to our rather mild winter so far, there were



Northern Pintail
Photo by Landa Palmer

no Snow Buntings (often found in the hundreds on this count) and no Rough-legged Hawks (also almost always found historically in this count).

Complete results for the three Christmas Bird Counts can be found at doas.us (click "Research" then "Bird Counts").

Upcoming Activities

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 on page 1). Registration required at <https://tinyurl.com/yusenjvd> or visit www.doas.us/calendar/

February 16-19 - Great Backyard Bird Count. Join the Annual GBBC as people from around the world come together to watch, count, and celebrate birds. For more information go to: <https://doas.us/events/great-backyard-bird-count-2024/>

March

March 5 - DOAS Board Meeting: 6:30 p.m.

March 15- DOAS Public Program: 7:30 p.m., via Zoom, "What can Wolf Spiders tell us about the Ecosystem, Evolution and Animal Communication?" presented by Dr. Alex Sweger. To register, visit www.doas.us/calendar/.

March 23 - Field trip to Montezuma NWR with Chris DeCesare

April

April 4 or 11- Parslow Road Woodcock Walk with Charlie Scheim and Sandy Bright

April 16 - DOAS Board Meeting: 6:30 p.m.

April 19 - DOAS Public Program: 7:30 p.m., in-person program featuring Rick Bunting

April 20- Earthfest, Milford NY, including a **Bird Walk in Riddell Park** with Bob Donnelly

May

May 11 - Oneonta Susquehanna Greenway Walk with Charlie Scheim and Sandy Bright

May 15- Riddell Park Walk with Suzanne Gaynor and Sarah Root

May 18 - DOAS Big Day- Charlie Scheim, coordinator

Additional field trips are in the works, so check this space next month!

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

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DOAS Announces NEW Summer Internship Opportunities

Applications are now available to fill two paid summer internship positions for a 10 week program during Summer 2024. Full details are available at <https://doas.us/summer-2024-internships/>. February 23 application deadline.