



THE BELTED KINGFISHER

DELAWARE-OTSEGO AUDUBON SOCIETY, INC.

February Program: Bird Architecture: Nest Beauty and Diversity

By *Becky Gretton*

Join us on February 20 at 7:30 p.m. for a Zoom program, *Bird Architecture: Nest Beauty and Diversity*. Explore the amazing variety of bird nests with this multimedia presentation from Anne Swaim, Executive Director of Saw Mill River Audubon. From the massive nests of eagles to walnut-sized hummingbird nests, from cavity-nesters inside trees to ground-nesters, to birds that weave intricately woven baskets that hang from branches, birds are master builders! Find out why birds sing, what a bird box does and how to make any property more bird-friendly—as well as the best strategy

should you find a nest or young birds in need of help.

Presenter Anne Swaim is Executive Director of Saw Mill River Audubon, a local chapter of National Audubon based in Westchester County, New York. She began as Staff Naturalist and sole employee of Saw Mill River Audubon in 1989 and has served as Executive Director since 2004. Anne works with a board of directors, dozens of volunteers and four staff to maintain eight wildlife sanctuaries and present over 200 free public programs and field trips annually to connect people with nature.

Anne has a B.S. in Biology from Clarion University of Pennsylvania



Anne Swaim

and M.Div. from Eastern University. As part of her work for Saw Mill River Audubon, Anne has the great pleasure of living at Pruyne [pronounced Prine] Audubon Sanctuary in Chappaqua, a 92-acre property that protects the 42-acre Gedney Swamp and often features evening concerts by Barred Owls and Eastern Coyote.

Registration for the Zoom program is required at www.doas.us

Mark your Calendars...

By *Becky Gretton*

You won't want to miss the DOAS program on March 26: *Birds, Climate, and Conservation: Stories from Montezuma*. Abby Kress from the Montezuma Audubon Center will offer an engaging presentation exploring the fascinating lives of birds and the challenges they face in a changing world. Learn how habitat loss, climate change, and human activity are reshaping migration patterns and bird populations - and discover how conservation efforts and community action are making a difference. Via Zoom at 7:30 p.m.; registration required at www.doas.us

Join us for our spring field trip to Montezuma NWR on March 21, 2026 - register at <https://tinyurl.com/montezuma-mar21>

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Conservation and Legislation

By *Andy Mason*

Good News for Horseshoe Crabs and Red Knots—Gov. Kathy Hochul did the right thing at the end of 2025 by signing legislation ending the harvest of horseshoe crabs in New York State waters. Although the effective date was pushed back by three years, this is still a victory that brings New York in line with neighboring states. Horseshoe crab eggs are a critical food source for shorebirds migrating north in spring. Red Knots, a species in serious decline, are particularly dependent on the eggs at refueling stops in southern New York heading for their Arctic breeding grounds.

A few lesser-known pro-environment bills made it through the Legislature and Governor in 2025: --Legislation adding state forests, Wildlife Management Areas and unique areas to the public lands where leasing for oil or gas production is prohibited. Currently the exploration, development and production of gas and oil on state-owned lands is prohibited only in state parks.

--A law directing the Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to take actions to conserve monarch butterflies and the unique habitats they depend upon for successful migration.

--Bills establishing a New York native plant and seed supply, development and enhancement program and also

New York native plants designation, using seals or logos identifying native plants as grown in New York state and certified for their quality.

What you can do—There were other good bills that did not pass, but will be reintroduced in this session, including a prohibition on lead ammunition; the “RAPTORS Act” (Restriction of Anticoagulant Pesticide Transactions for Online and Retail Stores); a Local Freshwater Wetlands Pesticide bill to prohibit the application of pesticides to local freshwater wetlands that are hydraulically connected to a reservoir, reservoir stem or other source of public water supply.

The Governor is also proposing to weaken environmental review of infrastructure projects, including nuclear plants, housing developments, highways and more. Although some streamlining may be appropriate, the long-standing and successful SEQRA (State Environmental Quality Review Act) law needs to be defended.

Be prepared to lean on your state legislators and the Governor to push them in the right direction between now and adjournment in June.

Contact information can be found in the Advocacy section of our website, DOAS.us

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.



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

Franklin Mountain's 36th Season

By Pam Peters

The Hawkwatch season wrapped up the day before Christmas with 4,265 raptors counted over 101 days.

Over time some species numbers are increasing, others are declining. The 4,265 total is lower than our 20 year (5,028) or 10 year average (4,731). Five species were on par or exceeded the 20 year average: Turkey Vulture, Bald Eagle, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Broad-winged Hawk and American Kestrel.

Counters and visitors alike were disappointed with the low number of late season migrants like Red-tailed Hawks and Golden Eagles. Numbers of migrating Red-tails have been declining for the past 20 years as has been documented elsewhere, but this fall was sharply lower. The season's 110 Golden was the second lowest (2011 saw only 92). As an observer, I really appreciated each Golden that glided by the site this year.

Hawkwatches south of us had better numbers of Golden throughout December, but we seemed to have more than our fair share of snow, cold and unfavorable winds. Other migrants with numbers below our 20 year average include Osprey, Cooper's Hawk, Red-Shouldered Hawk, Merlin and

Peregrine Falcon. See director Tom Salo's column, below, for a thoughtful exploration of these trends.

Here are the 2025 numbers: Black Vulture: 1, Turkey Vulture: 761, Osprey: 35, Bald Eagle: 190, Northern Harrier: 42, Sharp-shinned Hawk: 451, Cooper's Hawk: 53, American Goshawk: 0, Red-shouldered Hawk: 28, Broad-winged Hawk: 1987, Red-tailed Hawk: 398, Rough-legged Hawk: 2, Golden Eagle: 110, American Kestrel: 132, Merlin: 17, Peregrine: 9, Unidentified Raptors: 49.

Whether numbers are up or down, we wouldn't have any data without our dedicated volunteer counters who put in 686 hours this fall: Jane Bachman, Becky Gretton, Pete Fauth, Randy and Carol Lynch, Nancy New, Pam Peters, Tom Salo. Special thanks to Bob Gramling, a longtime friend of Franklin Mountain and excellent observer, who filled in several days throughout the season (and drove from the other side of the Hudson). We also appreciate three unofficial observers who showed up every week: Tracy Shelton, John Heidecker and Hartwick student Amanda Bryla.

The number of visitors this year



Golden Eagle
Photo by Landa Palmer

was a healthy 718, including college students doing field work from SUNY Cobleskill and the Coopers-town Graduate Program, as well as local birders and experienced spotters from other hawkwatches in the northeast who travel to FMHW several times during the season.

Finally, we continue to make improvements to the Hawkwatch site. Through volunteer help the area is brushhogged, grass mowed, trees trimmed, and bird feeders kept filled. New number reference signs were painted and hung. The interpretive signs installed two years ago continue to be useful and appreciated by visitors. The loaner binoculars are also popular. No matter how good the weather, however, visibility continues to decline because of the trees taking over the near horizons. This is a dilemma shared by other hawkwatches, and there seems to be no easy or inexpensive solution.

What's Happening with Raptor Numbers at Franklin Mountain

By Tom Salo

Some of the many changes seen over decades of counting at FMHW also show up at other sites. The Raptor Population Index (RPI) helps us visualize and understand those changes at about 80 sites: <https://www.rpi-project.org>.

Graphs show trends for species seen at FMHW from 2000 to 2023.

Some changes in our numbers appear to be the result of changing populations. Other changes may reflect changing climate and weather conditions, or the use of new flight paths.

Bald Eagle, Peregrine Falcon and American Goshawk have all seen somewhat dramatic population changes. Eagles and falcons numbers

increased due to reintroduction following the banning of DDT. Goshawk numbers have crashed.

Drops in population may be due to direct and indirect effects of diseases like West Nile Virus and Avian Flu. West Nile seems to be a significant cause of the decline of Ruffed Grouse

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and American Crow, major American Goshawk prey species. Goshawks are also susceptible to the disease.

An article published in Audubon Magazine in September 2024 discusses recent declines of Peregrine Falcons, and strongly suggests that Avian Flu is the cause. At FMHW, the last 2 seasons recorded the lowest numbers of the past 25 years.

While Merlin numbers have been mostly stable up to the RPI analysis, the past two years have also been low. I cannot find much on Avian Flu and Merlins except that they are known to be susceptible. Merlins, like Peregrines, eat mostly birds.

This season had the second lowest Golden Eagle count of the past 25 years. Very few migration alerts went out during the 2025 Golden Eagle season because ideal wind conditions were rare. When winds are light, eagles move across a broad front.

A decline in the frequency of moderate NW wind conditions is a regional phenomena. In addition to directly impacting Golden Eagle

numbers, it contributes to lower Red-tailed Hawk counts.

Most interior hawk watch sites have seen significant declines in Osprey numbers. The RPI species assessment says “some researchers suggest the increasing population of Bald Eagles at inland lakes and rivers may be limiting safe and suitable nesting sites for Osprey.” Locally, we have seen a remarkable increase in nesting of both species over 20 years. Clearly, we need to learn more.

One puzzle is the decline in Red-shouldered Hawks at FMHW. Their numbers have dropped about 3% each year for 20 years. Considered alone, this might seem like a cause for concern. However, Quaker Ridge in Connecticut has seen an average increase of over 6% for the same period. They have recorded over 500 in a single day. Our 20 year average of 45 birds per season hardly compares.

Since 2000, we have averaged almost 5000 birds each season. 40-50% of this total used to be Red-tailed Hawks. For the first time since 2000,

their share in 2025 fell below 10%. There is annual variation, but our gross numbers haven't really changed much. The drop in Red-tails has been somewhat offset by increases in Broad-winged Hawks, and to a lesser degree, Bald Eagles and Turkey Vultures. For the first 10 years of this century, Broad-winged, increasing at 3.5% annually, accounted for 23% of gross. During the most recent 10 years, they accounted for 43%.

Are the lighter winds of recent years creating better conditions for Broad-winged here while simultaneously dispersing Redtails and Golden Eagles? Or are Broad-winged changing their migration routes?

We understand why Golden Eagle numbers were low this year. We know much less about the reasons for Red-shouldered Hawk and Osprey shifts. Any attempt to understand the rapid changes occurring across the continent needs data. Continuing the effort at Franklin Mountain is a priority. With our aging counter base, we need to find some way to continue this effort for many more years.

Highlights of the 57th Oneonta Christmas Bird Count (CBC)

By Sandy Bright

Gray skies, light snow, wind, and temperatures in the teens that continued to drop throughout the day did not dampen the spirits of the teams searching for avian residents during the Oneonta CBC's 57th count. Despite the conditions, 43 species were identified, and the total number of birds tallied—3,408—was only slightly below the 10-year average of 3,476.

The 13 White-breasted Nuthatches found marked a record low, though this is likely an anomaly as the species'

overall population remains stable, averaging over 50 birds per count since 1969.

Eight Bald Eagles were counted this year, and most teams encountered at least one raven, illustrating the incredible recovery of one species and the range expansion of the other. Even common species provided memorable moments. Jennifer Hyypiö's team watched a large flock of Rock Pigeons circle overhead before dropping to “fill the wires”,

and a flock of 45 American Crows “feeding on Route 11”. Elsewhere, Charlie Scheim and I encountered a short stretch of road swarming with at least 100 gritting crows.

The importance of thorough coverage was underscored by the fact that 13 species - nearly 30% of the total - were reported by only one team. These included Great Blue Heron, Brown Creeper, American Robin, Common Merganser, Cedar

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Waxwing, Belted Kingfisher, Song Sparrow, American Black Duck, and Cooper's Hawk.

Pete Fauth found "my first Snow Buntings on the CBC", glimpsed briefly as the flock fled from his approaching car.

Fort Plain 2025 CBC Summary

By Charlie Scheim

The Fort Plain CBC was first organized in 1918 by Douglas Ayres. Ayres was the only recorded counter that year, and for many years afterward, he (or he and a friend) were the only counters. It was not until the 1970s that larger groups were recruited for the count.

This year, the Fort Plain CBC was conducted on Saturday December 27 with 21 counters covering twelve territories of the circle. There was a substantial snowfall the night before the count, resulting in many groups having to start considerably later than usual due to snowed-in drive-ways and slippery roads (one count group had to cancel). Luckily, count day was precipitation-free, though with cold temperatures and generally cloudy skies (the "usual" for our CBC).

Overall, 56 species with 11,222 birds were recorded. Excluding the 6525 geese, pigeons, and starlings, the Dark-eyed Junco, which only began appearing regularly in 2006, was the most commonly found species, with

Red Crossbills on wires near the Oneonta Airport gave Andy Mason's team great views when they dropped to the road right in front of their car. Randy and Carol Lynch discovered Evening Grosbeaks in Westville.

The sun peeked out at just the right

904 recorded. On the other hand, American Crows, often found in the thousands in recent years, only numbered 262. The other expected common winter species, such as chickadees, nuthatches, blue jays, and cardinals, were all found in varying numbers.

In the last few years, vultures have started appearing on the FPCBC, with 33 Black and 17 Turkey Vultures counted this year. Other raptor numbers were rather low, although the 8 Rough-legged Hawks were about average and the 18 Bald Eagles approached the all-time high of 23.

The most unexpected species found was the Savannah Sparrow, with 20 reported. It has only been reported on five previous counts. Other "summer birds" included 15 Eastern Bluebirds, 7 American Robins, and 20 Brown-headed Cowbirds.

Christmas Bird Counts in our area can be challenging due to weather-- but those who choose to participate are often rewarded by their encounters with nature. If you'd like to join,

time to give Becky Gretton's team this lasting memory: "Seeing 12 Eastern Bluebirds and one Fox Sparrow in the sun against the snow gathered together at a small flowing stream, drinking and feeding."



Bald Eagle

Photo by Landa Palmer

please do contact us, the Delaware-Otsego Audubon Society.

Thanks to our 2025 counters, both in Oneonta and Fort Plain: Elliott Adams, Jane Bachman, Faith Ballard, Ryan Ballard, Sandy Bright, Yolanda Bush, Sam Clarke, Janice Downie, Marianne Frier, Suzanne Gaynor, Margo Graham, Becky Gretton, Kristin Harshman, Jennifer Hyypiö, Maryanne Kehoe, Ann and Dave Kiehm, Pam Lea, Carol Lynch, Randy Lynch, Andy Mason, Nancy New, Don Nickerson, Paul Novak, Linda Pearce, Danielle Restuccia, Steph Restuccia, Jo Salo, Tom Salo, Charlie Scheim, Cindy Staley, Suzanne Summers, Kelly Toomey, and Kevin Topping.

Upper Delaware (NYDE) Christmas Bird Count

By Pam Peters

January 4, 2026 was snowy and cold, reflecting the weather leading up to the Christmas Count. Even with the cold and a shortage of counters, team enthusiasm remained high.

Kate Yard and Matt Walter discovered the first ever (for the NYDE) Merlin near Hamden, and in Downsville, Renee Davis and John Haas found our first Redhead. We had a record number of Golden-crowned Kinglet (25) and Purple

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Finch (23) and a good showing of other “winter birds” such as Red-breasted Nuthatch (15), Cardinal (49) and Pine Siskin (8). Landa Palmer and Linda Burkhart found 21 Golden-crowned Kinglets just in their territory.

Carolina Wrens are becoming more common in the winter and were seen in 3 different sectors. Jean Petterson found a lone Winter Wren by the river in Walton, only the second report in our count. The adorable Tree Sparrow was seen in every sector this year.

348 Blue Jays is double our average and a new record. Black-capped Chickadee at 473 is slightly higher than average; 422 Dark-eyed Juncos is double the average, and second highest (684 in 2017, another cold year).

Waterfowl were limited to the Delaware River, as ponds and wetlands

were mostly frozen. 68 Black Duck and 18 Common Goldeneye are new highs. Hooded Mergansers and Mallards had a decent showing, but 24 Common Mergansers was a new low.

Given the cold winter, it was no surprise to find fewer Wild Turkey (63) than usual and no Ruffed Grouse.



Redhead Photo by John Haas
Golden-crowned Kinglet photo by Landa Palmer



December 2025 - January 2026 Bird Sightings

By Sandy Bright

In mid-December, when most migrating birds are long gone, Suzanne Summers observed a Golden Eagle soaring over the Cooperstown area. During a cold snap, Rick Bunting shared photos of American Tree Sparrows and Snow Buntings that arrived “riding on a polar vortex”.

Dave and Ann Kiehm enjoyed several weeks of visits from a sizable flock of Evening Grosbeaks, despite a persistent bear raiding their feeders most nights. This irruptive species



Snow Bunting
Photo by Rick Bunting



Red-bellied Woodpecker
Photo by Rick Bunting

was reported throughout the area by multiple observers, including Kathryn Davino, Rod Spangle, Pam Peters, Suzanne Summers, Ruth Pederson, Mike DeWispelaere and Laurie Rankin.

Lance Verderame tallied waterfowl in Delaware County, finding American Wigeon, Long-tailed, Ring-necked and American Black Ducks, Bufflehead, Common Goldeneye and a Common x Barrow’s Goldeneye hybrid

Bald Eagles held their own at 25, mostly adults. 12 Red-tailed Hawks is lower than average (16), but not the lowest (9 reported in 2022). A Kestrel was spotted during count week.

Overall, our total number of birds (3,138) and unique species (44) are on par with other years. I attribute the low total to the lack of Crows and Gulls which can sometimes reach several hundred each. The other year with low numbers (3,004 total) was a frigid day in 2017 with temperatures below zero.

Thanks to our dedicated counters: Renee Davis, John Haas, Katherine Yard, Matt Walter, Jean Petterson, Chris DeCesare, Kathryn Davino, Landa Palmer, Linda Burkhart, Tom & Laurie Rankin, and yours truly, Pam Peters. Special appreciation to our new feeder watchers in Walton, Marcelle and Glenn Miller. We hope everyone will be back next year!

at the Cannonsville Reservoir, along with a Peregrine Falcon; Gadwall and Northern Pintail in Deposit, and a Redhead in Downsville. Besides eagles and hawks on the December 22 Raptor Survey, Landa Palmer and Pam Peters encountered a mini-raptor: a Northern Shrike. In Cobleskill, Susan Carver hosted a female Brown Cowbird at her feeder.

While winter offers a break for most breeding birds, larger birds take longer to develop; thus the Bainbridge Bald Eagle nicknamed “Maude” by Rick Bunting is already working on her nest. Rick also got photos of an especially colorful Red-bellied Woodpecker, showing how it got its name.

Other notable sightings included three Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, found by Landa Palmer (Meredith),

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Mike Porter (Margaretville), and Deb Miller (Fly Creek); 22 Horned Larks reported by Suzanne Summers (Otsego); and a Golden Eagle spotted by Mike DeWispelaere (South New Berlin).

Walking near Wilber Park in Oneonta, I heard the distinctive “kek-kek-kek” of a Merlin, familiar in other seasons but a first for me in December. Nancy New opened her blinds one morning and was treated to the special sight of a Barred Owl right outside her window.

Whether it's finding a common species at an uncommon time of year, spotting unusual or rare species, or having a close encounter with one of our feathered friends, birdwatching rewards those who take the time to look, listen, and appreciate nature.

*If you have bird sightings to report, contact Sandy Bright,
brights@hartwick.edu or 607-287-4465.*

Upcoming Activities

February

February 3 - **HELP (Habitats and Ecosystems for Landscape Professionals) Informational Session for Lawn and Landscape Service Businesses**, 6:00 p.m. via Zoom (see article, page 8)

February 13-16 - **Great Backyard Bird Count**: To participate, plan to watch birds for at least 15 minutes on any or all of these four days, and record all birds you see or hear on e-bird. For more information, go to the DOAS website: www.doas.us, or to the GBBC website: www.birdcount.org.

February 20 - **DOAS Public Program**: “Bird Architecture: Nest Beauty and Diversity” presented by Anne Swaim, Executive Director of Saw Mill River Audubon. Via Zoom at 7:30 p.m.; registration required at www.doas.us (see article, page 1)

March

March 3 - **DOAS Board Meeting**: 6:30 p.m.

March 10, 11, 12 - **HELP (Habitats and Ecosystems for Landscape Professionals) seminar**: 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m., Albany Pine Bush Discovery Center. (See article, page 8)

March 20- **DOAS Public Program**: “Birds, Climate and Conservation: Stories from Montezuma”, presented by Abby Kress of the Montezuma Audubon Center. Via Zoom at 7:30 p.m.; registration required at www.doas.us

March 21: **Montezuma NWR and Wetlands Trip**; watch for details next month.

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H.E.L.P. Program Offered

By Susan O'Handley

On Tuesday, February 3 at 6:00 p.m. a free one-hour informational session for landscape professionals and lawn service providers will be offered on Zoom, to learn about the upcoming H.E.L.P. (Habitat and Ecosystems for Landscape Professionals) program.

This three-day H.E.L.P. course will review ecological landscape principals and how your business can offer new premium services to clients. It is scheduled on March 10, 11 and 12, from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. at Albany Pine Bush Preserve Discovery Center, 195 New Karner Road, in Albany, NY. For more information visit www.doas.us

Become an endorsed ecoscaper when you successfully complete the course and requirements. Professional Continuing Education Credits are available for those who complete the course (CNLP, ISA NY, LA CES) upon request.

This training is for: landscape professionals, lawn and yard maintenance service business owners/providers, landscape architects, municipal or parks agency employees, non-profit site managers, and students attending a landscape professional program. Registration is required for the informational session on February 3, as well as for the 3-day course, at www.doas.us



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