The Mountain Chat

Christmas Bird Count
By LeJay Graffious, CBC Coordinator

Fantastic Day! 94 species! A new record was set for a one day count for the Mountaineer Audubon CBC. On December 16, thirty-six birders scanned the rivers, lakes, highways, trails and other wild areas within 7.5 miles of the Morgantown airport to record species and number of individual birds found in a twenty-hour period. I believe this record achievement is due to an increase in the experienced birders who volunteer their time. More eyes in the field lead to better coverage. We welcome all levels and ages of bird watchers. Our youngest birder this year was Laurel Fallon at age 5. I am sure this will only be the first of many bird counts in which she participates. Our group leaders welcome all, and are willing to share their birding skills. Meredith Kiger thinks participating is “Best On-the-Job-Training and education on birds available!” “Participating in the Christmas Bird Count (CBC),” adds Mack Frantz, “provides the opportunity to participate in one of the longest running scientific surveys in history. While you may or may not already know a thing or two about birds, I always come away learning something new from birding with others; not necessarily just birds but all other aspects of WV’s rich flora and fauna.” Everyone enjoys the day in the field. (continue on p. 6.)

Snowy Owl in West Virginia: Hedwig with a Happy Ending
By Larry Schwab

Irruptions of Snowy Owls (Bubo scandiacus) have become more frequent in recent years. These magnificent birds invariably attract a lot of popular attention when they occur far south of their normal high Arctic range. Fans of Harry Potter will recall Hedwig, the Snowy Owl of popular culture. This is a story of but one Snowy Owl – one Hedwig – that visited West Virginia during the current historic 2017-18 irruption. Among several sightings was a single bird that appeared in Monongalia County near a shopping complex in December. It was observed for several days there by several birders and an interested community. What is believed to be the same bird later appeared near Parkersburg and there attracted a lot of attention. What was assumed to be lack of fear of humans turned out to be an injury to a wing. Dr Jesse Fallon and his team captured the bird and took it to the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia in Morgantown where it underwent nutritional rehabilitation and repair of its damaged wing. The healthy owl, having gained strength and weight (1100 grams on admission to 1790 grams), was released January 20 at Presque Isle State Park near Erie, Pennsylvania. Please visit the ACCA online for photos, text and videos of its release. And unlike Hedwig of Harry Potter fame who met his demise in the Wizarding War, this Snowy Owl survived and thrived to live on. Thank you, Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia for your expertise and devotion to Appalachia’s avifauna.
President’s Message

2018: The Year of the Bird

This year, the National Audubon Society and other bird conservation organizations have declared 2018 The Year of the Bird. According to their website, National Audubon will be “celebrating birds while raising awareness about their troubles across all of our channels—magazines, television, social media, and more—with new editorial, content, and programs.” Visit www.audubon.org/yearofthebird to read and view some of this new content—you won’t be disappointed.

The Year of the Bird also celebrates the centennial of the signing of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, which protects more than 1,000 bird species (as well as their eggs and nests) from harm and harassment. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the law “makes it illegal for anyone to take, possess, import, export, transport, sell, purchase, barter, or offer for sale, purchase, or barter, any migratory bird, or the parts, nests, or eggs of such a bird except under the terms of a valid permit issued pursuant to Federal regulations.” It’s a powerful law that has undoubtedly saved millions (perhaps billions) of our birds over the last hundred years.

Unfortunately, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act is currently facing several challenges. In late 2017, a congressional committee approved an energy bill (H. R. 4239) that would remove liability for companies that accidentally or incidentally harm or kill birds as a result of their activities (for example, birds impacted by oil spills, birds killed by wind turbines, and birds that become trapped in hydro-fracturing and other waste ponds). Currently, companies can be held accountable for those bird deaths and injuries, but this new act would change that. National Audubon makes it easy for concerned citizens to contact their congressional representatives about this important issue. Visit www.audubon.org and click on the “Take Action” button; the first item in the dropdown menu is “Stop Industries from Getting a Free Pass to Kill Birds,” which concerns the House bill discussed here. Click on it; the next screen will describe the bill and provides a form to fill out that Audubon will forward to your representative in the US House of Representatives.

There are many other things you can do to help birds during the Year of the Bird. As Audubon members, you probably already work to conserve birds in a variety of ways, but here are a few additional suggestions:

· Clean your birdfeeders and birdbaths regularly to help stop the spread of disease.
· Plant native flowers, shrubs, and trees to provide food and shelter for birds.
· Keep your cat indoors (or inside a “catio”), especially during the spring and summer nesting season when young birds are learning how to fly and find food.
· Limit the use pesticides on your lawn; these chemicals could harm birds.
· Drink shade-grown coffee certified by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. Shade-grown coffee plantations provide winter homes for many of “our” warblers, thrushes, tanagers, and orioles.
· Try to prevent birds from colliding with your windows by hanging window decals.
· Bring a friend with you to a Mountaineer Audubon bird walk or program! Everyone is welcome, and we have a lot of great activities lined up for this spring and summer. In addition to listing events in our newsletter, we will list them on our website (www.mountaineeraudubon.org) and on our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/ mountaineeraudubon).

I’m looking forward to seeing many of you at Mountaineer Audubon activities during the Year of the Bird. I’m also looking forward to leaves on the trees, warmer temperatures, and of course the return of the Neotropical migrants.

See you soon,

Katie Fallon
Spring Field Trips 2018

All walks are free and will be on Saturdays except as noted. They will only be canceled for extremely inclement weather. Bring binoculars and dress appropriately for the weather. Included are a few events sponsored by other area organizations. For more information, contact David Daniels at Cotinga747@yahoo.com or (304) 276-7127.

Mar. 14: Old Hemlock Foundation: 7 am: Walk an approximately 2 mile loop through the woods at Old Hemlock. This series of once a month walks from March through July will be a chance to observe migrating birds arriving, establishing territory and breeding on the 232 acres. We will stop at 10 locations for three minutes and log all birds. Leader: LeJay Graffious

Mar. 17—Waterfowl Trip, Cheat Lake. 8:00 am at Ruby Ketchy’s Restaurant on Route 857 east of Cheat Lake. 7:00 am if you’d like breakfast first. Leader: Derek Courtney.

Mar. 24—Woodcock Walk, West Virginia Botanic Garden, Tyrone Road. 7:00 pm. LeJay Graffious will lead a search for American Woodcocks displaying over the old reservoir from sunset to dusk. Come join us to witness this amazing spectacle. Dress warmly and bring a flashlight. All ages. Sponsored by the West Virginia Botanic Garden. Please pre-register online at www.wvbg.org. For questions related to the WVBG, please call (304) 322-2093.

Apr. 7—Tygart Lake/Pleasant Creek Wildlife Management Area. 8:00 am at southern boat ramp parking lot at Tygart Lake Marina. For those coming from Morgantown, meet at 7:00 am at Mountaineer Mall near the water tower. Leader: David Daniels.

Apr. 14—Fairfax Pond-Rehe Wildlife Management Area, Reedsville area, Preston County. 8:00 am where Decker’s Creek Trail crosses Route 92 just south of Reedsville. Leader: David Daniels.

Apr. 17 (Tuesday)—Core Arboretum, Morgantown. 7:30 am at arboretum parking lot on Monongahela Boulevard. Leader: LeJay Graffious. Sponsored by the arboretum.

Apr. 18—Old Hemlock Bird Walk 7:00 am Leader: LeJay Graffious

Apr. 21—Prickett’s Fort State Park, Fairmont. 8:00 am at trail rail parking lot next to fort. Leader: Sue Olcott. Sponsored by WV DNR and the park.

Apr. 28 (Saturday) and May 28 (Monday)—Young Birders Walk, West Virginia Botanic Garden, Tyrone Road. 10:00 am. It’s never too early to become a birder! This walk will introduce children of all ages and their parents to the wonder and joy of birds and birdwatching. Bring binoculars and a bird guide if you have them. This walk is offered in conjunction with the West Virginia Young Birders Club and will be led by Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia’s Director Katie Fallon. All ages. Please pre-register online at www.wvbg.org. For questions related to the WVBG, please call (304) 322-2093.

Apr. 28—Prickett’s Fort State Park, Fairmont. 8:00 am at rail trail parking lot next to fort. Leader: Sue Olcott. Sponsored by WV DNR and the park.

May 5—Spring Bird Walk, West Virginia Botanic Garden, Tyrone Road. 7:30 am. Join local birder Terry Bronson on an early morning bird walk. We will be birding by eye and ear to search in the bushes and boughs for our feathered friends. Bring binoculars if you have them. All ages. Sponsored by the West Virginia Botanic Garden. Please pre-register online at www.wvbg.org. For questions related to the WVBG, please call (304) 322-2093.

May 5—Prickett’s Fort State Park, Fairmont. 8:00 am at rail trail parking lot next to fort. Leader: Sue Olcott. Sponsored by WV DNR and the park.

May 8 (Tuesday)—Core Arboretum, Morgantown. 7:30 am at arboretum parking lot on Monongahela Boulevard. Leader: LeJay Graffious. Sponsored by the arboretum.

May 12—Cooper’s Rock State Forest, Morgantown Migratory Bird Day. 7:30 am at Raven Rock Trail parking lot. Leader: Terry Bronson. Other leaders TBA. Sponsored by the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia.

May 15 (Tuesday)—Core Arboretum, Morgantown. 7:30 am at arboretum parking lot on Monongahela Boulevard. Leader: LeJay Graffious. Sponsored by the arboretum.

May 16 Old Hemlock Bird Walk 7:00 am Leader: LeJay Graffious

May 26: North Bend State Park: Join Audubon and Morgantown Area Paddlers for a trip to North Bend. We will do a morning paddle and bird watch among the trees. Red-headed Woodpeckers are a usual highlight of this trip. Details closer to date on our webpage or Facebook page. Leader: LeJay Graffious

June 2: Blackwater River Paddle. Join Audubon and Morgantown Area Paddlers for a trip to Canaan/Blackwater area. Details will be available closer to date on our webpage or Facebook page. Leader: LeJay Graffious

June 13: Old Hemlock Bird Walk 7:00 am Leader: LeJay Graffious
Ross Britain's CBC story

My day of birding for the Morgantown CBC started with tire trouble that limited my time for owling. Owling is my favorite part of these CBCs because of the mystery of the nocturnal creatures that roam the night while we are oblivious to their comings and goings, and because they are undercounted since so few go owling. I still managed to find four species of owls, including a Northern Saw-whet Owl, one Barred Owl, two Great Horned Owls and seven Eastern Screech Owls, but they weren't the highlight of the day. About 9:30am I was at the end of Crafts Run Road (the southern end coming out of Maidsville) where I had just found a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker to complete my six woodpecker species day. I noticed there was an unmarked side road that lead east toward the Longview Power Plant and decided to investigate to see if any new birds were close to the plant. Suddenly I saw a mammal run into the road in front of me and quickly dash into the woods on the left. What was that? It looked like it didn't have a tail! Was I seeing things? Then another one darted out from the right and stopped long enough for me to see it with binoculars and confirm that I had just seen two bobcats in broad daylight. The second one darted to the left, presumably to join its sibling/mate and they were never seen again. I saw a lot of great birds during the CBC including 18 Yellow-rumped Warblers, four Hermit Thrush and a lone female Purple Finch (I believe the only one on the count), but the highlight was definitely seeing these feline ghosts cross my path. I took pictures of their tracks in the snow for my memory book and resumed birding. Finding two House Finches shortly after noon to get my personal 50th species for the day was great. I ended up with 53 species on the day after finding a Turkey Vulture about 2:30pm, but seeing bobcats in broad daylight is the memory that continues to haunt me.

Ross Brittain, PhD

March 13, 7pm: Mountaineer Audubon Meeting and Program at The Village at Heritage Point

Join us at The Village at Heritage Point for a spring meeting and program on March 13 at 7pm; everyone is welcome to attend! After a short discussion of recent bird sightings, WVU graduate student Amanda Hill will give a program.

Amanda will be presenting her thesis project on the role that songbirds play in the spread of Lyme disease in the Northeastern United States. She traveled to banding stations in New York, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia to capture songbirds during Spring and Fall migration in 2017. Amanda removed ticks and collected blood samples from the birds that she captured to test for Lyme disease. The hope is that the research can be used to better understand the impact that migratory songbirds have on the spread of disease and encourage further research in this area. As a pre-veterinary student, Amanda chose to research this topic because it falls under the concept of One Health, which focuses on cooperation and collaboration between the fields of human, animal, and environmental health.

Amanda Hill is a native of Washington, PA, who has lived in Morgantown since 2012 when she began her undergraduate studies. She was a member of the WVU women’s soccer team, and is a volunteer with the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia, Hearts of Gold Assistance Dogs, and Ridgeway Farms. She is currently a graduate student at WVU in Animal Physiology, studying under Dr. Christopher Lituma. Amanda plans to attend Veterinary School in 2019 to work with exotic species (wildlife).
STOP. DON’T TALK. LOOK AND LISTEN
By Jan Quailey

Those are the first words Joey Herron always suggests to new birders when he is with them. In fact, the moment Joey gets out of his car, he follows his own advice. Joey has been involved with novice birders frequently over the last dozen years or more. Prickett’s Fort (for the last 10 years) and Tygart Lake State Park (for the last few years) have been locations where Joey has demonstrated bird banding during spring and fall migration. The Prickett’s Fort birding classes are offered through Life Long Learners of Pierpont Community and Technical College. Juanita Edge, Curriculum Coordinator for Life Long Learners says, “Joey is one of our favorite presenters and we have learned a lot.”

Joey grew up in the Weston area. A good friend of his found a screech owl while on his paper route. After telling Joey, they went back in the evening to watch it. Thus began his love for owls and birds in general. He and his friends would get dropped off in a hollow and camp and bird for the weekend until they were picked up Sunday morning. They would look for owl and hawk nests. This was his idea of fun as a teenager and apparently it still is.

When he got his first bird field guides (Peterson and Golden which he still has) in the mid 1970s, he would look up birds that he saw. The first birds he remembers identifying were northern flicker, wood thrush, and yellow warbler. Years ago he first heard but could not find a particular bird. He hunted for two hours with no luck and so he finally sat down near where he heard it. He thought to himself that after all of that effort it would surely become his favorite bird once he identifies it! The bird he heard and finally found, a wood thrush, did not become his favorite bird. It would be no match in his eyes to what would later become his favorite bird - the northern saw-whet owl.

For the last 13 years, Joey has been banding saw-whet owls in Valley Falls State Park in the late evenings of October and November. According to Brett Harshbarger, Park Superintendent, “This is one of the best events held throughout the year and is a great addition to the Park! It gets people out who may have never been to the Park to come see Joey band and also learn about the Park.” Since 2009, there have been over 2000 onlookers hoping to see Joey band a saw-whet owl. From 2005 to 2017 Joey has banded 377 saw-whet owls.

Currently Joey does about 80% of his birding by sound. He says the key to birding is listening. For example, hearing lots of crows could mean that they are mobbing a raptor. As an avid runner, a similar incident occurred while he was running. He kept hearing a robin carrying on. After finishing his run he returned to the spot and found a red-phase screech owl that he never would have seen had it not been for that rowdy robin! In the 1990s while in Coonskin Park, Kanawha County, he heard a bird sing while he was running. After finding the bird, it confirmed what he thought: a Swainson’s warbler – a lifer for him.

His love for birds has gone through various phases. In the beginning, Joey was first interested in watching birds with his binoculars and using field guides. Then he got involved listening to the Roger Tory Peterson bird recordings and also listening to birds in the field. Then about 20 years ago, he got his bird-banding license that brought another dimension. Bird banding gave him a new level of understanding by looking at molt, aging of the birds and other factors.

With a major in Biology and a minor in Art, these two areas of study have intertwined for Joey in starting another phase. Photographing birds he has banded as well as in natural settings has become his artistic outlet. He has won many awards for his photos and has had his photos published in various magazines. Most recently one of his photos of a white-winged crossbill was on the cover of Wonderful West Virginia magazine. He likes to use his photos when doing presentations, as he wants to “present birding the way he sees it.” He feels by using his photos, it makes birding more accessible.

He has also published two books, Birds of Prickett’s Fort (found on Blurb.com) and Birds and Words (found on Amazon and Blurb.com). His research has been published in Redstart of Brooks Bird Club with over 20 articles. “Memories of a Barn Owl” was his first article published in 1979.

Even another phase has been added to Joey’s list of pursuits. For years now, Joey has been interested in creating a birding and nature center. Two years ago, he was able to get started on his dream by working with the City of Fairmont in creating Morris Park Birding and Nature Center (MPBNC). The Center is located in Morris Park and is in its early stages. It was the Park’s superintendent’s home and has been vacant for 12 years. Through volunteer work and donations, a new roof, new doors and windows have been installed. A wrap-around deck is in
the process of completion. Another local birder and licensed bird bander as well as contractor, Todd Schnopp, has graciously done all of the renovations. Through all these different phases, Roe, his supportive wife of nearly 25 years, says with a wink that “if Joey could marry a bird that he would!”

After 23 years of working at Social Security Administration Joey is now retired. However, he is assistant girls’ basketball coach at East Fairmont High School. While on the road for an away game, Joey can be seen — you guessed it — looking out the bus window for birds.

Editor’s Note: Joey is a local bird ambassador. All photos this edition are courtesy of him except on page 1 the Snowy with calipers by Larry Schwab and Katie on page 2 from her Facebook page.

Mountaineer Audubon Sponsors the Blue Jean Ball for a 4th Year
Saturday March 3, Camp Muffly

It is time to pull out your favorite blue jeans and get ready for the 4th annual Blue Jean Ball co-hosted by the West Virginia Land Trust and the Mon River Trails Conservancy at Camp Muffly in Morgantown. On March 3, 2018, we hope you will join us for a fun evening as we enjoy a southern meal catered by Woodburn Shanks, a limited host bar, dance to a live band, play a round of beer ring toss, and bid on silent auction items.

The purpose of the event is to raise awareness and funds to support the land protection of public recreational green space. Proceeds from last year’s event are being used to help secure and build the Collins Ferry Connector Trail from the Suncrest neighborhood to the Mon River Rail-Trail and for access and hiking trails at Elizabeth’s Woods Nature Preserve. Mountaineer Audubon has supported this fund-raiser since its inception in 2014.

The Blue Jean Ball helps kick-off the Spring Season of recreation and outdoor events and programs. It provides a great reunion of green space leaders and friends to share news and celebrate victories in environmental conservation, outdoor recreation, and green space protection.

Tickets on sale now and visit www.wvlandtrust.org/activities/blue-jean-ball/ for more details. All are welcome and hope to see you there!

(Cont. p. 1) Terry Bronson who has participated every year since moving to Morgantown said, “My personal highlight of the 2017 count was locating 2 Snow Geese—a species very rarely encountered on the Morgantown count—at Dalton Farms.” The CBC has been held nationally every year since 1900. Terry Bronson noted, “Christmas Bird Counts may be the longest-running citizen science project in the world…” The modern version involves canvassing all the birds one can find in a 15-mile diameter circle in one day during the period from 10 days before to 10 days after Christmas. There are over 2,000 CBC’s in North America and more in Central and South America. The data from these counts is available on-line at CBCObservation/Historical/ResultsByCount.aspx and is used by scientists to assess the health and movements of bird populations over time.

We added two new species this year to historical records. Alert birders on Todd Schnopp’s team were surprised to find a Dunlin on the mud flats at Cheat Lake. This is a late record for this shorebird species in our area. The bird stuck around for other birders to see the next day. Derek Courtney spied our first Short-eared Owl flying over agricultural fields in the late afternoon south of Mylan Park. We had hopes of adding a Snowy Owl which was near the new FedEx center off I79 just weeks before, but it eluded us and had probably moved on. A complete list of birds can be found at mountaineeraudubon.org.

Mountaineer Audubon past president, Phillip Murray, says, “The CBC is great to escape the winter blues and get together with fellow birders to do something enjoyable and useful despite snow, ice, or whatever else the weather brings…” Ross Brittain, Dean of the College of Science at Alderson Broaddus University, relayed his experience for the day. I am reprinting it in this newsletter to share with you. So mark your calendar for Saturday, December 15, 2108. Hope to see you in the field with us. Then you will have a memory to share of your CBC.
Mountaineer Audubon Annual Spring Banquet

Saturday, April 7, 2018
Speaker: Patti Reum

This program will be about the American Kestrel Nesting Box and Monitoring Project given by Patti Reum of Highland County, VA.

The American Kestrel has shown population decreases because of loss of grassland habitat, loss of nesting cavities, and use of insecticides and pesticides on agricultural fields. The project’s goal is to provide nesting boxes in suitable habitat where kestrels are found throughout Virginia. During her presentation, Patti will show photos of this project and present information on the habitat and biology of this fascinating and valuable species. She will describe a monitoring program she started two years ago to keep track of the nesting success of kestrels using Highland County boxes.

Patti is a board member of the Virginia Society of Ornithology and serves as the Conservation Chair. She has been involved in many bird projects in Virginia, including the Golden Chase Project (working with biologists at the Center for Conservation Biology) where a Golden Eagle was trapped and fitted with a telemetry device. Many Virginians donated to this project and followed the migration of “Virgil Caine” for four consecutive years. She has also assisted the Golden-winged Warbler research project done by Virginia Commonwealth University. She has been a wildlife biologist in Canada, Maryland, and Virginia, and also taught math and science for 18 years. Now “retired,” she spends much of her time working on the kestrel project and helping out with bird projects whenever she can. She is Vice President of the Bath-Highland Bird Club.

The spring banquet will be held in the Welcome Center at the West Virginia Botanic Garden, 1061 Tyrone Road, Morgantown, 26508 (the same location as last year).

6:30pm: Social Time
7pm: Dinner and program, followed by our annual meeting

Dinner will be from Oliverio’s

Reservation Form:

Name(s): ___________________________________________________________  Phone: _________________________

Email: _________________________________  Number of meals: _____________ x $25 each = Total: ________________________

Make checks payable to Mountaineer Audubon and return to Katie Fallon, 87 Morgan Hill Road, Morgantown, WV, 26508. Please register by March 31, 2018.
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Spring 2018