

BIRDS OF THE WISSAHICKON VALLEY

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The Wissahickon Valley has been a popular place for bird lovers for many years, and records have been kept on the birdlife since the 1890's. Many of these records were unavailable to me directly, but many are incorporated into papers by Ross and Tracy. These papers, combined with other records published in *Cassinia*, some books on the area's natural history, and my own field work, form an interesting account of the creek's birdlife over the years. However, in this, and in my previous report, I have only been concerned with post 1958 records so as to present an up to date list of the area's birdlife. It is the purpose of this paper to add to what is known about the area's breeding birds, and to describe where they can be found. The Author notes the Wissahickon Valley's value as a haven to a great diversity of breeding birds, located not hours away from most people, but in the midst of a great city.

Habitat loss and conservation 1958-1978.

Within the last twenty years few drastic changes have occurred in the valley. Natural ones like habitat maturation are expected, and many grassy places have become brush and second growth woods. Unfortunately, many fields and open spots have succumbed to development. This loss of habitat and birds is sad. Some species have been reduced in numbers, and some have been eliminated. The most extensive areas of brush and fields left in the upper Wissahickon are to the north and south of Bell's Mill Road, west of the creek. These lands are still privately owned. Fortunately, the old Andorra Nurseries, along Northwestern Avenue, have been added to Fairmount Park. This is a haven for owls and forest warblers, and is fascinating in terms of its plant life. I feel strongly that an overall plan and goals for conservation in the area should be made and carried out by the park, especially for areas of high wildlife diversity, and where rare species occur. In addition, this should not just be the job of the park, but also involve input from various civic groups that address themselves to the Wissahickon.

Presented below will be an annotated list of birds, mentioned in my first report on which additional comment, or a change of status will now be made, along with birds previously unrecorded as breeding or summering since 1958.

ANNOTATED LIST

- GREEN HERON**—A very rare and irregular summer visitor.
- BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON**—The last summer records I know of are of single birds seen in June and July of 1959, at Carpenter's Woods and Valley Green respectively.
- MALLARD**—I consider Mallards in the Wissahickon feral. The bird is a common breeder along the creek.
- TURKEY VULTURE**—This species seems to have been absent in the summer during the last few years. Conditions are probably not right for its breeding.
- COOPER'S HAWK**—The last confirmed summer record was on June 8, 1969 near Carpenter's Woods, and I know of no summer records between this time and 1962 when Ross listed it as a regular breeder. There are, however, several possible June observations at the covered bridge since 1975. One possible reason for this bird's disappearance, that is usually not given, is competition and/or predation from Great Horned Owls. This owl is now widespread in the Wissahickon and may have colonized the area as recently as the 1950's. If not, it seems to have certainly increased during the 1960's. It is interesting that the recent breeding of the Sharp-Shinned Hawk, in Germantown, was in an area where no large owls occur.
- RED-TAILED HAWK**—A scarce to rare, and irregular summer resident around Bell's Mill Road. Breeding is undocumented. Its presence in the Wissahickon is encouraging in light of Richards' (1975) report that it is declining as a nester in southeastern Pennsylvania.
- AMERICAN KESTRAL**—A scarce breeder around the Houston Recreation Center in Roxborough, and at other open spots. I suspect that this bird has declined recently as a breeder.
- RING-NECKED PHEASANT**—A fairly common breeder in woods and brush near fields.
- KILLDEER**—A rare and possibly irregular summer resident and suspected breeder at the Biddle Sal Agricultural School. Birds which appear to be breeding at the Andorra Shopping Center seem to visit the Wissahickon. This species, which once bred in natural habitat in the Wissahickon, seems now dependent on man-modified or man-made habitats.
- ROCK DOVE**—A quite numerous breeder at the Valley Green Inn and wherever there are buildings.
- YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO**—I have not seen this bird in the Wissahickon since the summer of 1974. This may be the result of a population cycle though. This bird used to be found in woods, east of the creek, between Bell's Mill Road and the Covered Bridge.
- BLACK-BILLED CUCKOO**—One summer record, in June, 1961, near Bell's Mill Road. This bird probably bred in the 1940's.
- GREAT-HORNED OWL**—Although this is an uncommon to scarce, but widespread breeder, Ross and Tracy never mentioned it. This would suggest that it was not present or rare before the 1960's, but I think it was probably overlooked. It has also probably been increasing during the last fifteen years.
- COMMON NIGHTHAWK**—A scarce, probably irregular, summer resident, possibly breeding on flat roofs, or in large stands of pine.
- CHIMNEY SWIFT**—An uncommon breeder. Most birds seen in the Wissahickon breed in residential areas around it.
- RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRD**—Contrary to my first report, this is a scarce, regular breeder in woods near open areas with honeysuckle. It is best found from Bell's Mill Road to the Covered Bridge.
- BELTED KINGFISHER**—A fairly common summer resident along the creek, being in some years quite numerous. Although these birds are usually paired, no recent nests have been found.
- PILEATED WOODPECKER**—In 1977, this bird was seen near Bell's Mill Road and near Carpenter's Woods in May and June respectively. This is the first Wissahickon record in over twenty years. The recent increase of these birds in Delaware County could be the reason for the above record.
- GREAT CREASTED FLYCATCHER**—An uncommon breeder around open spots in mature woods. This bird may have decreased slightly as a breeder.
- EASTERN PHOEBE**—An uncommon to scarce breeder on rock faces and on man-made structures near water. Richards (1975) states that this species has declined 85% as a breeder in southeastern Pennsylvania. In the Wissahickon, it has declined much less.
- ACADIAN FLYCATCHER**—An uncommon breeder at spots along the creek and some of its tributaries (not on slopes). These birds are most numerous from the Covered Bridge to Harper's Meadows.

WILLOW FLYCATCHER—This bird was a summer resident at some time during the mid sixties in the fields southwest of the creek, at Bell's Mill Road. It has not been seen there recently.

LEAST FLYCATCHER—This species was a summer resident in the early 1960's at Lykin's Lane and Manatawna Avenue. House construction here could be a reason for its disappearance. This and the preceding species were probably overlooked by Ross.

EASTERN WOOD PEWEE—An uncommon breeder in mature woods, especially around Bell's Mill Road.

ROUGH-WINGED SWALLOW—A scarce summer resident around open fields. Although flocks of up to 15 have been seen, no nests have been found recently. This bird formerly nested on bridges.

BARN SWALLOW—A scarce breeder in open places near buildings.

FISH CROW—A scarce summer resident. Present nesting status unknown.

BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE—This species has been seen few times in the breeding season. It can be identified by its distinct call and song with experience. I know of no nesting record.

HOUSE WREN—A common breeder in cavities, and in the Wissahickon it often uses street lights. Although Richards (1975) expressed concern over a regional decline in this species, it is thriving in the Wissahickon.

BROWN THRASHER—A fairly common to uncommon breeder in brushy areas.

BLUE GRAY GNATCATCHER—A scarce breeder near wood edges. It has been a summer resident since the 1940's.

STARLING—A common breeder in open woods and near houses.

WHITE-EYED VIREO—A fairly common breeder in second growth woods.

YELLOW-THROATED VIREO—A scarce to rare breeder in tall shade trees in open areas. It has been seen near the Covered Bridge and at Valley Green. This species has probably decreased as a breeder and is now certainly irregular.

WARBLING VIREO—In my previous report this species was incorrectly listed as having bred at Lykin's Lane. The only summer record is of a bird seen at the Mount Airy Avenue bridge in June, 1975, but this record is not definite.

WORM-EATING WARBLER—A scarce or rare, possibly decreasing, breeder on wooded slopes. This bird is usually heard, not seen.

BLUE-WINGED WARBLER—A fairly common breeder around overgrown wood edges and thickets.

YELLOW WARBLER—A scarce breeder around field edges, where Lykin's Lane dead-ends, just north of Bell's Mill Road.

CERULEAN WARBLER—Although I previously listed this bird as a scarce breeder, no recent nests have been found. Only a singing male has been present just north of the Covered Bridge, but this species may occur at other spots.

YELLOW-THROATED WARBLER—One recent record in June, 1977, along the bridle path just north of the Covered Bridge.

OVENBIRD—An uncommon breeder in woods with heavy underbrush. This species has possibly decreased as a breeder, but is still widespread.

LOUISIANA WATERTHRUSH—A scarce breeder along tumbling streams that feed the Wissahickon.

KENTUCKY WARBLER—An uncommon to fairly common breeder in woods with a dense understory.

YELLOW-BREASTED CHAT—An increasingly local breeder, now found mainly in hedgerows and overgrown wood edges where Lykin's Lane dead-ends just north of Bell's Mill Road. Along with habitat destruction, habitat maturation has contributed to this species' decline.

HOODED WARBLER—An irregular summer resident in the high woods, southwest of the creek at Bell's Mill Road, and at other spots. This species has undoubtedly bred in the last fifteen years near Livezy Lane.

HOUSE SPARROW—A local breeder wherever there are houses.

RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD—A common to uncommon breeder in weedy fields and other overgrown places.

ORCHARD ORIOLE—At least one pair has summered at the Lykin's Lane dead-end just north of Bell's Mill Road, since 1975. These birds appear to have bred but no nest or juveniles have been found.

ROSE-BREASTED GROSEBEAK—A scarce to uncommon breeder in thickets throughout the Wissahickon. This bird has probably increased as a breeder in the last fifteen years. I know of no other areas in the Delaware Valley where this species breeds regularly.

FIELD SPARROW—A fairly common breeder in open places.

I regret that the following species, which were in my previous list, must be invalidated as breeders or summering birds since 1958, due to insufficient evidence of their occurrence. Red-Shouldered Hawk, Bobwhite, Whip-poor-will, Grasshopper Sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow. The Bobwhite, Grasshopper Sparrow and Henslow's Sparrow are past breeders in the Wissahickon. In his 1975 paper on declining birds of southeastern Pennsylvania, Richards lists as vulnerable (could become endangered) two species that at present are regular summer residents or breeders in the Wissahickon. These are the Eastern Phoebe, Yellow-Breasted Chat and Orchard Oriole. The Chat and Oriole now breed only in an area which is unowned by Fairmount Park. Other birds which he expressed concern about, which are summer residents are: Red-Tailed Hawk, Common Nighthawk, Chimney Swift, Ruby-Throated Hummingbird, Belted Kingfisher, Acadian Flycatcher, House Wren, and Chipping Sparrow.

Other birds that I believe could breed in the Wissahickon in the future are: Bobwhite (if reintroduced), Long-Eared Owl, Whip-poor-will, Pileated Woodpecker, Black and White Warbler, Prothonotary Warbler, Summer Tanager and the Blue Grosbeak.

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