

General Notes

Finding a Fork-tailed Flycatcher

One of the more unique sites for birding in Bucks County is the Morrisville levee. Running some 4,000 feet along the Delaware River between Trenton Avenue and Bridge Street in Morrisville, it sits 10 feet above the adjacent land and 20 feet above the river, with commanding views of both the “Falls of the Delaware” (the rock-strewn stretch that marks the limit of upstream navigation) and the downtown Trenton, NJ skyline. A narrow shoreline (called a “batture”) between the levee and the river supports a thin line of trees — Sycamore, Silver Maple, Willow and Birch, several small pools, and even the odd beaver. I occasionally take a walk along the stone path atop the levee, and almost any time of the year, one can find an interesting bird that is not too common elsewhere in the county.

But on Sunday, June 4, 2006, I found something that could very well end up being the high point of my birding career. It had already been an exhilarating day. Earlier in the morning, a friend took me to observe bird banding for the first time at Hannah Suthers’ well-known Featherbed Lane Banding Station near Hopewell, NJ. In return, I took my friend to see a Brown Creeper nest that Devich Farbotnik had discovered in a swamp in Washington Crossing. I thought, “If that is all I do today, I will be very happy.” But I felt good, and it wasn’t too late, so I decided to make one more stop before starting all those chores I had to do around the house.

I had not stopped at the Morrisville levee for quite a while — I thought that would give me a different look than what I had seen so far that day. At 1:30 pm, it was overcast, with temperatures in the upper 60s, but the birds were still active, and I was glad I was out there. There was a small bird on a branch just to the left of the path, 100 feet ahead. The bird had a dark cap, white belly — a Tree Swallow or an Eastern Kingbird? Raising my binoculars, I immediately eliminated the swallow based upon the size and structure. It had to be a kingbird, so I checked for the white band at the tip of its tail for confirmation. But...something was wrong with the tail...there was no obvious band. It made a short, flycatcher type of flight, with a return to the perch, and a view from the back, with the tail momentarily fanned just before landing. That tail not only had no white band, but it appeared to be forked! And what was that patch of light gray on the mantle? I was starting to get excited and reached for my pocket Sibley. This was a bird I had never seen before, but do kingbirds have some kind of juvenile phase I had never before noticed? And that forked tail — not really long like the Scissor-tailed Flycatcher I had seen in Texas, but definitely longer than a kingbird, and definitely forked. While I was fumbling furiously through the pages looking for flycatchers, the mystery bird dropped out of sight. When I got to the page, I found the same gray mantle on the Fork-tailed Flycatcher. Something was wrong with the tail, but I thought maybe it was a juvenile bird, and the tail was just short. I had to get a better look and now that I knew what to look for.



Photo: Adrian Binns

Forked-tailed Flycatcher

Next followed five anxious minutes of trying to relocate the bird...I couldn’t believe it! I saw an Eastern Kingbird, perched in the same tree in which I last saw the mystery bird. Then I began to doubt myself — maybe I just got up too early and it was nap time! I thought, “If this is a rare bird, I will have to make a phone call and get someone here to verify it. If I do something stupid like mis-identifying a kingbird, my name will be mud.” At last, the mystery bird reappeared, in the same tree, and I checked it carefully. YES! In all significant points illustrated in my field guide, this appeared to be a Fork-tailed Flycatcher. I noted the thin white stripes on the outer edges of the tail, which appeared to be broken off unevenly

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— the tail had been longer! The wings on my bird appeared a little bit browner than the illustration, but that isn't major. And I noted a touch of yellow underneath the dark cap, reminiscent of the red that the kingbird seldom displays. Then I was REALLY excited! I don't remember seeing a Fork-tailed Flycatcher reported anywhere around here, so I knew this was going to be an interesting bird for a lot of people.

I tried to keep the bird in sight while pulling the cell phone out of my pocket. (I'm still in the dark ages with cell phones — up to that point I only carried one for emergencies, or to tell my wife that "I'm almost home, but I just want to check out one more spot," if you know what I mean. So, unlike most other serious birders, I have no contact numbers in my phone [don't even know how to do that], and all I was able to do was call home.) So I called Sue and asked her to find me some numbers while I held the bird in sight. She found the few I had, and I jotted them down on my bird list. Oh no, in the process I lost the bird again! But I was confident I was right, and I knew I should make the call. The first number I tried was August Mirabella, Bucks County compiler of rare sightings. But all I had was his home phone; he didn't answer, and I had to leave a message on his machine. I thought, "Oh, boy, I don't think I should have done that — I really want to talk to someone live who can tell me if I am crazy, before the whole birding community finds out that I am." I then tried Nick Zahn, a very experienced birder and nearby friend who could get there quickly and would have more phone numbers. No answer and I didn't want to leave another message. Next on my list was Sandra Keller, who did not live nearby, but could have been birding anywhere. She had plenty of experience and could tell me whether to retract or report. She did answer, but she was in North Carolina for a pelagic trip! But Sandra took me seriously, asked a few diagnostic questions and volunteered to call some people whose numbers she keeps in her cell phone. So the reporting began!

I tried Nick Zahn again and started to leave a message, but this time he picked up. He promised to make a few calls and then to hurry over. Meanwhile, my wife Sue arrived with her camera, even though she doesn't have a telephoto lens, just to get some kind of documentation. The bird popped up and down, but stayed in the same area while I was making calls. Sue got within 20 feet, and though it is just a dot, I was confident that if that was all we were able to get, it would still be identifiable when blown up. Bob Shaffer came in right behind her, with a good lens, and we were safe. I got some more calls with people asking diagnostic questions — to make sure it would be worth the trip. People kept coming, and the bird was gone again! Nick arrived, then Devich Farbotnik made it in from Quakertown, and then I finally found the bird, in a tree less than 30 feet from where we lost it a half hour before. RELIEF!

From that point on, it was show time! As more and more birders got there, the flycatcher was almost continually in sight until we lost it in the darkness. Often perching on branches very near the path, a couple of times even flying toward the dozens of scopes and cameras, in perfect sunlight, I couldn't have trained it better if I had tried. I even joked that the tail feathers broke when I was trying to get it to come out of its cage. (It's a joke, okay!) By then I knew that it was the first of its kind in Pennsylvania (except for a documented bird in 1873), so it was a Pennsylvania life bird for everyone, and a world life bird for all but a few of the most widely traveled amongst us. It was a thrill for me to meet so many of the top birders in Pennsylvania and surrounding states — so many great people in this hobby! It was a joyous occasion — with all the congratulations I was receiving from so many happy people, I felt like everyone had just come to my wedding! And I promise that I will work on that cell phone thing for next time.

Photo: Bill Eitner



Fork-tailed Flycatcher

Bill Keim

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New Peregrine Falcon Nests Documented in Bucks County

There was at least one “good news” story in Bucks County avifauna in 2008. An endangered bird species continued its local population expansion and has now surpassed its historical breeding density for the Bucks County region. That bird is the Peregrine Falcon. This past spring a new nest was discovered on the Pennsylvania side of the I-95 Scudder Falls Bridge in Lower Makefield Township. On June 23, 2008 the Pennsylvania Game Commission checked the nest and found one nestling, a 15-day-old female, which they banded, and 2 unhatched eggs which were collected for contaminant analysis. The banded adult female nesting at the Scudder Falls Bridge was identified; she fledged from a nest located atop the Sheraton Hotel in Hamilton, Ontario in 2006. The male was also banded and was identified as fledging in 2005 from the Schuylkill Expressway Bridge over the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. The new Scudder Falls Bridge site is in addition to the pair of Peregrines that have successfully nested on the Pennsylvania Turnpike Bridge in Bristol Township since 1992. Historically, Bucks County had only one documented pre-DDT nesting location for Peregrine Falcons, and that was the Nockamixon Cliffs in Bridgeton Township along the Delaware River. That nesting pair disappeared sometime before 1958.

[Note: 2008 also saw a new Peregrine Falcon nest on the New Jersey side of the Burlington-Bristol Bridge, just across the Delaware River from Bristol, PA. That pair laid four eggs in a nest box that was placed on the bridge’s eastern tower 15 years previously by the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection’s Endangered and Nongame Species Program. Although the birds can be viewed from Bucks County, the nest box is located on the New Jersey side of the main channel.]

David. B. Long
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Yellow Rail at Pine Run

A Yellow Rail was flushed at the Pine Run reservoir in New Britain Township in Bucks County, PA on October 31, 2006 by the author. It was also flushed on November 5th by Ken Rieker and videotaped by Devich Farbotnik. It was reported again on November 7th by Mike Homel. This may be the first fully documented live individual in Pennsylvania. The bird was not reported at the time of sighting for its protection. There are only three recent Bucks County reports. One was seen in 1950 at Lake Warren by Alan Brady and Les Thomas, and one was found dead at Quakertown Swamp in 1978 by Joe Pearson and Bob Smith. In early October 2002, one was seen at the Penn Warner Tract by Devich Farbotnik. The Yellow Rail had previously been listed as occasional in Bucks County in the nineteenth century.



Photo: Devich Farbotnik

Yellow Rail

August Mirabella
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Western Grebe in Delaware

At 1 pm on June 1, 2006, I observed and photographed a Western Grebe at the New Castle Yacht Club on the Delaware River opposite Battery Park, New Castle, DE. Observation was by 10 x 40 Swarovski EL binoculars; photography was by a Canon 20D fitted with a 100-400mm zoom, used at maximum zoom. The bird was actively fishing about 60-80 yards offshore. I did not see it fly during the 40 minutes of observation. The only other birder present was Jim Wilson, a young guy from the eastern shore of MD, who kindly allowed me to use his scope.

There are only two *Aechmophorus* grebes in North America. They are similar and distinctive, being large, long-necked and basically black and white with yellow bills and a red eye. The Western Grebe observed was identified as such by its dull yellow bill (Clark's Grebe would have a bright yellow or orange-yellow bill at this time of year — breeding plumage) and the dark cap extending down to cover the red eye (Clark's would have the white of the cheek extending to surround the eye).

Photo: Colin Campbell



Western Grebe

I am familiar with both species, having seen numerous examples in many western states.

Colin Campbell
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Pine Run Le Conte's Sparrow

A Le Conte's Sparrow had been discovered at Pine Run in Bucks County, PA by Tom Johnson and Cameron Rutt on November 24, 2006, the first record for Bucks County. At the time, I was recovering from assisting with a course at Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island in NY. I knew about the bird, but didn't dare to hope that it might still be around when I finally had time to go to Pine Run, as my parents arrived for the Thanksgiving holiday soon after I returned from New York. On November 26, my parents left for Ohio. I waved them off, and as soon as they were out of sight, I packed up my Scion xB with field guides, telescope, and binoculars. A half hour later, I arrived at Pine Run. August and Judy Mirabella, Sam Perloff, and some other birders were on their way out, but they let me know that they had seen the Le Conte's Sparrow 15 minutes before my arrival. The bird had flushed from the sedges and flown into the tall vegetation surrounding the reservoir. Later, they had found the bird at the edge of the vegetation when it hopped out onto the path. August wished me luck and headed out. I tried the sedges first, as this area had been the bird's preferred habitat. A few other birders arrived, and we tried to create a line of birders so that the Sparrow would have difficulty getting around us without being seen.

This went on for an hour with no luck. Some birders left and others appeared. Our next tactic was to walk through the tall vegetation. Much has been made about "trampling habitat" in the search for this bird. For the record, the vegetation was riddled with deer paths and other clear areas. Those looking for the bird stayed to these more open areas, and damage to the vegetation, if any, was minimal. During the search, we encountered a dozen or so Savannah Sparrows which would flush from the fields and fly to the shorter grass. Some Meadow

Voles ran through vegetation. Every time one disappeared into the grasses, it made me wonder if the mouse-like movements were truly rodents or a mouse-like sparrow.

Eventually someone called out about a sparrow that might be the Le Conte's. We all converged on the area, and at the water's edge, everyone eventually got excellent looks at the bird. It was definitely an *Ammodramus* sparrow, but something was a bit off. This bird had a complete and somewhat bold eye-ring, gray in the supercilium, a large bill, and a clear buffy breast. This was not the *Ammodramus* we were looking for. In fact, it was the Grasshopper Sparrow that had also been reported from the area recently. I think we were all somewhat frustrated, but also pleased to have found at least something besides Savannah Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and Voles. We'd been at it for several hours now, but we went back to walking the vegetation and looking for mouse-like birds.

Several Savannah Sparrows later, someone had the bird and saw it very well. Again, we all converged upon the area from which the bird was spotted. Moving slowly, we eventually found the bird. It wandered out in an open area in the field about 5 feet from us. We saw it very well including the crisp fine black streaks on the flanks and the very fine breast streaking. The bird was very bright where the plumage ran to yellow-buff in color. The face was somewhat brighter and the bill smaller than the Grasshopper Sparrow we'd seen previously. Also, the crown stripes were not streaky like the Grasshopper Sparrow. The nape color and pattern completed the identification. I later recounted to Nikolas Haass that the bird was unmistakably a Le Conte's Sparrow. Incidentally, the Le Conte's Sparrow never flushed in all the time we observed it or searched for it, which should assuage those who feared for the bird's safety in being flushed from the fields. In fact, the bird eventually just walked away from us after feeding for a bit. Then we walked away from Pine Run, encouraging some newcomers that the bird was around and that they simply needed patience and persistence to see it. Hopefully, they had an experience as rewarding as ours had been. Others apparently did have some luck finding the bird, but November 26 was the last day the Pine Run Le Conte's Sparrow was reported.

Steve Kacir

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Scissor-tailed Flycatcher in Delaware

On August 7, 2006 at about 3:00 pm, I observed a Scissor-tailed Flycatcher sitting on telegraph wires on the west side of Route 9 some 100 yards south of Deakynville Road, about half a mile north of Fleming's Landing. Viewing conditions were excellent, and I used Swarovski 10x40 EL binoculars and an Optolyth TBG80 scope for viewing and a Canon 20D equipped with a 100-400mm zoom for photography. Also present were Todd McGrath, Sarah Warner, and Andrew Leidig (who had found the bird earlier that day), Anthony Gonzon, Jim White, and three or four others.

Only two very long-tailed *Tyrannus* flycatchers occur in North America to my knowledge, the Scissor-tailed and the Fork-tailed. That this bird was a Scissor-tailed was immediately apparent due



Scissor-tailed Flycatcher

Photo: Colin Campbell

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to its pale gray head and mantle (the Fork-tailed has a black crown stretching to below the eye and a dark mantle), the pinkish tinge on the shoulder which blossomed into startlingly bright pink under wing coverts (the Fork-tailed has no pink and has white under wing coverts) when it took to flight, which it did frequently, snapping up insects at both low level and at hedge-top height. A paler pink wash on the flanks stretched down to the belly. The dark bill appeared to be somewhat deformed with a slight upward curve on the upper mandible, causing the bird to look open-mouthed; this did not seem to detract from its insect-catching or -devouring capabilities, however. The tail showed signs of wear in that, while the full length was exhibited, the amount of feathering on each of the “blades” of the scissor was asymmetrical.



Photo: Colin Campbell

Scissor-tailed flycatcher

I am familiar with both species of long-tailed *Tyrannus* flycatchers, both from other states as well as in Delaware previously.

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Le Conte's Sparrow: First County Record for Salem County

On February 17th, 2007, I was walking through a field of tussocky grass and Sorghum at Abbott's Meadow WMA, south of Salem, when I noticed a bird fly from a short distance away and drop down into the grass ahead of me. I approached it, and it flushed as I was almost upon it and dropped into the grass again nearby. The third time I flushed it, it flew up into a bush bordering the field, a Le Conte's Sparrow! It posed there for 15 full minutes before flying a short distance down into the grass again. Other birds present at the time included Savannah, Swamp, and Song Sparrows.

Subsequently the bird was only seen twice again, 4 days later and then on March 15th, when I saw it running along a trail. It is quite remarkable that the bird could escape detection so well in spite of sustained attempts to find it by numerous observers.

This represents the first recorded sighting for Salem County, NJ and a rare winter sighting for New Jersey. To date there have been 24 accepted records of Le Conte's Sparrow in New Jersey, most being migrants found in October and November. There are three previous records from February, and each of these birds stayed until late March/early April at their respective wintering sites.

Paul Driver
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Cooper's Hawk Nest in New Jersey

Big Hill (elevation 109 feet) is located in the center of a large retirement community called Leisuretowne located off Route 70, two miles east of the Red Lion Circle (Routes 206 and 70) in Southampton, NJ. The hill is on the edge of the Pine Barrens and is relatively high compared to the land surrounding it, with a commanding view north towards Fort Dix. At the top of the hill, there is a small wooded area with nature trails and a picnic area which is never used. I often climb the northern slope (which is quite steep) from my back yard and sit on a bench enjoying the view across Budd's cranberry bogs.

My observations began on April 23, 2006 when I first sighted a female Cooper's Hawk carrying sticks to a nest near the top of a pine tree about 60 feet off the ground. On April 26, 2006, a male was seen flying in with prey from the north. I did not see the exchange, but watched the female feeding about 10 feet off the ground while the male stayed in the vicinity. On April 28th Don Jones came with me to confirm the sighting, and we watched the first sign of incubation as the bird sat low with her tail extending over the rim of the nest and just her head visible. The iris of her eye was yellow, an indication of a juvenile bird. This was probably her first nesting.

Between April 28 and May 28, I observed numerous times while the female was incubating. Each time I approached the nest site, the male would dart off and disappear completely. The female never moved at all. During this period, I did see the male chasing crows away from the area. On May 29th, I noticed the first sign of hatching. The female was sitting higher on the nest in a brooding position and would occasionally stand looking down into the nest. On June 1st while she was standing on the nest, a flock of grackles flew over the nest and landed in the tops of the trees behind me. She immediately launched off the nest, swooping low overhead, then perched low and close to where I stood. Even after the grackles left, she stayed for a while and then flew back to the nest. I was left with the feeling that she also checked me out more closely while she was there.

On June 11th, I had my first glimpse of a downy head in the nest. Only one young was ever observed. Often when I visited the site, the female was nowhere in my sight, but any time there was activity near the nest (such as a crow or Turkey Vulture flying too close), she would immediately come zipping back to the nest occasionally giving an alarm note. (During the course of the nesting season I seldom heard any alarm notes.) Apparently she was always hunting within sight of the nest.



Photo: Chip Krilowicz

Cooper's Hawk on nest

On June 20th, Chip Krilowicz and Jean Gutsomuth visited the site with me and photographed the adult and young at the nest. While we watched, the male called from a grove of pine trees on the northern slope. The female left the nest and flew to the grove, returning to the nest with prey. During the entire nesting period, I never saw the male approach the nest. On July 27th, the male called from the northern slope, and the female flew back to the nest with prey on which both she and the young bird fed. By this time, the youngster was almost fully feathered and after eating began exercising its wings and branching out in the same tree.

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On June 29th, I found the fledgling about 50 feet from the nest tree. With a series of short flights, it returned to the nest where it apparently searched for remaining food. It picked up the tarsus of a small bird (with toes still attached) and seemed to play with it before swallowing it whole. From June 29th to July 6th, the young bird was seen branching out further and further from the nest tree, but staying in the area, and often returning to the nest. On two occasions during this time the female would fly in and perch low and close to where I sat in plain view. It was a great experience as we studied each other. She seemed relaxed, standing on one foot. Her purpose, I believe, was to see if there was any real danger to her young. My purpose was to learn more about her life.

On July 6th at 1 pm, the youngster was still hanging out in the nest. That was my last sighting of the bird. (During this whole process most of my observations were done with a 30-power spotting scope from a safe distance.)

August Sexaur
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Eastern Phoebe Eats Minnow

On Tuesday, March 7, 2006, Ned Connelly and I were birding at the John Heinz NWR at Tinicum, Philadelphia, PA. We observed an Eastern Phoebe catch and eat a live minnow, or other small fish, from a fresh water impoundment. We observed the bird make several more unsuccessful attempts to catch a minnow. At least two Eastern Phoebes have over-wintered at the refuge during what has been called the fifth warmest winter on record. A reference to Eastern Phoebe feeding on minnows is in the general notes of the April 1957 issue of *The Auk*. This adaptation is known to allow the species to survive when insects are not available.

Denis Brennan
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A Migration Everyone Should Like

As you read this, the fall 2008 Broadwing Hawk migration through Bucks County will have come and gone, save a few stragglers and some misdirected birds. Every year for the past 15 or so years, some dedicated hawk watchers have been spending about 10 days during the middle of September documenting the Broadwing migration through the Broadwing SEPT (South-eastern Pennsylvania Transect) project. SEPT was the brain-child of Kirk Moulton. Kirk was intrigued by the large discrepancy in hawk numbers between the counts from the hawk watching venues in the Northeastern part of the United States (mainly along the ridges) and the counts along the Texas coast, where most of the Broadwing Hawk population funneled through. Kirk suspected that the Broadwing Hawks were more likely migrating along a broad front rather than specific paths dictated by the topographical features of the Appalachian Mountains.

SEPT counts have demonstrated that the ridges along which some hawk species tended to travel were not always the favorite haunts of the Broadwings. It quickly became evident that, in some years, the majority of the Broadwing population coming from eastern Canada and the New England states was being pushed along the New England coast by the weather system. Under favorable winds, these birds would then be funneled around the northern edge of the New York City metropolis and, from there, would disperse in a southwesterly direction across northern New Jersey, through Bucks County, and onward toward Mexico and points south, avoiding

water by skirting around the western edge of the gulf of Mexico. This phenomenon is easily observed in locations such as Corpus Christi, where the hawk watch at Hazel Bazemore County Park, in some years, records daily Broadwing flights in excess of 100,000 birds. After 10 years of observations, Kirk developed a better understanding of the correlation between weather and Broadwing counts along the transect line and was able to better predict migration patterns.

The project, while never intended to keep going forever, ran for 12 solid years; the recruiting of volunteers for the seven count locations was by far the most arduous part of the project. Six locations counted through 2006, three carried the count through last year and, to my knowledge, only Buckingham counted for the 10-day duration this year, while Nockamixon provided some partial coverage during the peak of the migration.

This year again, the Buckingham gang (the actual count site is located in Forest Grove), anchored by George Rowe, met on Saturday, September 13, the unofficial beginning of the count. Despite a good cloud cover, the winds were not conducive to any sort of flight, and the social aspect of the count quickly took over the day. Participants = 5; Broadwings = 0; Other raptors = 11.

Sunday, September 14 promised to be a repeat of the previous day, but light winds from the southwest turned westerly later in the day, triggering some hawk movement. Participants = 5; Broadwings = 11; Other Raptors = 11

A dry cold front passed over the area during the night and with the winds turning to the northwest, Monday, September 15 had the makings of the official start of the migration. For the past couple of days, the weather system in New England had been pinning the birds along the coast, and the passing cold front opened the door to the first noticeable hawk flight. Participants = 6; Broadwings = 289; Other raptors = 17.

Tuesday, September 16 was much cooler than the preceding days. Moderate winds from the north-northeast and a low cloud cover were good omens. Birds trickled over through most of the morning and, by mid afternoon, substantial kettles were in evidence. The flight was definitely on. Participants = 7; Broadwings = 1,138; Other raptors = 31.

Wednesday, September 17, weather-wise, was to be a repeat of Tuesday. Light northerly winds and sporadic cloud cover were prevalent most of the day. Birds were migrating, and small kettles were seen most of the day until mid afternoon. Then, the floodgates opened for the last three hours of the day when the bulk of the birds flew by. Participants = 11; Broadwings = 7,483; Other raptors = 29.

For Thursday, September 18, the previous day's weather conditions were still holding, but for most of the day the cloud cover was nonexistent, making it difficult to find the birds. The spotting of a couple of Broadwings against the pure blue sky usually revealed the presence of far larger numbers of birds. Participants = 14; Broadwings = 2,191; Other raptors = 53.

That evening, a review of the hawk count reports from Connecticut and northern New Jersey indicated that lots of birds were still directly north of us, promising a good morning flight on Friday, September 19. During the night, the winds shifted slightly toward the northeast with predictions of easterly winds later in the day. The lack of cloud cover in the morning made observation difficult, and by mid-morning, the flight was extremely high and mostly, to the northwest of us. By mid-day, it was evident that the migration had dried up; the expected flight must have happened to the northwest of us or at such elevation that the birds went by unobserved. Participants = 13; Broadwings = 118; Other raptors = 63.

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The reports of the evening did not indicate any large concentration of birds to our north, and the forecasted southerly winds for the upcoming weekend were a strong indication that the Broadwing migration was over in Bucks County for 2008. While counts were conducted during the following four days, it was evident that we had seen the last of the migrating Broadwings the Friday before.

On Tuesday, September 23, we celebrated the end of the count with a wine and cheese luncheon at the site. The count of 2008 was the second best ever at that location, surpassed only by the year 2000 count, when 15,184 Broadwings flew over the site. While the vagaries of the weather have strongly influenced the migration over Bucks County, as evidenced by counts varying from a low of 444 Broadwings to the previously indicated high, the lack of strong weather systems in 2008 kept the New England birds in New England until favorable winds pushed them south. Favorable weather remained long enough to allow most of the birds to move in a very short period of time along the expected route. As a side note, the location set a new record for Bald Eagles with 25. All indications are that we will be counting again in 2009.

Gerry Dewaghe
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Langhorne, PA 19047

Adult Bald Eagle Takes Ring-billed Gull in the Air

At 3:00 pm on December 13, 2006, I saw an adult Bald Eagle take a gull out of the air over the water at the marina at Lake Nockamixon, Bucks County. It grabbed the gull about 8 or 10 feet off the water, carried it across the lake, and sat down on a tree limb, where it proceeded to eat the gull. I have been watching hawks for many years, and this was the first time I saw an eagle hit a bird in the air. They commonly take ducks from the water.

Roy Frock
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Chalfont, PA 18914

Bald Eagles in Bucks County

Bald Eagles have become increasingly common in Bucks County. Hardly a day goes by that they are not seen in the Peace Valley area, and they are seen regularly at Core Creek Park, Lake Nockamixon and along the Delaware River. Many of the older birders in the county can remember with no trouble when there were only one or two nesting pairs in the state, and they were far off in the northwest corner at Pymatuning Reservoir. Beginning with the earliest available records for Bucks County, Dr. J. Thomas indicated in 1876 that the Bald Eagle was rare here. Then, in 1937, G. MacReynolds listed them as an “uncommon winter visitor.” He saw them at least twice on his field trips between 1901 and 1937. For more recent information, we have weekly sighting data from Peace Valley. There is a bird walk every Saturday all year long, and from 1989 to 1996, Bald Eagles were sighted on the average of 14% of the weeks each year. From 1997 to 2001, this rose to 33% of the weeks each year. In 2002 to 2005, the average was 55% per year. In 2006, Bald Eagles were seen every week at Peace Valley except for one week in April. The highest number recorded in one day was 18 on March 7, 2006. From 2007 through 2012 Eagles have been seen 100% of the weeks of each year. Until recently, we have not had a record of their breeding here in Bucks County. Then, in 2005, a pair of eagles began nest building at Core Creek Park. In 2006, they were successful, with young fledging by the end of June. In 2007, the Core Creek nest was successful again, and this was joined by a successful nest in a Sycamore tree on Lynn Island in the Delaware River near Routes 32 and 611.

The pairs will usually reoccupy a nest, adding to it and increasing the size until it is as much as 8 feet across. The usual number of nestlings is two. In 1963, when the Bald Eagle was put on the Federal Endangered Species list, there were 417 pairs nesting in the lower 48 states. In July 2007, when they were removed from the Endangered Species list, there were 9,789 nesting pairs in the lower 48! Any day a birder sees a Bald Eagle is a good day, and there are now many good days for Bucks County birders!

Ken Kitson

6 Tupelo Cluster

Doylestown, PA 18901

Black-crowned Night Herons in Bucks County

I have decided to write about the past breeding status of Black-crowned Night-Heron in Bucks County. It is likely that many of you do not know that we had an active breeding colony at Brick Tavern, west of Quakertown, until 1982. I have personal knowledge of the status of this colony, since my wife, Judy, and I, sometimes with help from George Franchois, did surveys from 1976 to 1982 for the Cornell Colonial Bird Register. Joe Pearson reported this colony to us and says that he personally knew about it from at least the mid-1960s, and the landowner indicated it had been there for some time. Our peak count was on July 22, 1978, when George and I counted 27 nests and an incredible 72 young birds. This is consistent with the expected production from that number of nests. Joe told me that he had also seen a small number, possibly three pairs, of Great Blue Herons nesting at the same site in the earlier years.

By 1982, only one bird was found. The colony was located in a wood lot between two houses, and we were told that the local residents were not happy about their presence. The lady of the house was particularly disturbed by the fact that the birds returned on the Ides of March each year. That, along with hearing their scary footsteps on the roof of the house, forewarned of the evil nature of these beasts and impending doom they could bring. Although we visited on many a hot day to survey the site, including the day of our peak count, when the temperature peaked at 95° F, we never encountered bad odors that we can remember, but that was another complaint of the owners. With the apparent surge in the numbers there in the later years, we found the owner removing understory and then many of the nest trees that previously had active nests. This was the beginning of the end of this colony. When the birds were gone, the owner hinted that “neighbors” had shot some of the birds. A house has since been built on the lot for the owner’s daughter.

No colony has since been found in Bucks County. Alan Brady told me of at least four other breeding locations in the county, all gone by the early 1960s. He knew of three sites along the Delaware River from Tinicum Township south to the present site of the Scudders Falls Bridge. He believes that the three sites were not occupied at the same time, but were occupied in succession from north to south. The Scudders Falls Bridge site was the last, and his recollection is that it vanished shortly after construction of the bridge in 1959. He also says there was another colony that predated the other three and was located across from the present site of the Penn Warner Club clubhouse in Falls Township.

This species probably nested throughout the area at one time. The Brick Tavern colony may have been a remnant of a larger population inhabiting an area of extensive wetlands formerly known as the Great Swamp around Quakertown, which was drained long before the 20th century. Undoubtedly, the Delaware River was also productive as indicated by Alan’s recollections. Human alteration of both areas, industrialization along the county’s lower Delaware River tidal marshes, and human persecution probably were among the causes that contributed to their decline. They were recently moved from threatened to endangered species status in Pennsylvania. With the *Second Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas*, there is still hope that someone will find this species nesting in the

General Notes

county. With the historical arrival date on the Ides of March, now is the time to find those potential nesting sites. With protection, possibly a recovery can occur similar to the recent return of the Great Blue Heron.

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Common Moorhens in Bucks County

A Common Moorhen was sighted in Falls Township, Bucks County on May 13, 2006 during the North American Migration Count. Only one adult bird was seen at that time. It was a very striking bird, with its bright red bill tipped with bright yellow, in contrast to its black and white plumage. Observers at this initial sighting were Lydia Reichner, Don Jones, Rich Rogers, and Al and Nancy Bilheimer. The birds were on private property owned by U.S. Steel Fairless Works.

After the first sighting, I went back to the same pond a number of times, but did not see a moorhen again until May 27. Fellow birder Devich Farbotnik was with me, and we saw three adult Common Moorhens that day. I kept going back looking for moorhens and finally got lucky on June 15 at 4:30 pm. There were two adults and, for the first time, two juveniles. What a thrill this was for me! I couldn't wait to tell someone, anyone! This pond happens to be a part of Devich's block for the *Second Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas*, so I called him. I went back numerous times after seeing the young moorhens, but did not record the dates (bad mistake); now I know better. My wife and I took several photographs, both 35mm and digital. On November 10, I received an e-mail from August Mirabella asking for further information on the moorhens. I went back to the pond and saw two adults and one juvenile at that time.

With the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) approaching in December, I went back to check on them. On December 10 and 14, I again saw two adults and one juvenile. On the CBC, December 16, at 8:00 am, two adults and one juvenile were seen by the following observers: Don Jones, Lydia Reichner, Rich Rogers, and Caleb Hopkins. I went back alone from 4:30 to 5:00 pm and saw the two adults and one juvenile again. I had to complete a CBC Rare Bird Documentation Form. The adults were in normal non-breeding plumage except that the bills were still fairly bright red. The juvenile's plumage is almost the same as the adult's, but the bill is still dark gray at the lores and almost to the tip, where it starts to turn a light yellow-gray. The only sound Devich and I heard was a series of clicks with a pause between (although my wife swears she heard them "murmuring" in the reeds). The habitat is mostly phragmites around a shallow pond. They seemed to come out of hiding when the American Coots were nearby.

They continued to be seen in 2007, first on January 5, when one adult and one juvenile were seen after 3:00 pm. On January 7 at 9:30 am with Devich, two adults and one juvenile were seen. On January 19, 3:25 pm, only two adults were seen. It was cold, cloudy, and windy with the temperature at 35° F. On January 26, one adult moorhen was seen at 3:10 pm, with possibly a second in the reeds. The weather was again cold and windy, but the skies were clear. That was the last time a moorhen was seen. By that time, the pond was mostly ice-covered except for a small patch around the muskrat mound, where the moorhen was last seen. I have returned numerous times without success. They may have been here unnoticed for a long time, as this is not an area accessible to the public and has not been birded until very recently. Also, when the moorhens were seen, they made only very brief appearances.

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Great Black-backed Gull Eats American Black Duck

I had one of my most interesting (and somewhat horrifying) birding experiences today — Sunday, February 11, 2007 at 9:00 am — while birding at Horseshoe Cove, Sandy Hook, NJ. I was there looking for the reported female Barrow's Goldeneye. Somewhat foolishly, it had not occurred to me that most of the ponds and coves would be frozen over. However, there was a small spot of open water at the north end of the cove. I was watching a lone female Common Goldeneye in the water when a commotion nearby caught my eye. An adult Great Black-backed Gull had just grabbed a young female American Black Duck on the right side, getting the right leg and wing partially in its beak. I suspect the duck was somewhat weakened because it did not struggle as much as I would have expected. The gull proceeded to drag the duck from the open water onto the ice. The duck would struggle periodically and sometimes loosen the gull's grip, but the gull always managed to redo its grip and would try to shake the duck as though it were a crab or fish. The gull kept working on its hold, trying to work the beak deeper into the duck's side, but not really having much success at it. At one point the gull let go and the duck made a weak attempt to escape, but this time the gull grabbed the duck on the head. The gull resumed the periodic shaking and also moved its grip down to the neck. The repeated neck pinches seemed to finally do in the duck. This "battle" took about 15 to 20 minutes. Once the duck went limp (but not quite dead yet), the gull went back to the side, trying to pierce its way in. It took it another 10 minutes of removing feathers and repeated stabs (with a couple of dying twitches from the duck) before it finally got inside the duck. When the gull first dragged the duck on the ice, a couple of other gulls initially approached, but apparently thought better of messing with one of their own that was hungry and aggressive enough to attack a duck. During the rest of the struggle, they sat impassive and seemed oblivious to the life-and-death struggle.

I know from reading the behavior books and watching "Life of Birds," that gulls are omnivorous, and that they will eat the chicks of other birds. However, it had never occurred to me that one would be aggressive enough to take on an adult duck (albeit a somewhat small one). I say "young female" duck because the unfortunate duck seemed somewhat smaller than many of the other female American Black Ducks observed during the remainder of the day. If this were a first-year female, she would be inexperienced at coping with the sudden icing over of her regular habitat. This could account for her presumably weakened condition and the fact that she did not escape and fly away at the initial attack.

I never did find the Barrow's Goldeneye...hope she wasn't the victim of a gull!

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Turkey and Black Vultures in Harleysville

Both Turkey and Black Vultures roost together here in Harleysville, Montgomery County. In March of 2008, I counted over 350 birds in the trees and on the tower near the intersection of Moyer and Morris Roads. The birds dispersed in the summertime, but they started to come back again early last November. One morning, three weeks ago, I saw 142 Turkey and 37 Black Vultures. Recently, I counted 232 vultures in the trees and fields in the vicinity of Moyer, Morris, and Schlosser Roads. There were approximately 35 Blacks and the balance Turkey! This is the most I have seen since they started coming back last fall.

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Phred the Phantastic Pheasant

I came across him while birding at the Woodland Beach WMA, Kent Co., DE. On January 4, 2007, I drove slowly down the little cul-de-sac to biologist Tony Florio's house with the aim of seeing if I was still capable of spotting a Ross's Goose amongst 10,000 Snows. A brilliantly colored (sorry about the b&w photos!) cock Ring-necked Pheasant ran out of the little hedgerow and walked up to the front passenger door as I halted. Obviously wanting his handsome head and inquisitive eyes photographed, I duly obliged (IMG 8375.jpg). As I pulled away, hoping not to run him over, he started running alongside. I speeded up gradually to 12mph, and he kept pace like a Roadrunner; I could see him periodically through the passenger window. At 13mph he took off and followed in flight. I stopped. He landed and trotted up to the driver's door. I opened the door, and he ran away. I closed it, and he came back within 6 feet. I put the car in reverse, and he chased me down the road this time in full view through the windshield. We repeated this a couple



Photo: Colin Campbell

Ring-necked Pheasant

of times. I wanted to ensure I wasn't dreaming as well as put Phred through a thorough work-out regime. The same thing happened. He was beginning to pant so, not wishing him to look like Roger Bannister after the first sub-four minute mile, I put a handful of grain on the side of the road and took off at speed. An intriguing encounter; I just hope this stylish athlete didn't turn into roadkill and other birders had a chance to race a pheasant.

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Photo: Colin Campbell

Ring-necked Pheasant

First State Breeding Record for Great Black-backed Gull

On May 26, 2006, Ray Miller documented the first Pennsylvania state breeding of the Great Black-backed Gull when he found a nest on a concrete and steel pier at the Sunoco fuel terminal on Hog Island Road along the Delaware River in Delaware County. The round nest of grasses contained three eggs on May 26, and three chicks hatched on June 16. The parents stood guard atop light standards and regularly delivered small fish, parts of which were strewn around the nesting area. One chick soon disappeared, but the remaining two were banded by John C. Miller on June 30, and both fledged in July.

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