

Philadelphia Larus

the newsletter of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club

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WINTER 1992-93



Taking the measure of Montauk

By CHRIS WALTERS

We all know how the DVOC runs an annual New England winter trip to Newburyport and Cape Ann, Mass., extending sometimes north to Portland, Maine, or beyond. With good reason, this is a well-known trip, lasting three days over Presidents Weekend in February.

Probably less well-known to current DVOC members is that before 1970, the New England trip used to be run only every two years, alternating with trips out the length of Long Island to the Montauk Point Lighthouse. In 1989, DVOC winter trips to Long Island and Montauk resumed, with interesting results.

Summarized here are the club's off-again, on-again adventures to Long Island and some of the things you will want to know if ever planning such a trip.

The first thing to know is geography: Montauk is 225 miles from Philadelphia, a five-hour drive straight through. The second thing to know is geology. Both the eastern "forks" of Long Island (Montauk Point to the south and Orient Point to the north) jut out into the Atlantic like ridged fingers. These high promontories, and resulting 70-foot-high bluffs, provide some of the East Coast's most spectacular scenery south of Maine.

Geologists tell us that Montauk Point is no less than a gigantic moraine left behind by the retreating glaciers of the Wisconsin Ice sheet. Approaching on the highway from the west 15 miles away, one suddenly has the sea in sight on both sides of the fingerlike Montauk peninsula, which, toward the end, becomes a wide land of rolling hills, pines and grassy moors. The view, with the sea all around, conveys a clean and open serenity.

But it was not the view, the geography, the charm of Montauk's remoteness or the geology that first brought DVOC out to this spot in the early 1950s — it was birds.

Specifically, something rare: the House Finch!

The what?

Yes, many a veteran DVOCer used the Montauk trip as an occasion to "score" his life House Finch, a species native to the West that had established itself in the Brooklyn area during that time. And later, it was the lure of the thousands upon thousands of scoters that often winter by the Montauk Lighthouse, plus the possible alcids, eiders, sea ducks or rare gulls.

Cassinia records, for example, DVOC's trip in February 1970, organized by then Field Trip Chairman Harry Todd, which found, among other species, King Eider, Common Eider and the three scoters, plus Long-eared Owl along the way at Jamaica Bay.

Earlier trips in the 1950s and '60s had found Spotted Towhee (now just a Western subspecies of Rufous-sided Towhee), kittiwakes on the beach, Short-eared Owl, Northern Shrike and Eurasian Wigeon. Even earlier, Phil Street had a Lesser Black-backed Gull on March 1, 1947, when this was a rare find.

There's also always the tantalizing memory of the 1987 Montauk Christmas Count, on which 11 species of gulls were reported.

Bob Sehl recalls how the club decided, sometime in the early 1970s, to drop Montauk and instead go to New England each winter, due to the greater variety of birds being found on the more northerly trip. Only in 1989 did the club resume winter visits to Montauk, while, of course, continuing the great New England trips.

Since then, the club's trips to Long Island have proved to be popular, and the birds seen and all-around trip atmosphere hold promise for the future.

Take the 1989 trip.

It began with a 10 a.m. stop at Shinnecock Inlet, where the very first bird seen by Paul and Anita Guris was a Black-headed Gull swimming 20 yards away from us, while Sandy Sherman and I found ourselves looking at two Harlequin Ducks.

Not a bad beginning. One hundred yards away we had an extended study of an Ipswich (Savannah) Sparrow.

When we got out to the Montauk Lighthouse, at the end of Long Island, we had a full adult male King Eider waiting for us within easy viewing. The lighthouse, incidentally, was commissioned by President George Washington in the 1790s and once ran on whale oil.

By the time our group hit the ferry to Shelter Island for our night's lodging, the trip already seemed a success.

DVOC's own Erica Brendel, who has co-led these recent Montauk trips with me, has kindly made her house on Shelter Island available as sleeping quarters.

This happy accident of geography has not only proved enormously convenient, but has meant that mornings begin with a bracing dawn ferry ride on Peconic Bay, while the long birding day concludes after dark the same way. It has also meant that DVOC's dinners have been taken on remote Shelter Island, about as far from winter's workaday world as can be imagined.

Believe me, it is good for the soul.

Shelter Island's two ferries lead to Sag Harbor on the southern end and the fishing village of Greenport on the north. Both were settled in the 1600s and once were home to two of the country's greatest whaling fleets. The many whaling captains' houses even today give Sag Harbor a look found nowhere else outside of New England.

Heartened by this two-day experiment in 1989, we found the trip in 1990 attracted 11 members, and that swelled to 15 by 1991. New logistics were required, and it was Al Kronschnabel to the rescue.

Remembering his former DVOC trips to Montauk from the 1960s or '70s with personages like Sehl, Stern, Thomas, Brady, Choate, Grant, Kramer, Todd and the late

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PROGRAMS

Meetings are normally held the first and third Thursdays of the month, beginning at 7:30 p.m., at the Academy of Natural Sciences, 19th St. and Benjamin Franklin Parkway, unless otherwise indicated. For information on programs, call Hart Rufe, 215-257-8677 (home) or 215-348-6708 (work).

DEC. 17, 1992 — SCOTT WEIDENSAUL, "Forests of Life." Nationally known author, photographer and artist Scott Weidensaul will bring to us his own professionally prepared slide program on the neo-tropics of Belize, Guatemala and the Amazon. He will also have available for sale many of his books — including his most recent, *Seasonal Guide to the Natural World* — which he will autograph for purchasers.

JAN. 7, 1993 — ANNUAL MEETING. Christmas Bird Count reports will follow election of officers and year-end committee and financial reports. Refreshments shall be served.

JAN. 21, 1993 — GREG BUDNEY, "The History of the Library of Natural Sounds at Cornell University." Greg Budney is the curator of that library, and his program will trace the history of bird recordings from the earliest days to the newest compact discs and digital technology.

FEB. 4, 1993 — SANDY KOMITO, "The Record Big Year — 725 Species." Sandy Komito's slide program will recount his experiences in planning, traveling, chasing and finally spotting the current record total

Selected '92-'93 Christmas Count Dates

SATURDAY, DEC. 19

Glenolden, Nick Pulcinella, 215-543-8360

Brigantine (Oceanville), Ed Bristow, 609-641-4671

Wyncote, Cliff Hence, 215-247-3560

Southern Bucks County, Bob Mercer, 215-785-1177

West Chester, Barry Blust, 215-458-5616

Rehoboth, Del., Joe Swertinski, 302-292-1592

Pennypack Valley, Bob Billings, 215-667-8939

SUNDAY, DEC. 20

Cape May, Keith Seager, 609-884-8778

Upper Bucks County, Hart Rufe, 215-257-8677

Southern Lancaster County, Bob Schutsky, 717-548-3303

Pinelands, Karenne Snow, 609-953-1987 (home) or 609-985-6360 (work)

Cape Henlopen, Del., Gene Hess, 302-658-9111 (work)

SATURDAY, DEC. 26

Elverson, Pa., Bob Cook, 215-286-9919.

of 725 species in North America in one year, 1987.

FEB. 18, 1993 — BOB SCHUTSKY, "The Return of the Osprey and the Eagle to the Lower Susquehanna." Bob Schutsky, the well-known naturalist at Muddy Run State Park in Pennsylvania, has been following the plight of these fish-eating raptors for many years.

MARCH 4, 1993 — ED KWATER, "Shorebird Identification." Ed Kwater, a transplanted British birder now living in western Pennsylvania, is highly regarded as an authority on shorebirds. His slide program is aimed at aiding and assisting all of us in sorting out those fine points and distinctions that separate the various peeps, sandpipers and waders, all just in time for the spring migration.

MARCH 18, 1993 — STEVE KRESS, "The Puffin Project: Restoring Endangered Seabirds on the Maine Coast." Steve Kress is a National Audubon Society researcher and author who has worked for many years to restore puffins, Arctic Terns and petrels to coastal islands in Maine.

APRIL 1, 1993 — TIM KIMMEL, "The Northern Goshawk in Pennsylvania." Tim Kimmel recently completed an in-depth nesting study of this species for the Pennsylvania Game Commission. His slide program will focus on his censusing protocol, nesting density and highlights of habitat usage.

APRIL 15, 1993 — BRIAN MOSCATELLO, "A Naturalist's Gasp." Our transplanted immediate past president, now head of Tenaflly Nature Center, will bring us a slide presentation featuring the general

nature of the Gaspé Peninsula in Canada, with particular emphasis on the birds. His program will take us to Bonaventure Island, Forillon National Park and Saguenay Fiord.

MAY 6, 1993 — THE PHILADELPHIA ZOO. John Groves, curator of birds at the Zoo, will present "An Update on the Pacific Islands Project" at the club's biennial trip to the Zoo, 34th St. and Girard Ave. The Bird House and the Hummingbird Exhibit will be open to the club from 5 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. A buffet supper will be served prior to John Groves' slide program, which will deal with the Zoo's work with rare and endangered species in the Pacific.

MAY 20, 1993 — MEMBERS' SLIDE NIGHT. Each member may submit up to three slides in any of the four categories: Birds, Birders, Natural History and Scenery. Slides will be judged and valuable prizes will be awarded.

JUNE 3, 1993 — MAY RUN REPORTS.

FIELD TRIPS

For a copy of the field trip schedule for 1993, call Earl Harrison, Field Trip chairman, at 215-592-7950 (home) or 215-842-6315 (work).

Saturday and Sunday, Jan. 9 and 10: Annual Pocono trip. Meet at the Days Inn, Routes 22 and 309, in Allentown at 8 a.m. Overnight at Pocono Environmental Education Center. Bring Saturday lunch. \$30 for one night and three meals, including cocktail party. For information, call Phil Street, 215-647-8324 (home).

Friday and Saturday, May 28-29, 1993: DVOC-Urner Pelagic Trip. For information, call Alan Brady, 215-968-2833 (work) or 215-598-7856.

Parking Alert!

DVOCers can now take advantage of a new arrangement the Academy of Natural Sciences has with the Logan Square Parking Garage, 1815 Cherry St.

You can park all day (or all night) for \$3 in this indoor, patrolled lot between 18th and 19th Streets. There are entrances on both Arch Street and Cherry Street.

You must have your parking ticket validated by an Academy guard.

For information, call Sandy Sherman, 215-893-5739 (work) or 215-237-6814 (home).

Philadelphia Larus

Send information you would like considered for publication in Philadelphia Larus to:

Sandra Sherman, editor
912 North St.

Collingdale, Pa. 19023
215-237-6814 (home)
215-893-5739 (work)

SUNDAY, DEC. 27

Bombay Hook, Dave Cutler, 215-886-0937, or Winston Wayne, 302-658-0282

NW Gloucester County, Michael Delozier, 609-468-9344

Central Bucks County, Ken Kitson, 215-847-2968

Belleplaine, Paul Kosten, 609-861-5827.

FRIDAY, JAN. 1

Cumberland County, Clay Sutton, 609-465-3397

SATURDAY, JAN. 2

Audubon (Valley Forge), Russ Swett, 215-269-9675

Wilmington, Howard Brokaw, 302-655-8076

SUNDAY, JAN. 3

Marmora, Ed Bristow, 609-641-4671

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SUNDAY, JAN. 17

Annual Philadelphia County Winter Bird Census. Not related to the Audubon Christmas Counts, this ongoing census is compiled locally by Keith Russell. To participate or for information, call Keith at 215-844-2810.

A Sampling of Not-So-Local Notes

EDITOR'S NOTE: With the mailing of the last Philadelphia Larus, DVOC members outside the tristate area were asked to report in and tell us what they've been up to. Here are some of their responses. Unless their addresses have changed recently, members can be contacted through addresses found in the latest Cassinia. If a phone number is given, the individual has invited members to call when in the area. Thanks to all who responded.

PAUL A. BUCKLEY, University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Oceanography, Narragansett, R.I. (401-792-4201):

"P.A. Buckley moved in 1990 from N.J. (Rutgers) to R.I. (URI), where his personal birding highlight was a juvenile Ringed Plover on one of the coastal ponds in September 1991, only the second known for the East Coast, and almost a year to the day after the first on Cape Cod.

"Paul also reports taking enormous pleasure in his 394th New York state bird, a staked-out Gray Kingbird near Troy on Nov. 1 this year. DVOCers heading to Block Island or just passing through R.I. and interested in looking along the coast — nothing promised — might call."

MILLARD LINDAUER, Valley Stream, N.Y.:

"For the first time in 62 years of birding, I missed the fall migration, due to illness in the family (100% recovery attained). Couldn't even get to Militia Hill the one time we got to Philadelphia recently."

EDWARD S. WEYL, Columbia, S.C.:

"Thanks for your invitation to account for myself. I like Columbia very much. I am on the 20th floor (top) of a combination condominium and leasehold apartment house.

"My birding, which is negligible, consists of looking out of my picture window over the campus of South Carolina University and for several miles beyond. In my 14 months here, there has been greenery all along.

"My street-level birds have been mockingbirds, mockingbirds and mockingbirds, plus House Sparrows and Chipping Sparrows. . . .

"One morning in March, perched outside of my window was a kestrel. He came there almost daily for close to a month, usually three times a day.

"My best to you and to all other DVOCers, known and unknown."

JAY LAVIA, Tallahassee, Fla. (904-656-6476, home, 904-681-0311, work):

"I have lived in Florida for over eight years and in Tallahassee for over five years. I have a birdwatching wife (Jennifer) and a 4-month-old daughter (Hanna). My wife and I are both attorneys — I practice environmental and administration law and my wife is a trial attorney.

"Tallahassee is an interesting birding locale — recent yardbirds include Wood Stork, Bald Eagle, Wild Turkey, Solitary Vireo, Loggerhead Shrike and Orange-crowned Warbler.

"We are located just 25 miles from the Gulf of Mexico and have several hotspots nearby. St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge offers concentrations of wintering shorebirds and ducks, a variety of spring and fall migrants, and the occasional wandering rarity. About 15 minutes south of Tallahassee is the Appalachian National Forest, a vast expanse of Southern pinewoods habitat. During breeding season, this area is home to several Southern specialties, including Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Bachman's Sparrow, Swainson's Warbler and Brown-headed Nuthatch. Nearby Wakulla Springs is a good spot for Limpkins in all seasons and Mississippi and Swallow-tailed Kite in the spring and summer."

DR. IRA JOEL ABRAMSON, Bird Bonanzas, Inc., North Miami, Fla.:

"I'm writing hurriedly because I'm wrapped up in preparation for an extensive tour of Panama. I'm still running birding tours,

presently emphasizing inexpensive short trips to Mexico, but also some more distant exotic destinations like the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific.

"The bird tour business has been very brisk lately. But my medical practice still has to come first, so my world list is growing slowly. I'm at 6,172 for the world and 705 for the U.S.

"I was recently in the DVOC area on a medical mission, and I had the great pleasure of revisiting places I birded as a teenager. While at Cape May and Bombay Hook, I ran into several DVOC members. It almost made up for arriving at Raymond Pool just moments after a Curlew Sandpiper — which I need for my U.S. list — flew away."

RAYMOND DAVIS, Sanibel, Fla.:

"Just got back from the Everglades National Park. Although we got in the park, it is closed to the public [due to Hurricane Andrew]. Roads are cleared. They expect to reopen Dec. 15. That's tentative. Both the reception center and the Anhinga Trail buildings are relatively intact. Many windows and the door were blown out, but overall, they look in fair shape.

"Otherwise, damage is awesome. Trees blown over and broken off like matchsticks. Shark Valley is open to the public but has no services. Plenty of water, more than I'd ever seen. No shortage of wading birds, but spread out.

"The Ding Darling seems about the same. Andrew had no effect on the island.

"The Bailey Tract lost their Smooth-billed Ani about three years ago and to this date not a single positive report. This area had a near-normal rainfall for the first time in years. This should be good for the birds but will spread them out, making it more difficult to find some species.

"The years of drought were hard on the apple snails and, thus, the Everglades Kite left the area. However, we frequently see them about 50 miles east of here."

LUCY TYRRELL, Woodruff, Wis.:

"I never tire of seeing Bald Eagles up here in Wisconsin's northwoods — where I have a temporary position (post-doc) with the U.S. Forest Service, compiling information on old-growth forests in the East.

"Not long ago, I had occasion to fly from a local airport in a four-seater plane. Right after takeoff, as the pilot banked left to take us on our flight route, there, just below the right wing, was an adult Bald Eagle, also turning, giving a backward glance at the other winged thing so close!

"Other birding highlights include:

- "Travel to Hawaii (pre-hurricane) with views of some of the honeycreepers at the higher elevations, including Apapane, Iiwi, Amakihi and Anianian. At the lower elevations, there were mostly exotics, such as Japanese White-eye and Common Myna. I also got to see an active volcano glowing pink-orange after dusk.

- "Spending two weeks in late May participating in field censuses of Kirtland's Warbler near Mio, Mich., helping USFS' John Probst with his research on habitat use and seasonal territorial shifts of Kirtland's Warblers."

JOE ENGLER, wildlife biologist, Kern National Wildlife Refuge Complex, California (805-758-3605, home, and 805-725-2767, work):

"...The complex is actually comprised of four refuges — Kern and Pixley, in the San Joaquin Valley; Bitter Creek, in the Coastal Range; and Blue Ridge, in the Sierra Nevadas. The latter two were purchased for the recovery of the California Condor — as of now, they are not part of the immediate recovery plan. . . .

"The bulk of my work takes place on the Kern and Pixley refuges, dealing primarily with endangered species. Some of my general duties include conducting aerial waterfowl surveys throughout the Southern San Joaquin Valley; conducting general bird surveys on two of the refuges; conducting surveys of the endangered blunt-

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Cross-Country Sampling of Not-So-Local Notes

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nosed leopard lizard; small-mammal trapping to document occurrence of the resident rodents and delineate habitat use by the endangered Tipton kangaroo rat; technical assistance with refuge management via grazing and/or prescribed burning programs.

"I'm currently assisting the National Ecology Research Center on a Mountain Plover project. The Mountain Plover has exhibited a dramatic population reduction in the last decade and hopefully will be listed as endangered in 1993. Virtually the entire population winters in Southern California (as far as anyone knows). There is almost nothing known of this species on its wintering grounds, so this project is the first of its kind. Samples taken from 50 birds a few years ago showed that almost all were heavily contaminated with DDE and DDT. Surveys in the Imperial Valley and surveys we did last winter show the plovers relying heavily on agricultural fields, due to loss of native grasslands.

"We've had a few early successes, including the first known night roost and making the first captures of Mountain Plovers on the wintering grounds. . . .

"Extracurricularly, I'm secretary for the San Joaquin Valley Chapter of the Wildlife Society and serve on the Tricolored Blackbird Recovery Plan Steering Committee. In the latter group, we were involved with the impending proposal to list the Tricolored Blackbird as threatened or endangered. Due to good spring conditions, this species enjoyed a population explosion and the proposal to list it has been withdrawn (for now). . . ."

GERRY McCHESNEY, 2810 Pole Line Rd., # 1, Davis, Calif. 95616:

"I get back to the Philly area about every year or two, and it always seems I'm there during the wrong part of the month to catch a meeting.

"For the last four years, I've been working for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife's Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center in Dixon, Calif. Between 1989 and 1991, I was surveying breeding populations

of seabirds (e.g., storm-petrels, cormorants, gulls, alcids) in coastal California. We're finishing writing up the results of that now.

"Starting in 1992, my colleague Harry Carter and I began a seabird monitoring program at San Nicolas Island, one of the Channel Islands of Southern California. Our principle species of study are Brandt's Cormorant, Western Gulls and Black Oystercatchers.

"I am also a student at California State University, Sacramento, where I'll conduct a master's thesis on breeding biology of Brandt's Cormorant at San Nicolas Island."

MIKE DANZENBAKER, Sunnyvale, Calif.:

"Yes, indeed, I am now married, to Lee Hung, a local (California) birder originally from Taiwan. She's a great person and wife, and we enjoy many birding weekends as well as international forays together.

"I spend all of my waking and non-working hours out photographing birds. It's a great hobby. As for work, I'm an engineer (Silicon Valley), out of necessity to support my photography and birding habits.

"Been out here 7½ years. Still make it back to New Jersey once or twice a year, usually with work, and squeeze in a weekend or two at Cape May or Brig, and manage to catch up with a few DVOcers."

CINDY UPTGRAFT BARRY, Vancouver, Wash.:

"I'm still with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but I have a new job in the Regional Office (Portland). I'm the chief, Division of Recovery, which includes all recovery plans (Spotted Owl, desert tortoise, Marbled Murrelet, 'Alala are the hottest issues), interagency consultations on listed species and conservation planning on private lands. Our Pacific Region includes Washington, Oregon, California, Idaho, Nevada, Hawaii and the Pacific Islands. . . .

"Bigger than work in our lives is that Tim and I are expecting a baby around Thanksgiving! Surprise! I'll keep in touch through the staff at Tincum. . . ."

Taking the measure of Montauk

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Tom Davis of the Linnaean Society, among others, Al has brought his van along for the past three trips and has undertaken break-fast duties.

The smell of Al's 5 a.m. coffee and bacon (not to mention the lure of those Mickey Mouse-shaped pancakes) made waking up in the blackness of Shelter Island considerably easier.

1990's Sunday, brisk and sunny, turned up Thick-billed Murre after we had seen Glaucous and Iceland Gull and hordes of scoters in wet and brutal conditions the day before. Later that afternoon, Short-eared Owl, Eurasian Wigeon, Redhead and 14 other duck species greeted us on the way home along Long Island's south shore. And after dark, a Barn Owl flew through Kronschnabel's headlights.

In 1991, knowing the Murphys planned to participate, DVOC devised a new strategy for the trip's first day: I actually planned the initial stops in a way designed to produce no good birds just to frustrate Bill and Naomi, expecting Bill would report he was finding rarities anyway. But what a failure this policy turned out to be!

First, on a barren roadside known only for its Rock Doves, Bill claimed he'd seen Red Crossbills — whereupon the rest of us saw them, as well. Then, at an empty crossroads, Bill yelled out, "Northern Shrike!" — surely another fiction. But there it was, perched atop a high bramble.

When the group then found the previously reported Black-billed Magpie — all this before reaching the ocean — we knew it would be a trip to remember.

Twenty-seven King Eiders, six Lapland Longspurs, two Harlequins, Glaucous and Iceland gulls, together with a mass of mergansers, scoters and both loons, finished off the trip.

With such luck in the past, we expanded the trip to three days in 1992, picking Martin Luther King Weekend in January.

Hitting sites in Connecticut, Jamaica Bay, Rye and Riverton, N.Y., the first day, we checked off Tufted Duck, two Black-headed Gulls, eight Harlequins, King Eider, 20 Common Eiders, Snow Buntings, Merlins, Peregrines, Saw-whet Owls and two Eurasian Wigeon.

Indicative of the potential, however, were these slippery previously reported birds that

the trip did not record that weekend: Boreal Owl (the Connecticut stop), Gyrfalcon, Dickcissel, Franklin's Gull and Barrow's Goldeneye.

Whether traveling in a group or alone, birders can sense a certain lure to Montauk's winter beaches, such as the one stretching miles northwest to Shagwong Point, a wild beach that gives way to scenery unchanged for hundreds of years. This is a beach where, even now, late in our century, one can find loons calling, or come upon a Harlequin Duck or Glaucous Gull preening, or discover a scoter lounging right on the beach.

Surrounded by Long Island Sound, its dunes, high bluffs and diminutive wave action, there is about this beach a stillness, a freshness, high sky and far horizon that characterize the winter at Montauk and beckon the visitor back.

Club members would do well to consider such sites, wherever they can be found.



The 1993 Montauk trip has been tentatively scheduled for Jan. 30 and 31. For information, call Chris Walters, 215-642-6862 (home).