

# Philadelphia Larus



the newsletter of the Delaware Valley Ornithological Club

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## The Yard List

*Satisfaction From a Well-Tempered Place of One's Own*

by HENRY ARMISTEAD

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Henry "Harry" Armistead, a club member since 1959, has completed 100,600 words and 21 chapters of a book Birds of Rigby's Folly: Nature, People, and Musings From a Chesapeake Farm, about his experiences, his birding colleagues and natural history on the lower Delmarva Peninsula based on his family's property near Easton, Md. A librarian with the Free Library of Philadelphia, he is compiler of the Cape Charles Christmas Count and former book review editor of Birding and Middle Atlantic Coast regional editor of American Birds. We thank Harry for allowing us to excerpt portions of his final chapter.*

In the May/June 1996 issue of *The Maryland Yellowthroat*, compiler Phil Davis summarizes lists of birds in "Maryland Yards." Here one sees that Henry Armistead has a yard list of 255 bird species, 171 of which were recorded in 1995 alone. The runner-up, Ethel Engle, has 202 in her "yard," 110 acres which border the Choptank River and its lush freshwater marshes near Tanyard, Caroline County, Md. At 199, Marshall Iliff, whose "yard" is an 80-acre horse farm near Annapolis, comes in third.

More remarkably, Chandler S. Robbins also has a list of 199. Here is someone with a real yard, 2.5 acres near Laurel, Md., where Chan has lived since 1951.

Chan has also captured and banded 119 species here on his small lot on the side of the Patuxent River. His best year list is 151 species in 1954. His best day was May 9, 1953, when his list was 80 species. Rarities have included White Ibis (feeding in the river), White-winged Crossbills at his feeder, Dickcissel and Pine Grosbeak.

After Chan comes former DVOCer Jim Stasz at 197 in fifth place. Jim has lived for several years on a small property with not much vegetation except grass. However, it is in Calvert County, Md., on the edge of Chesapeake Bay, where he has seen hundreds of gannets, countless thousands of diving ducks and rarities such as Eared Grebe.

With his telescope, he can look across to the other side of the Chesapeake to Poplar Island and see cormorants on their nests.

What significance do these yard figures have? Hardly any. This is a game. It's just for fun. Those who want to may report their yard lists annually. They are then published in the newsletter of the Maryland Ornithological Society. Yard lists are a way for us to keep score at

our homes. Pride and love of one's own turf leads to games such as this from which we derive enjoyment and pleasure.

But, like any game, it may assume importance out of proportion to reality. If our team loses in the playoffs, the old adage "it's just a game" is small compensation and little comfort to those to whom the game is vital, even all-encompassing. Yard lists are hardly conducive to this sort of fanaticism, yet I will readily admit that adding a new yard species — on the rare occasions when this happens anymore — is one of the highlights of the year for me. I haven't added one since a Northern Saw-whet Owl flew across the driveway on Nov. 12, 1995.

I am sure there are a few who may grouse, "Well, Harry, has a 120-acre "yard" with extensive frontage on the Choptank River and diverse habitats. He should have a superior yard list. He was born with a silver checklist in his mouth." Or there may be those who resent my list because I am an out-of-stater.

To these few, I will reply that I do indeed have an outstanding "yard." However, I do not live there. At most, I am there 50 or 60 days a year, but when I am, I work the property intensely, sometimes to the exclusion of everything but food and sleep. Just ask my family.

In further rejoinder, I am perfectly willing to shrink my yard to get on a more even footing. Let's restrict it to the real yard at Rigby, an area of less than three acres, which is mowed. Fine.

This done, the yard list is 208, still six ahead of the competition. Is this all braggadocio? Yes, it certainly is. No apologies. But this misses the point. In the spirit of birding at its best, yard lists are sheer, personal fun.

Yard lists do have some real significance when the resident keeps accurate records over a long period of time. Having done this, s/he needs also to report significant findings so that they will be part of the written record.

Very few birders are historians who comb through the archives of natural-history societies for the pearls and gems that observers have recorded over the decades. There are not that many with a research bent such as Ed Fingerhood, now at work with Keith Russell (both DVOC members) on a history of ornithology and bird life in the city of Philadelphia, who pour through old journals as well as original pri-

*Continued on Page 4*

## PROGRAMS

*NOTE: Meetings begin at 7:30 p.m., at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, 19th St. and Benjamin Franklin Parkway.*

*For information on programs and parking in the area, call Don Jones, 609-859-0281.*

*Christmas Count compilers: Please call Sandra Sherman with CBC dates by Oct. 6.*

SEPTEMBER 5 and 19, 1996 — Informal summer meetings.

OCTOBER 3, 1996 — KEVIN KARLSON, "Birds of the High Arctic." If you recall Kevin's Dry Tortugas program from last year, you'll recall the excellent quality of his slides.

OCTOBER 17, 1996 — RAY DAVIS, "Birds, Bats and Butterflies." DVOC member Davis presented a program on Sanibel to the club several years ago at an Annual Banquet. *Vote on program change. (See story)*

NOVEMBER 7, 1996 — SLIDE CONTEST. Maximum of three slides allowed in each of four categories: birds, birders, natural history and scenery.

NOVEMBER 21, 1996 — BILL HILTON JR, director of education at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. "Hummingbirds and Hamburgers: The Tropical Connection."

DECEMBER 5, 1996 — ANNUAL BANQUET (*note change of traditional date*): STEVEN HILTY, field trip leader for VENT and author of *A Guide to the Birds of Colombia* and *Birds of Tropical America*. To be held at Dugan's Restaurant, 7900 Roosevelt Blvd. Details to follow.

DECEMBER 19, 1996 — Sid Lipschutz, "Bird Art and Bird Artists, Then and Now." Sid last spoke to the club about bird photography.

JANUARY 2, 1997 — ANNUAL MEETING. Election of officers and refreshments.

## FIELD TRIPS

Saturday, Sept. 21, 1996. Palmyra, N.J. (the "Bailey Tract") For the fall passerine migration. Call for meeting time and location. Leader: Ward Dasey, 609-953-1685 (home) or 215-886-2220 (work).

Saturday, Dec. 7 Pelagic to Hudson Canyon. Leaves from Brielle, N.J., at 5 a.m. and returns at about 8 p.m. Cost is \$65. Contact Armas Hill at Focus on Nature Tours, 302-529-1876, or e-mail at font@wittnet.com.

## Program Proposal to Go to a Vote

by SANDRA SHERMAN  
DVOC PRESIDENT

In the spring 1996 *Philadelphia Larus*, I proposed a change in our program schedule designed to speed up our meetings and to create more opportunities to exchange knowledge about birds.

I am hereby calling for a vote of this new policy, to take place at the Oct. 17, 1996, business meeting. After a period of discussion, all members in good standing will vote on the proposal based on the options listed here.

Those unable to attend the Oct. 17 meeting are welcome to send in absentee ballots; please mail them to me at the address below. All ballots must be received by Oct. 16.

The ballot is printed below in boldface and is followed by a summation of my proposal.

1. **No change in program policy.**

2. **The second meeting of the month would be devoted to discussions of ornithological interest led by club members, rather than having a formal speaker. The primary focus of these 30- to 45-minute, interactive presentations would be Local Notes and Ornithological Studies; pre-publicized topics could include specific identification problems, with use of study skins; scientific developments; reviews of recent literature, tapes, etc.**

**In order to speed up the first meetings of the month, Ornithological Studies and Conservation Committee reports would, on a regular basis, be suspended until the second meetings.**

**If this choice is selected, it would go in effect in February 1997. Another vote will be taken at the June 5, 1997, meeting to decide whether to retain this format.**

3. **Speakers' policy would stay the same, but Ornithological Studies and Conservation Committee reports would alternate in an effort to trim length of meetings. (E.g., Ornithological Studies, first Thursday; Conservation Committee, third Thursday).**

*Condensed Version of Proposal:*

I'd like to suggest we streamline the first meetings of the month by paring down the committee reports. And I recommend we eliminate a formal speaker from the second

meeting of each month.

Except for the Annual Meeting, the first program of each month from October to May would continue to offer high-quality speakers. The business portion of the meetings, however, would be abridged to allow the speakers to begin earlier and the meetings to end sooner.

Retained in this format would be election of new members, abbreviated committee reports (books, field trips and programs), announcements, local notes and any time-oriented conservation reports.

The second meetings in February, March, April, May, October and December would begin with the reading of the minutes, election of new members and all Committee reports, but would expand Ornithological Studies. Additional time would then be available for local notes and for sharing members' expertise in the field of ornithology.

Specific topics would be announced in advance, and members could bring slides or other information pertaining to the topic. [The Academy's Ornithology Department has previously offered us the use of the specimens for study at these meetings.] Perhaps a meeting could be set aside to review new birding literature or sounds.

Since the first January meeting would remain our Annual Meeting, the second January program could include a speaker instead. The third Thursday in November would still be set aside as our Annual Banquet.

I hope you'll come and vote. Please call me with any questions (numbers below).

To have your phone number/e-mail address listed in the *Cassinia*, to be issued in November, contact:  
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# MAPS: More than Avian Pleasantries for Summer

by DORIS McGOVERN

AUGUST 1996

I just pulled a bit of gray down out of my Symonds' *Shrub Identification Book*. My partner and I have been doing vegetation surveys since mid-July. We've done 54 of them in between, during and after our net runs. So, contour feathers and occasionally flight feathers get woven into my books and my life. They drift about my apartment in Virginia, slosh around the wash cycle and filter through the string bags I stuff into my backpack each morning before sunrise, before we pack our gear into our banding site.

When the American Birding Association's "Supplement for Volunteer Opportunities" arrived in the mail last winter, I eagerly looked for a chance to broaden my birding experience. On the first page was a listing for an internship Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship (MAPS) — i.e., banding birds from May 1 to Aug. 28, including a "salary," room and travel expenses. It was too perfect and so exciting that I thought it might not be for real.

Three months later, fantasy became reality. After a 15-day training program and six days of group banding, my partner and I began operation of six banding stations along the Potomac River south of Washington, not far from Mount Vernon, including two each at Mason Neck Management Area, Fort Belvoir and farther south at Fort A.P. Hill.

Most of us are familiar with bird population censusing — Christmas Bird Counts, breeding-bird atlases or hawk counting. The MAPS program is designed to provide a demographic profile of a cluster of species, in a particular habitat, and to monitor the changes in the various parts of the population over time. It is modeled on the highly acclaimed British Constant Effort Sites Scheme (CES) and in the United States has been directed by David DeSante at the Institute for Bird Populations in Point Reyes, Calif., since 1989.

MAPS data provide a view of post-fledging productivity according to the proportion of young and adult birds captured. Because the effort is site-intensive during breeding season, our recapture numbers are high and show the adult population size, survivorship of fledglings and adult recruitment from surrounding areas. The banding data is supplemented by breeding-bird point counts at the nine designated points where vegetation surveys also are done. More than 400 MAPS banding stations were run this summer.

My favorite site is Mason Neck 1. In May, I caught a lot of Prothonotary Warblers, male and female. In June, I recaptured one pair in an advanced state of breeding readiness. Then, in the same net — the one just beyond the beaver-cut trees, where you can see the ospreys' nest — I got four Prothonotaries, the same pair with a male and female juvenile! (Usually you can't determine gender in a juvenile, but Prothonotaries have white patterns on their sixth retractor that allows for this distinction.) The young were so stubby, if the parents had not been in the net, I might not have known what they were.

The story continues when, 10 days later, I recaptured the adult male and the juvenile male, by that time completely transformed after passing quickly through the first pre-basic molt. The mother scolded noisily as I extracted her family from the net. The juvenile female was

never netted or seen again.

In the weeks leading up to the end of July, I heard and saw this family foraging in the laurel thicket at the edge of the beaver pool, but I never caught them again.

As very early migrants, the Prothonotaries are on their way south. Will my replacement catch one next year? Will someone doing migration banding on a barrier island off New Jersey snag one? Will Prothonotaries reproduce in similar numbers at this site next year? I won't know, but the ornithologists at the Institute for Bird Populations will, and they might even be able to establish the point in the life cycle of this species where population change is occurring.

A MAPS site consists of about 40 acres, where 10 12-meter nets are precisely located along a "net trail." From May 1 to Aug. 28 are 120 days or 12 10-day periods. Each site is worked for one day in each period. For six hours beginning at sunrise, we visit each net in sequence on a one-third-mile trail, not less than every 30 minutes or more than one hour.

At my sites, we put up 10 nets in 25 to 35 minutes, and then did 40-minute "net runs" to extract birds, carry them back to the banding station, process and release them before the next net run. The juveniles and full brood-patch females are returned to the vicinity of capture, not so close that they will be recaptured, but close enough that they can make contact with their distressed families.

Usually, nets are arrayed in a figure 8. While I check nets one to five, my partner covers six to 10. After processing the birds, we exchange routes, and continue alternating during the six hours of operation.

In this way, we shared equally the uphill/downhill, creek-crossing, gully-jumping, swamp-sloshing obstacle course. As an added benefit, we had equal exposure to ticks, chiggers, mosquitoes and other blood-sucking parasites.

Working on a blue tarp in the forest at our banding site, we hang the birds in their carry bags on a nearby tree limb, and we begin banding immediately. Species identification, age (there are six possible designations) and sex information are basic. We assess the breeding readiness of each male by checking the development of the cloacal protuberance — there are three scores (big, bigger and biggest), whereas breeding females develop brood patches allowing for six more scores. Fat accumulates in the furculum (the notch below the Adam's apple) and is also noted (six possibilities).

Other features we score are skull pneumatization, body molt, flight-feather wear and molt, as well as juvenile body plumage, wing length and weight. Finally, we record the collection data — day, time, net number, bander and notes. Of course, judgment required above and beyond species ID, in addition to basic extraction and banding skills.

If the net run is light, there will be time to rest, catch your breath and even complete the breeding-bird survey done each day from the banding site. If not...

Oops, time for another net run.

For information on the MAPS program, call Doris McGovern, 610-352-7062.

# The Yard List

*Continued from Page 1*

mary sources and personal records.

Therefore, if one's records appear with some regularity in a regional journal such as *Maryland Birdlife*, the *Delmarva Ornithologist*, DVOC's *Cassinia* or the Virginia Society for Ornithology's *The Raven*, then s/he is making a real contribution to our understanding of ecological and environmental changes, instead of squirreling away the records in some filing cabinet that his/her heirs may not know about or want to be bothered with ensuring its proper provenance.

In September 1994, Paul Lehman, editor of *Birding*, and his wife, Shawneen Finnegan, bird photographer, artist and photo editor of *Birding*, moved to a duplex on Sunset Avenue in Cape May from Santa Barbara, Calif. Their second-floor deck overlooks the Cape May meadows and, in the distance, the beach. With their telescopes, they can scan the ocean from their property. They moved in Sept. 5, and five days later, their yard list reached 100 species. By Nov. 14, they logged their 200th bird, their 222nd by April 15, 1995.

Even considering where they live and who they are — both are crack birders — this is extraordinary. Their December 1994 Christmas card, drawn by Shawneen, shows the view from their deck and features some of the rarities they have seen from there: Cave Swallow, Fork-tailed Flycatcher, White Pelican, Swainson's Hawk and Wood Stork. Out over the sea they have seen Common Black-headed and Little gulls, King and Common eiders, Black-legged Kittiwake and Razorbill.

It has taken me since 1949 to attain a yard list of 255 on a 120-acre farm with nearly a mile of shoreline, and these parvenus to the region were hot on my tail with 222 species from a less-than-one-acre lot in half a year! On their first anniversary at Cape May, they surpassed me by one with 256. As of August 1996 they are at 283.

Undeterred by such friendly competition, I have also kept yard lists elsewhere.

In Philadelphia, I have lived in our East Mount Airy house for almost 11 years. Our yard here is less than one acre in the heart of the northwest part of the city. But, perhaps more significantly, there is a considerable expanse of open sky.

Here I have seen 108 species, including flocks of Great Blue Herons and Double-crested Cormorants. Small numbers of Common Loons pass north in April. One April day, I looked up to see an immature Bald Eagle dive at a Broad-winged Hawk. On two days, I have seen 28 species here, my best day list, until my son, George, and I smashed it with 32 species on March 31, 1996, when 780 Snow Geese, a Peregrine Falcon, eight Sharp-shinned Hawks, two Black Vultures and an early spring Barn Swallow flew over.

Although surrounded by streets and sidewalks busy with traffic and pedestrians, DeKay's snakes abound in our garden and small shrubby areas. In summer, we often see one or two bats hawking insects in the gloaming, silhouetted against the fading sky at dusk.

Up to 10 gray squirrels at a time patronize our feeders. Skippers throng in our butterfly bush. A couple of times Eastern Screech-Owls have called in the early evening. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are

rare visitors. One day our cat, Steatsmeyer the Magnificent, brought in the only Winter Wren we have ever seen here. Common Redpolls from the Arctic have visited the feeder a few times.

But in spite of the presence of big trees and abundant shrubbery in the neighborhood, only 15 species of warblers have been detected.

All of this diversity in the face of urban blight, what might be called the "Rose in Spanish Harlem syndrome," is heartening but it can only be carried so far. For 26 years, I worked at Thomas Jefferson University's library at 11th and Walnut Sts., in Center City Philadelphia.

In all that time, my yard list for work only rose to 36 species, some of these dead birds that had flown into buildings during migration.

One of the most extraordinary yard lists I have heard of was on the California coast and is described in a letter longtime DVOC member Howard Brokaw sent me on April 18, 1995: "I first visited Gerard Brady on February 24, 1973, when his yard list was 261. He and his wife ran the Inverness Motel, a small eight unit affair just south of Inverness on Tomales Bay.... The motel property fronted the road for about 200 feet and contained about eight small trees. However, across the road was a good piece of forest, and of course he counted everything he heard or saw there from his own property.

"A brook ran out of the woods and formed a small cattail marsh at the north edge of his property, where he had had Black Rail, and where Virginia Rail and Sora appeared when he rattled corn in a can. The property extended from this narrow frontage for about 250 yards to the shores of Tomales Bay with its rich assemblage of shore birds, waterfowl, and other water-associated species. I think that occasionally, on stormy days, even a few pelagic birds from Pt. Reyes had wandered within his ken...."

On his last visit before Brady's death, Howard wrote, he recalled the list being in the low 290s.

Club member Jesse Grantham's small lot was right in the town of Corpus Christi, Texas, almost out of sight of the water, but he had 190 species there in three-and-a-half years. When George and I visited on March 31, 1990, Black-chinned, Ruby-throated and Rufous Hummingbirds were attending Jesse's feeders.

**B**irding in one's backyard can contribute to our understanding of wildlife and have significance far beyond one's property lines.

No matter where one lives, no matter what manner of work they do, a contribution can be made from the record of what one sees from one's home and its environs. I have not traveled extensively compared with many of my acquaintances. This is of small consequence to me. I am happy for those who have these adventures and new experiences.

But I would rather spend another weekend at Rigby. Maybe the next trip there I will see something I have never encountered before.

I will finally get a Golden-winged Warbler or a Common Merganser, or a Snowy Owl will drop in from the high tundra, or a stray Olive-sided Flycatcher will filter through from the boreal forests of northern Quebec. The Aurora Borealis for the first time, or a double rainbow.

Maybe something in the water, a harbor seal or a dolphin. Or a whale or an even manatee, which has been found in waters within sight of our shoreline....

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