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## IN REALITY ...

A closer look at Delaware County's Reality Birding League

By Megan Edwards

Perhaps you've heard the "Fantasy Football" believers clustered around the office coffee pot arguing the relative merits of Emmitt Smith and Deion Sanders. Maybe you've agonized over players for your rotisserie baseball team, weighing the contributions of a power hitter versus a golden glover. But to truly appreciate the arts of planning and persistence, nothing beats the binocular-swinging competition of Delaware County's "Reality Birding League".

Started last year by the DVOC member Nick Pulcinella, the fledgling competition pits birders against the fates and each other in a contest to see who can rack up the most "bird points" within Delaware county in a year. It was adapted from a similar contest sponsored by *Bird-watch Magazine*, a British birding journal.

"I'm really big into the competitive aspect of birding," said Pulcinella in explaining his reason for starting the league. "It brings in the competitive aspect of birding. It brings in the listing aspect. Plus, it's fun."

Pulcinella, who is working on a guide to the county's birds, also had something of an ulterior motive. He has long believed that Delaware County is under-birded and thought that a competition which encouraged people to scour less-known areas might lead to interesting finds and – potentially – new records.

The results from the first year are encouraging. Thirty five species of warblers were reported, including a Connecticut Warbler and a rare fall Mourning Warbler. Nesting Yellow-throated Warblers were discovered along the Brandywine River, as were Summer Tanagers. And the wild aftermath of Hurricane Fran left a completely unexpected Sooty Tern in its wake.

"I just wanted to keep people out there exploring new places," said Pulcinella. "People were going to areas that they had never been to before to get one up on the competition. Last year, I birded more in the county than I ever have, and I've lived here all my life."

As for the league's rules, they're relatively straightforward. Each bird on the official Pennsylvania checklist is assigned to one of four abundance categories: 1) Common, 2) Local or less common, 3) Scarcity or sub-rarity, or 4) Official rarity. Birds must be found in the wild to be counted.

Birds can be either "seen" or "found". A "seen" bird is one that has been previously reported by another birder, then relocated by the participant (even if it is relocated days or weeks later). A "found" bird is one that is located without any prior knowledge of its presence in that area – other than knowledge of habitat and previous years' records, of course.

"Found" birds are worth more points than "seen" birds, except in the "common" category where both earn the same amount. As a result, there's a real advantage to birding new areas. Finding a Northern Goshawk in a previously unexplored area on the edge of the county rather than rushing off to find one reported by someone else at Ridley Creek, for example, can earn a participant an extra two points.

"In searching, in getting competitive, you go to places you don't normally go and see things you don't normally see," said Doris McGovern, another DVOC member who participated. "You're motivated to get out. It certainly did push me to go to places I've never been before, to check the little ponds I know of."

She spent an early spring day tracing the Delaware River's edge from the Commodore Barry Bridge north through all the tough industrial park neighborhoods, searching for the unexpected.

"It's not something you'd normally see me doing on a gentle day in March," she said.

Each league participant is issued a scorecard, which is submitted to the scorekeeper on a monthly basis. The card lists each species and has room to record the date on which the species was first "found" or "seen". Any new sightings are added to the league spreadsheet, and new scores and rankings are calculated.

The sighting sheets are then returned, along with a short newsletter containing updated rankings, reports on significant sightings and other helpful information. While some people might be discouraged by how far ahead the leaders were, McGovern said she saw it as a learning opportunity.

"Last year, I birded more in the county than I ever have, and I've lived here all my life." Nick Pulcinella



A Mallard or a Blue-winged Teal is worth only three points, but an Eurasian Widgeon could be worth ten.



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"I see it in terms of 'Wow, that's as good as I could do if I were as good a birder and spent as much time,'" she said. "You learn what it means to be dedicated and consistent. You learn from seeing good birders bird well. They always say good birders are lucky, but they aren't. They work hard."

One of those who worked hard last year was Al Guarente, who won the competition in fine form – outdistancing his nearest competitor by an astounding 40 points. His efforts were helped by the fact that he lost his job early in the year and could thus spend many hours in the field, he said.

"I found I didn't go to Bombay Hook as often as I used to," said Guarente. "My wife likes it because I'm home a lot sooner."

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(Continued from page 1)

He saw a total of 211 birds in the county (seven more than he had ever seen in the county in a single year before) for a total of 764 points. Pulcinella finished second with 205 birds and 724 points.

"Al creamed everybody last year," Pulcinella said. "He was out there every stinking day."

But other participants may have the last laugh. Guarente just bought a new business, one that will require much time and effort. "I'll probably be working seven days a week," he said, ruefully.

Maybe there's hope for the other Delaware County twitchers after all...

*It's not too late to participate in this year's Reality Birding League. To join, call Nick Pulcinella at 610-543-8360.*



## Upcoming Programs

*Meetings are held the first and third Thursday of each month at 7:30 p.m., at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, 19th and Benjamin Franklin Parkway. For information on programs, call Don Jones at 859-0281.*

*Parking is available at the Logan Square Parking garage, 1815 Cherry Street, at a reduced rate. This is an indoor, patrolled lot. Get your parking ticket validated at the Academy to get the reduced rate.*

**MARCH 20 - SOUND RECORDING OF BIRDS;** presented by George Reynard, Don Jones, Kate Somerville and Hart Rufe. A how-to guide for those interested in learning more about recording bird songs and calls in the field.

**APRIL 3 - VIREO - HISTORY, CONTRIBUTORS, COLLECTION;** presented by collection manager

Doug Wechsler. A look at the Academy's extensive bird slide collection.

**APRIL 17 - RECENT CONCEPTS IN SYSTEMATIC SPLITS/LUMPS;** presented by Louis Bevier. What makes a species? Come and find out at our third new-format, interactive meeting.

**MAY 1 - TOPIC TO BE ANNOUNCED;** presented by Dan Brauning.

**MAY 15 - TO BE ANNOUNCED**

**JUNE 5 - MAY RUN REPORTS.** The final formal meeting of the season will detail May Runs, Big Days, Century Runs, etc. Contact Bill Murphy at 215/885-2488 if you plan to present a list.

**JULY 3, AUGUST 7, SEPTEMBER 4 AND SEPTEMBER 18 - Informal summer meetings.**

## Upcoming Field Trips

*For information about these trips, contact the listed leader or call field trip chairman Bill Murphy at 215/885-2488.*

**March 22 - Pedricktown and Mannington Marsh area** (southwestern NJ) for early shorebirds, waders and raptors. Led by Frank Windfelder; 215-673-6240.

**April 27 - Brigantine (Edwin B. Forsythe NWR)** for early shorebirds and lingering waterfowl. Led by Megan Edwards; 609-783-4192.

**May 3 & 4 - Pocomoke and environs** (overnight trip) for shorebirds, rails, owls, spring passerines and more. Led by Colin Campbell; 302/792-2506. The plan is to meet on Port Mahon Road at 9:00 p.m. on May 2, 1997.

**May 11 - White Clay Creek, DE** for warblers (including nesting Hooded and Cerulean), Pileated Woodpecker, Willow Flycatcher and others. Led by Andy Ednie; 302/792-9591. Meet at Hot Shoppes rest area on I-95, south of Wilmington at 6:00 a.m.

**May 17 - Dot & Brooks Everett Trail and Lebanon State Forest, (central NJ)** for Kentucky, Hooded, Worm-eating and Prothonotary Warblers.

Led by Don Jones; 609/859-0281. Bring boots, meet at the Vincentown Diner at 6:30 a.m.

**May 23 & 24 - Pelagic trip out of Barnegat, NJ.** Call Focus on Nature Tours at 302/529-1876 for more information if you are interested in going. The cost per person is \$89.

**June 7 - The Poconos** for breeding birds. Led by Bill and Naomi Murphy; 215/885-2488.

**July 13 - Bombay Hook NWR and environs,** for the start of fall shorebird migration. Led by Sandy Sherman; 215/237-6814.

**August 23 - Brigantine (Edwin B. Forsythe NWR),** for shorebirds, waders, waterfowl and raptors. Led by Tom Bailey; 609/426-4727.

**August 24 - Pelagic trip out of Brielle, NJ** from 5:00 a.m. - 8:00 p.m. Call Focus on Nature Tours at 302/529-1876 for more information. The cost per person is \$66.

**September 6 - Pelagic trip out of Lewes, DE** from 4:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. Call Focus on Nature Tours at 302/529-1876 for more information. The cost per person is \$80.

**November 1 - Raccoon Ridge** (northwestern NJ) for raptor migration. Led by Tom Bailey; 609/426-4727.

presented by George Reynard, Don Jones, Kate Somerville and Hart Rufe. A how-to guide for those interested in learning more about recording bird songs and calls in the field.

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

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