

## The newsletter of the Baltimore Bird Club

February/March 1997 - Online Edition

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Deadline for next CHIP NOTES: February 23, 1997 (the next issue will be April/May 1997)  
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Please help CHIP NOTES get out on time

### Black-legged Kittiwake at Conowingo Dam

by Steve Sanford



The star bird of the early winter season in central Maryland was a first-year Black-legged Kittiwake seen regularly at Conowingo Dam. It often came spectacularly close to the overlook near the base of the dam. Unlike many immature gulls, this bird was extremely well-marked and strikingly handsome. It showed up December 1st and was still there in early January.

This species is rarely seen in or near Maryland except well off the coast. It breeds from the Gaspé Peninsula in Quebec to the far north, and in Alaska. It normally spends the winter at sea.

Conowingo Dam also had a highly-out-of-season Parula Warbler for some weeks, and a brief visit by an Indigo Bunting. Another out-of-season surprise was a Grasshopper Sparrow seen on the Baltimore Harbor Christmas Count near the sewage plant on January 4. Two Brant appeared at Fort McHenry for the count. An "Oregon" Junco has been visiting a feeder at the Watershed Authority offices of Liberty Reservoir on Oakland Road on the Carroll County side. This is a western race of the Dark-eyed Junco that may be re-split into a separate species that is normally seen in the Rockies and west.

Thanks to Tim Carney for responding to the call for artwork for *Chip Notes*. One of BBC's youngest members, he likes to draw and contributed the illustrations of the Black-legged Kittiwake and Purple-bearded Bee-eater for this issue. He has a special interest in exotic birds from around the world and enjoys seeing them in the Baltimore Zoo and other zoos.

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### Mutant Duck from Outer Space

by Elizabeth K. Moser

There is a duck I look for each morning at Baltimore's Inner Harbor quay. He (or possibly she) will be either sitting on the grey granite blocks which form the bank of the harbor in front of the Maryland Science Center, or he will be sailing placidly with four or five of the mallards near the steps to the water taxi at the southwest corner of the harbor. His coat is uniformly glossy black-green, the exact color of a mallard's head, but his beak is not bright yellow, like the other males; it is a dull spotted brown. Male or female -- I don't know -- maybe both. My duck is enchanting -- maybe he is a mutant, not from the defined flyways that migratory ducks follow but from outer space! He is certainly the only non-mallard of all the ducks who congregate on the stones and in the water near the Science Center, between the docked yachts and the quay, pecking under their wings for insects, or bobbing, bottoms and orange webbed feet up, for the small fish and bugs which swim in the shallow water.

I have been observing him for three years, as the brick harbor quay is on my morning jogging route. When I first noticed the duck, he was alone, always alone. I cannot remember whether it is true or whether I made up the story to divert myself from the discomfort of jogging, but I recollect hostility, evidenced by flapping wings and quacking from the other ducks when he approached them. Mostly he would be huddled on the stones, a dark, shiny spot apart from the other birds. Even the gulls, perched on the light poles, or pacing stiff-legged around their white-spotted roosts at the stone edge of the quay, squawked at my black-green duck. That first year, he was an unwelcome outsider.

By the next spring, he was accepted. Today, seldom alone, he sits and swims with a cordon of companions. I think they want to share in his popularity. He is easily the most sought after duck in the harbor -- I am not the only passerby who scans the water anxiously and calls out "Good morning!" when even in dark dawn I can distinguish his black outline from the other ducks. I see by the early walkers-to-work tossing him bread crusts.

Jo Anne Ditch, Baltimore City's Dockmaster, agreed that even though he is the most popular, all of the ducks are warmly greeted and enjoyed as part of the holiday spirit that permeates the harbor area. She told me that ducks were not always around the inner harbor. "About fifteen years ago, there were two, maybe four families of mallards which nested around the grain elevators along Key Highway." She remembers that the owner of Connelly's seafood restaurant, which had long been located on Pier Four, decided that ducks would add to the appeal of his operation. He floated crates of garbage on pallets outside the restaurant and soon the birds arrived. Once fed, they stayed. When they did not feed from the garbage crates, they found aquatic plants, seeds and insects in the water, or poked with their bills in the grass by the World Trade Center and the Rouse pavilions. And they were given hot dog rolls, pizza and other delicacies by the people walking along the quays.

These erstwhile wild ducks became tame; they stayed permanently, nesting on the wooden framing of the finger piers just above the high water mark, sharing the harbor and promenade areas with the recreational boaters, office workers and tourists. Like my black-green duck, who may have flown hundreds of miles to the harbor expecting only a temporary stopover, they settled in, migrating with the food supply between the grain elevators and the populated areas. Soon there were about thirty full time residents, a number which has held relatively stable, controlled in large part by the local rat population.

According to Valerie Chase, Staff Biologist at the National Aquarium in Baltimore, the rats have enjoyed the ducks. "They would eat the ducklings and eggs, and sometimes they would attack the female ducks." Chase conjectures that this is why there seem to be more drakes than female mallards around the harbor. Since the male only stays with the female through the breeding mallards around the harbor. Since the male only stays with the female through the breeding period, the brown spotted females have full responsibility for their clutches (what broods of ducks are called) and are busy sitting on eggs or nurturing their offspring. They are more likely to be caught off guard. Full clutches can be as large as fourteen -- however, the females who swim in the harbor seldom have more than four or five downy balls paddling behind.

Chase told me "There are more tame local ducks than there used to be before the Marine Mammal Pavilion was added to the original Aquarium building. The ducks discovered that the large concrete base of the pylon which supports the viaduct connecting the two buildings is a perfect nesting spot, since it is surrounded by water and unapproachable by the rats. So even though Jo Anne Ditch says, "Those birds drop their eggs everywhere -- on the piers, on the quays -- even in the shuttle boats!," it is probable that most eggs are being sat on between the two Aquarium buildings. Unless the ducklings venture onto parking lots or the rat-infested ivy-covered landscaping, they will grow to maturity and raise their own broods.

I asked Chase why there are only mallards at the harbor, not the other kinds of ducks that Maryland is so famous for, the colorful canvasbacks, scoters, wood ducks and buffleheads we are used to seeing pictures of. There are two answers to that question," she said. "First, the mallards get on with people. They are sociable, unlike the other types which shy away from human activity. But also, they aren't all true mallards; they are hybridized --- in generations past, they have bred with domestic ducks. A male mallard would breed a feather duster given the chance."

That started me thinking about whether my black-green duck was really a mutant from outer space, or whether he might be just the product of a chance encounter on a grain ship. I met with Patsy Perlman who is active in the Maryland Ornithological Society to learn more about migration and breeding patterns of the local mallards. When I found her in her office on the third floor of the Cyburn mansion, surrounded by stuffed bird specimens clearly labeled for the many schoolchildren who visit the museum there, she was looking at a snapshot of a bird -- my duck. The photo had been sent for identification to the Ornithological Society by a man from Cincinnati who had been in Baltimore for a convention.

"I don't believe this!" she said. "Why are you all making such a fuss about an old morph!" Perlman explained that "morphs" are not uncommon -- many duck families display more than one color pattern. Then she told me about my duck. First of all, he is a she. The snapshot clearly showed the brown mottled beak of a female rather than the male's bright yellow, which is the determining characteristic -- less dramatic, but much more important in sex and species determination than the color of the duck. So even though I have never seen any black-green ducklings along the quay, Perlman told me to keep watching. "This green duck is part mallard and part barnyard duck. It's a product of several generations of hybridizing. After so many, many generations of these ducks -- commingling with white ducks -- it will be interesting to see what that duck produces."

So I will wait till next spring. I will watch all of the mallards, seeing the feathers of tell-tale white that show their hybridization. Maybe next year, there will be clutches of black-green ducks swimming in the Inner Harbor by the Maryland Science Center, so that I won't mind sharing one special Murphy with walk-to-workers and tourists from Cincinnati. My duck really isn't an outer space mutant, but she is still interesting and unique.

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### Postcard from the Edge: 12/16/96

by Hank Kaestner

I've just spent an interesting weekend in Lore Lindu Park, 500,000 acre protected rainforest on Sulawesi Island. Most of the island's 86 endemic birds can be found in the park. When I arrived in the town of Palu, near park headquarters, I was met by Wayne Klockner, an MOS member, formerly head of Maryland's Nature Conservancy branch, and now in charge of the Nature Conservancy's Indonesia Program. Wayne was headed home for Christmas leave so couldn't join me for some birding. My favorite bird was the gaudy purple-bearded bee-eater.



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### BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETINGS

by Alan Bromberg, Recording Secretary

The Board of Directors met on November 11 and December 9. At the November meeting, the board approved a proposal to purchase three subscriptions of the Maryland Conservation Council's conservation report at half-price to be provided to area members of the General Assembly. The appointment of Phyllis Gerber as chairperson of the Scholarship Committee was announced. In December, the board heard reports on land-use issues in the next session of the General Assembly and on the Department of Natural Resource's efforts to develop a deer-control policy. The board discussed the possibility of participating in the development of a trails program for the Jones Falls and considered ways of determining what conservation organizations it should support.

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### Bird watch in Trinidad and Tobago this summer

by Marty Brazeau

A few years ago, a William Murphy slide show about bird watching in Trinidad and Tobago whetted my desire to see such a tropical paradise. Last July, I was happy to join a Caligo Ventures birding tour of both of the islands located off the coast of Venezuela. This Summer, you can join me on the same tour that I will be leading this August 6-16. You will add at least 150 birds to your life list of birds as a result of this ideal first tropical birding experience.

Native guides will lead all birding trips via comfortable vans to diverse habitats including rain-forested slopes, coastal areas, mangroves, lowland forests and grassland habitats. In the evenings we will gather to share field notes, view informative videos, and hear from native naturalists to learn tropical bird ecology. We will stay in comfortable rooms at the famous Asa Wright Nature Center during our seven days in Trinidad. The center's appetizing meals include topical fruits and vegetables plucked from surrounding gardens. Awaken early every morning to the raucous noise of the Crested Oropendola and a host of other exotic sounds including the anvil-like chorus of the **Bearded Bellbird**. Birding from the veranda of the Asa Wright Lodge, you will likely see 25 to 30 new species before breakfast. I especially liked the colorful array of hummingbirds observed at the feeders. Highlights of the tour include a visit to a beautiful riparian grotto located at Asa Wright to view the breeding colony of the unusual nocturnal Oilbird and a boat tour of Caroni Marsh for spectacular views of the famous Scarlet Ibis.

During our three days in Tobago, we will stay at the Blue Waters Inn, located directly on a beautiful sea beach. You will select meals from the Inn's seafood restaurant menu. Spend warm afternoons viewing exotic sea life while snorkeling in the coral reef off the Inn's beach. We will travel by glass-bottom boat to the Little Tobago Island to explore nesting sea bird colonies of Tropicbirds, Boobies and Terns. Hike trails in a lush mountain forest above 2,000 feet called "The Gilpin Trace" to view the rare White-tailed Sabrewing Hummingbird and Blue-backed Manakins.

Even though August is considered the rainy season, last Summer most of my Trinidad trip was gloriously sunny. In his book book, *A Birder's Guide to Trinidad and Tobago* William Murphy writes, "Any time is good time to visit Trinidad." Unlike the drier months, the forest (in August) is lush. Birds are especially active after brief showers. Murphy also mentions rainy season birding is easier on the wallet and opportunities to see unusual South American bird migrants abound.

Interested? The tour price is \$1,895 per person/double occupancy and includes the round trip flight from Baltimore, guide fees, meals, and lodging. Call me, Marty Brazeau at 410-665-7462 (or send me e-mail at [mbrazeau@mail.bep1.lib.md.us](mailto:mbrazeau@mail.bep1.lib.md.us)) for more tour information.

*Editor's note:* Marty Brazeau is a member of the Baltimore Bird Club.

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### Baltimore Bird Club Officers for 1997-98

President	Sukon Kanchanaraksa
Vice-President	Deborah Terry
Treasurer	Robert C. Wood
Recording Secretary	Alan Bromberg
Corresponding Secretary	vacant
Membership Secretary	Roberta Ross

At the annual membership meeting in March additional nominations for elected officers may be made from the floor. No nomination should be made without the nominee's prior consent.

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### Summer Scholarships

#### Training in Ecology and Ornithology

#### Ecology Scholarships

The Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS) is now accepting applications from Maryland teachers and youth leaders for six scholarships to attend summer ecology workshops which the National Audubon Society holds at camps in Maine, Connecticut and Wyoming. Each grant covers the cost of tuition, room and board for an intensive six-day course of field study and instruction in ecology, conservation and natural history.

#### Ornithology Scholarships

The MOS is also accepting applications from Maryland teachers and youth leaders for one scholarship for a week of study in ornithology at the Audubon summer workshop in Maine.

One more scholarship is available, with preference for an applicant from the Eastern Shore to any camp of choice.

#### Requirements

1. The MOS requires that its scholarship recipients be those who work with young people. This includes teachers, camp counselors, park rangers, and others who make or are planning to make nature education a part of their careers.
2. Applicants need not be members of MOS but must be endorsed by a chapter or member of MOS.
3. Each candidate must provide a written statement showing how the Audubon experience will be used to develop in young people an appreciation of our wild heritage and a sense of responsibility for the care and quality of our natural resources.
4. Two or more letters from individuals who know of the candidate's interests and activities are requested.
5. Applicants must be 18 years or older.

Applications must be submitted by January 31, 1997. Additional information may be obtained by calling 466-7377. Send applications and letters of recommendation to:

Mrs. Phyllis Gerber  
6202 Gernand Rd.  
Baltimore, MD 21209

Brochures can be obtained from the Registrar, Audubon Camps and Workshops, 613 Riversville Road, Greenwich, CT 06831.

You may also contact Mrs. Isa Sieracki, Chairman Scholarship Committee.

*Editor's note:* We apologize that this notice was not published in *Chip Notes* timely, but we include it to make you aware of this ongoing program. The essential information in this article was in the November-December issue of the *Yellowthroat*.

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### Back Yard Birding

by Gail Frantz



Tom first spotted the red-shouldered hawk four years ago on a dull winter day near a busy intersection of Bel Air Road. She was perched on top of one of the five foot high posts that outline his neighbor's small garden. She appeared to be hunting, but without much success. It occurred to Tom that it would be no trouble at all for him to give her one of the live mice from the supply he always keeps on hand in his pet store just a few doors away. The longer he watched her sitting motionless in the cold, the more the idea appealed to him. So he got the mouse, offered it to her and she took it. In less than a week, the hawk learned to associate Tom's whistle call with food. In a few weeks she brought along a male to feed with her. The male, not so trusting, never came closer to Tom than fifteen or twenty feet.

Tom has learned that the pair usually eat three mice apiece daily, except on especially frigid days when they often eat as many as six each. During the cold winter months the birds' weekly food bill often costs as much as \$20.00 a week. Tom has never complained about the expense, he believes "they're worth it."

One morning last October I visited the site to observe this fascinating relationship between Tom and the hawk. By 9:00 the raptor was already perched in a maple tree. She'd been waiting for him about twenty minutes. He appeared carrying a large white bucket that doubles as a mouse carrier and a seat. Tom approached her space slowly while giving the sweet, undulating whistle call he always uses. She appeared to ignore him and to be disinterested in his movements. Tom extended his arm, dropped the live mouse within a foot or two of his feet, then stood quietly. This morning the hawk, always patient and cautious, was biding her time. But finally, after several moments, she floated down from the tree to the ground. At this point she was so close to Tom that if he wanted to, he could have easily touched her. She plucked the confused mouse from the short grass and with strong beating wings returned to her perch, bent her head over the small, white furry shape and consumed it. Later, Tom recalled that at the first feeding, he had to retreat at least fifty feet away from the mouse before the hawk would fly in to retrieve it.

For the last four years, the birds have flown in almost daily for food, then disappeared during the summer months. Sometimes, during the spring, the birds carry the food away. Tom is fairly certain this is an indication they have young, but he's never been able to locate the nest. Sadly, the male failed to return in the fall of 1996. Tom fears the worst, but he is hopeful that the magnificent red-shouldered female will find another mate by the spring of 1997.

Last June, Phyllis Grimm had a great time at the 1996 MOS convention. In addition to attending several interesting field trips, she read the synopsis of a paper presented by Peter J. Tango and David F. Brinker from the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. According to their research, marsh birds often respond to "recorded vocalizations." Phyllis found the idea intriguing and within the week she made a tape using the songs of three different rails.

Armed and ready, she proceeded to the Owings Mills wetland area on Red Run Blvd., and ran her tape of the sora, clapper, and Virginia rail calls for several minutes. When she finally cut off the machine, she was delighted to hear the Virginia rail call continue. However, the bird remained out of sight and Phyllis never did get a look at him. Nevertheless, she had the thrill of conjuring up the call and next year she'll try again.

In Woodensburg: The Mays family had a "singing" screech owl from September through November. What a great Halloween sound for their seven kids to hear! They've also seen sharp-shinned & Cooper hawks for the first time since last spring and two female purple finches showed up in October and November.

Fruited quince, American plum, and crab apple trees in the Frantz backyard, attracted a flock of 80+ cedar waxwings on November 18. At the same time, just a few feet away, 1 Pine Siskin almost got lost in a crowd of 14 goldfinches at a black oil sunflower feeder.

This past October, in winter, and new Apple trees in the Frantz backyard, attracted a flock of red-tailed hawk swoop to the ground, capture, then devour a few feet away.

From his backyard in northeast Baltimore city, Kevin Graff reports seeing a veery very often during October. Most exciting was a high flying golden eagle heading south/west on October 21. November 6 produced more than 36 juncos on an eating weed seed stopover. November 7 featured the first black-capped chickadee that Kevin has seen for two years. November 12 brought in a hermit thrush, 33 robins, and 3 female purple finches.

Let us hear about your Back Yard birding too. Call or write

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