

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 14, No. 1

January~ February, 2008

### In the Bleak Mid-Winter

Winter is a good time to look at trees. They can't fly away, which means they are foul-weather friends. You can study the intricate designs and textures of their trunks and shapes of their limbs in sun, shadow and dusted with snow. Winter is also a good time, says Josh Galily, to trim and remove broken trunks and branches that overhang the walks and roads of the park. When I asked Josh about his background, he said he grew up in Brooklyn and went to the Bronx High School of Science. After his junior year, he volunteered in Prospect Park. He became an intern, then the assistant to the Arborist of Prospect Park. His job was to evaluate new plants and measure the height and trunk diameter of park trees. He went to the University of Vermont where he majored in urban forestry and landscape horticulture. After college he worked for Ira Wickens Arborists, a commercial grower. Next he went to The New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx where he climbed and pruned. He did the same jobs for the New York City Parks Department. but on street trees in Staten Island. A year ago he joined the work force of the Central Park Conservancy as Tree Care Supervisor.

Every year work crews spend a day at a time in 2 of the Park Transverses. They close off the transverse to traffic and inspect both sides. They prune branches and cut down dead trees that overhang the road. Dead wood is cut up and hauled away and the road and sidewalks are cleared. On Saturday, Feb. 23, they planned to work from 8 AM to 3:30 PM at the 86th St. Transverse. But Friday's big snow storm wiped all that out. Instead, Regina Alvarez said, all crews shoveled park walks to remove 6 inches of snow. A ghost force came in on Sunday to finish the job. On Monday morning, I was pleased to walk on clear walks all over the Ramble. I remember years when the walks were not cleared and the snow turned to slippery ice. Thanks to all the people who shoveled snow this February.

While interviewing Josh, I learned that this really is the year for trees. There is a citywide plan to "clone" sturdy park trees from all 5 boroughs of New York City. Foot long cuttings were taken from the branches of historic old trees of robust stock and proven hardiness. The cuttings were shipped in refrigerated cars to Schichtel's Nursery in Oregon. The nursery will grow and care for saplings to produce 10 genetically identical copies of each original tree. When the saplings are 2 to 3 feet tall, they will be returned to New York and planted throughout the city. The goal is to plant one million trees over the next 10 years.

On Jan.10, in Central Park, Commissioner Adrian Benepe joined City officials, tree experts, business financiers, and students from John Browne High School to kick off the program. They witnessed the removal of cloning samples from a 100-year-old beech tree. It is a variety of European Beech named a copper beech for the maroon leaves it puts out each spring. The tree stands across the walk from a group of evergreen trees at the bottom of Cedar Hill near Fifth Ave. at 79<sup>th</sup> St.

When it comes to trees, "cloning" is a very old technique. You cut off a slender branch of a tree and whittle the cut end to a sharp point. The point is inserted into split root stock and the 2 are wrapped tightly and grow together to make a sturdy graft.

Sometimes a handsome tree with weak roots is grafted onto a tree with strong roots to make a sturdy specimen. This may be the reason we have a grafted tree on a hill across the East Drive from the Boat House. The tree has 2 kinds of trunk, easy to see at this time of year. The

upper part is a pink horse chestnut. Below it, the root stock is an American sycamore. Both these trees have grown taller over the years. Now the graft line between them is well over 6 feet high.

For the city-wide clone project, tree samples have been taken from 6 trees in Central Park. They are:

1. Cutleaf beech *Fagus sylvatica laciniata* 'Asplenifolia'. It's named for the leaves that are deeply cut to the midrib. Cutleaf, like copper beech, is a variety of European Beech. This one is beside the sidewalk at the western edge of Cherry Hill, near Wagner Cove or the Lower Lobe.

2. Tuliptree or yellow poplar *Liriodendron tulipifera*. It stood on Cherry Hill in view of Bow Bridge, and for many years attracted beautiful birds, including orioles and tanagers. As samples were gathered from its branches, the tree was taken down because the roots were deeply rotted. A slice of the trunk was taken to the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Yard and the growth rings counted. Neil Calvanese recons it was 150 years old, one of the original plantings of Central Park.

3. London plane *Platanus acerifolia*. It stands near the northeast corner of the Reservoir beside the Bridal Path beyond lamppost #9614. It is believed to be the oldest tree in the park, planted before the Reservoir was dug.

4. crabapple *Malus* ssp. This tree was 1 of 4 that were planted around the pool in the south garden of Conservatory Garden. It is the only one left so you can find it easily.

5. Horsechestnut *Aesculus hippocastanum*. It stands near Central Park West at the 100th St. entrance. The tree is near the park road. It is one of the oldest trees in Central Park and probably an original planting.

6. American beech *Fagus grandifolia*. This tree is north of Winterdale Arch at West 83rd St. and the bridal path. If you enter from West 81st St. you would cross under the arch and West Drive. Turn left on the bridal path and you will see this large beech on your left.

No oaks or elms were selected for the tree clone project. Oaks cross-breed easily and produce surprise hybrids. Elms are susceptible to Dutch elm disease and long horn beetles. Oaks are healthy here but on the West Coast they could be exposed to a new plague, oak blight.

Let's hope this project, Million Trees NYC, is a success. It could put trees on streets, in parks, and around business and private property. All this planting and care could increase the trees in our city by 20%. Imagine that.

### Super Census for Central Park Trees

The Central Park Conservancy has embarked on an awesome computer project called Tree Works. It will name and list every tree in the park old and big enough for a trunk diameter of 8 inches or more. There will be a record of each tree by common and scientific name and the care it receives, such as pruning, treatment for disease, pests and if it was removed. Each of these trees will be pinpointed on a park map. Eventually we will know how many trees are in the park, and the number of each species. People will be able to search for trees of the same species of the same size or different sizes. Or they can compare trees of the same size of different species. Davy is the company that has been doing the naming and counting of park trees. They provide the total number of trees for each group and what percentage that group is of the entire park tree population. The Kennerson Group designed the computer software for the tree census.

I was lucky enough to see a printout of a working list of trees. I feel sure this census is being updated all the time so my comments may already be somewhat outdated. But it is better to duplicate than omit so here goes. **European beech** should be split in 3 to separate it from its

cultivars, **cutleaf** and **copper beech**. **Yellow buckeye** trees are undercounted. There is 1 just east of Maintenance Shed at 79<sup>th</sup> St., Another 1 is beside the Samuel Morse statue at 72nd St. Transverse and Fifth Ave. There are 2 more on the hill northwest of that Transverse and the circular bench. All bear lumpy yellow fruit. There are 3 **crapemyrtle** trees beside the Alice-in-Wonderland Statue, but the trees are missing from my list. **Cornus mas** or **Cornelian cherry** trees are seriously undercounted. You will soon see their yellow blooms between the crapemyrtle and Hans Christian Andersen statue. A count of 252 trees for **English elms** seems high. **Euonymus spp.** is listed but not yet named or counted. There is a tall tree of **winged euonymus** beside the 72<sup>nd</sup> St. Transverse west of the crosswalk above the 2 yellow buckeye trees.. Miles of this euonymus are trimmed as hedges in many locations, and in fall live up to their common name, burning bush. **Spreading euonymus** lives up to its name, too. It is planted all over the park and you can see its green leaves all winter. Look around the Boat House, and the flagpole at 69<sup>th</sup> St near Fifth Ave. **American filbert**, also called hazelnut in the U.S. and hazel in England, is undercounted on my list. It is currently dangling its golden catkins in many park locations: 1. the zoo, north of the clock and almost under the 68<sup>th</sup> St. Transverse, 2. the west side of the Upper Lobe near the bridge, 3. in the Locust Grove on the west side of the Great Lawn and 4 this sample, from behind the benches near the Romeo and Juliet Statue. A handsome and groomed **Hercules club** stands west of the Children's playground at 76th and Fifth but I can't find it on my list. **Pignut hickory** is missing from the hickory list. One of them is across Bow Bridge on the walk to Bethesda Fountain. **American, littleleaf** and **silver linden** are listed but **English linden (lime)** is missing. Many **magnolias** are not included on my list, including **star magnolia** which you will soon see at Cleopatra's Needle. There is 1 **umbrella magnolia** east of the West Drive and the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Yard, There was 1 **cucumbertree magnolia** near the East Drive on a flat meadow above the cat statue. It took two hits last year and winds knocked off big branches. The same fate met the umbrella magnolia. As soon as the deadwood was cleared away, the umbrella tree put up lots of new shoots with foot-long leaves. We hope the cucumbertree can also be groomed and do the same thing. The last magnolia missing from my list is **sweetbay** tree. There is one at the south shore of the Meer across the walk from Conservatory Garden. There is another behind benches and a fence beside an east-west sidewalk that crosses the East Drive and leads toward 84<sup>th</sup> St. and Fifth Ave. That sweetbay was planted by Neil Calvanese. Oaks are well represented in our park with lots of Turkey oaks and hundreds of pin oaks. But **Lea's Oak** is missing. It is a hybrid of **shingle** and **black oak**. One stands opposite the Swedish Cottage below Shakespeare Garden. There may be another one just across the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Transverse but I am not sure. "**Mulberry spp.**" should be changed to **black mulberry**. I wrote about one that was blown down in Shakespeare Garden. There are 2 more along the north edge of the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Yard. It would be nice if we planted some of those mulberry seeds and put a replacement in the garden. My last tree to mention is **Smoketree**. There is one on a walk beside Shakespeare Garden and another on the south shore of Turtle Pond.

Some trees on my list have names I don't know and will try to find for a spring treasure hunt. American elm trees require more care than all the others because of Dutch elm disease. Black cherry is the most common tree in Central Park. In the 1980's, Lambert Pohner explained they are vital to birds. The trees bear small black fruit from June into September, really needed in a drought year. One hot, dry summer day, I watched a family of crows teach their young to pick up and swallow cherries on the sidewalk. Lambert taught me to eat them, too. They are sour enough to pucker your mouth but just a few of them will slake your thirst. And the more you eat, the better they taste.



SME



SME

## Spring Blooms in Winter Snow

Despite snow, rain and sleet, spring flowers are appearing in the park. While I was out sketching, I saw snowdrops coming up through a blanket of snow. They were under a stand of witchhazel Regina Alvarez planted a few years ago. The bushes are east of the cross walk over the East Drive at the top of the 79<sup>th</sup> St. We have lots of American witchhazel that put out spidery, yellow flowers in November. These new witchhazels bloom in February. Their scientific name is *Hamamelis x intermedia* a hybrid of Japanese and Chinese plants. The plants with ruby flowers are called 'Diane' and the plants with copper flowers are 'Jelena.' Each flower has crumpled, twisting ribbons for petals. Beneath the ribbons are what look like tiny, maroon roses. These are buds that grow into seed capsules. When they are ripe, the capsules explode and fling seeds far enough away to begin growing on their own. Twigs and roots of American witchhazel are used to make liniment for sore muscles and sprains.

February is a good time to see winter jasmine *Jasminum nudiflorum*. It grows in long strands dotted with yellow flowers. They cascade down banks beside bridges like Winterdale Arch, or beside the steps leading down from the South Pumping Station at the Reservoir. Winter Jasmine flowers are small, but they really brighten up a winter day. As you can see, this issue of the news is full of plants. I added their park locations so that you can get out and visit them. If I hear from enough of you I will do some tree walks.

Before leaving Central Park, I want to mention squirrels. A black squirrel, color morph of the gray, came up to me at the winter birdfeeders and sniffed my shoe. Marty, the Zone Gardener said she is female, pregnant and lives on high ground east of the feeders. I didn't see her when I returned. But when I scattered broken egg shells in the leaves they were inspected by sparrows and a gray squirrel that sniffed and moved on. A second squirrel arrived, sat on her haunches, and grasping shells with both hands, held them upright, like a flute player. She ate shells so steadily, her young are sure to have strong bones. I've seen female mallards and swans with cygnets eating egg shells. I fed a frazzled blue jay. She carried shells off to her nest. But this hungry squirrel is new to me.



SME

## Eye-Opener for Birders

Last December a colorful bird arrived in Manhattan's Union Square. Not orange enough for a Baltimore Oriole. The dull yellow body is like an Orchard Oriole, but the head is too black. Pictures were taken and put up on the internet and woosh, the word went out. "Grab your bins and rush to Union Square. We've got a **SCOTT'S ORIOLE!**" Soon the south end of the park was full of people, pointing out the yellow and black bird to each other. This oriole lives in the Southwest and Mexico. Did a passing jet stream deliver it air express? We don't know. But this is **the first one ever to be recorded in New York**. I think the only other Scott's seen in these parts appeared in Pennsylvania. This oriole displays its young, male feathers, taking celebrity in stride. Below a holly tree, he pecks at orange slices, pears and bananas. Humans aren't a problem for the bird but hawks are. We hope he continues to slip into the shrubbery when a red-tailed or Cooper's hawks come around. The oriole's name honors Winfield Scott, (1786-1866) a US Army General who served presidents from Jefferson to Lincoln but never became one himself.

→ **SPRING BIRD CLASSES** start Wednesday, April 16, at 76<sup>th</sup> and Fifth Ave., 9 AM. ←  
 → \$35 for 5 sessions. Sunday classes start April 20, at Loeb Boathouse, 9 AM. \$35 for 5 ←  
 → sessions. Please send checks to me at the address below by April 5. One walk is \$10, cash. ←

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 14, No. 2

March~~ April, 2008

### World Enough, Not Time

Sometimes life seems to gallop along so fast you feel you've been left in the dust. That's the way I feel this spring. At the end of March I went to California to visit kin and see birds. The last time I saw California was in 1953, too young to notice birds, plants and trees. Not now. The redwoods were thrilling then, when I sped past. Now it's awesome to gawk upward among them at Armstrong Wood. Herb McGrew, who takes my newsletter, organized a marvelous trip with his wife Linda, and Sonoma County expert Mike Parmeter. I got to see birds that I haven't seen since the 60's and 70's and birds I've never seen before. In the morning, we braved high winds and searched water and shore for birds such as black turnstone, black scoter, eared and western grebe, pelagic cormorant, black oystercatcher, and marbled godwit. After a delicious lunch we drove inland and saw black phoebe, Steller's jay, Western scrub-jay, California towhee, Oregon junco, and white-tailed kite. On my own I discovered raven, golden-crowned sparrow, lesser goldfinch, Brewer's blackbird, and violet-green swallow. I made visits to a nearby red-shouldered hawk on her nest and a late-day Anna's hummingbird. What a joy!

I came home and sat right down to my taxes. That's why I missed the Western tanager in Central Park. It was first seen at Winterdale Arch on March 26, when I was flying to CA. The tanager stayed for about 2 weeks. When I mailed off my tax returns, I searched the park in vain, consoling myself with memories of one seen in Arizona, and wishing I could see this rare beauty right here.

It was time to start spring classes. All the Wednesday sessions were bright and sunny and jolly. There were enough birds to keep everyone glad to be there. Many Sunday classes were cold and dark. Fair-weather friends stayed home. Determined birders peered high in the trees and saw lots of little dots flitting about. With great difficulty we saw warblers. They were single, alpha males who were out ahead of the pack and insect supply, scouting the land for territory. We got to see 1 palm warbler, 1 pine warbler and a flock of yellow-rumps. From its movements we identified a ruby-crowned kinglet, black-and-white warbler and white-breasted nuthatch. It was a relief for eye and neck to see to see white-throats, Eastern towhees and grackles on the ground.

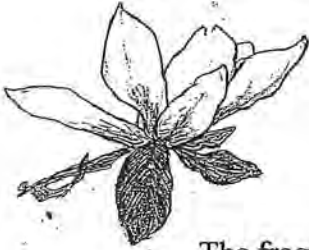
One super birder who has graced my Sunday classes for 23 years, asked me about the call of a prairie warbler. I explained that you start at the tail and follow the black dots up the side to the head. Think of the ascending dots as staccato notes of the bird's call. Like a parula warbler? Yes, but without the exclamation point at the top. She immediately heard the bird and followed it. We got to see the prairie just before it disappeared. We learned of a rare yellow-throated warbler and consulted our guides so that everyone knew what to look for. "I see it," said a plant expert. She explained where the bird was standing and all the bird watchers saw the bird. All, that is, except me. I went home in a snit and vowed to look at plants.

### Garden Flowers Curtsey Now and Blooms are Hung Along the Bough

It's the season for reading Housman, and this spring is spectacular. Dogwoods spread snowy flowers wide as hockey pucks. Virginia bluebells toss their cerulean tresses. The giant

leaves of Solomon's Seal can hardly conceal their crowded strings of dangling, dancing bells. Violets line the walkways in many colors and sizes. Trillium, columbine, shooting star, Mayapple and twinleaf adorn Azalea Pond. Learn them there and you will recognize them in many other places in the park.

March was chilly but all the magnolias came through spring without frost blight to turn their petals brown. One magnolia, the brave old cucumbertree was battered almost to death by storms. It revives, defiantly flashing new leaves from stumpy limbs. Gary Lincoff kindly took its picture, but the day was dark and when reduced to fit here, the tree was unseeable.



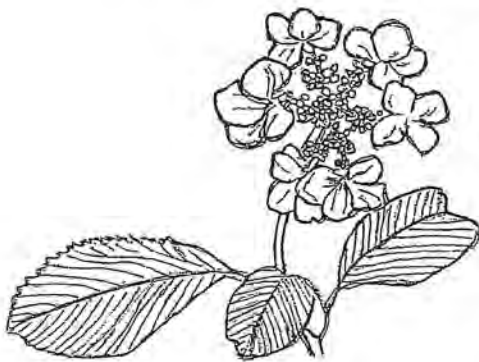
There are 3 new magnolias south of Bow Bridge by the path to Bethesda Fountain. The day I planned to sketch them, I was hailed by Doug Blonsky, President of Central Park Conservancy. He was driving an enormous new Ford Escape, a hybrid that runs on gas and electricity. He told me to hop in and he would give me a ride to where I wanted to go. The ride was posh--elevated, cushy and silent. I said I was told the new magnolias were called Elizabeth and he checked with his staff. Yes, Elizabeth.

The fragrant flowers start out soft yellow. but when I sketched them the petals were white tipped. with a yellow wash at the base. Elizabeth *Magnolia acuminata* is a hybrid of cucumbertree and yulan magnolia. I'm told yulan magnolias are in the park, but where?

I showed Doug my sketch of this next flower with leaves and asked if he knew what it was. He immediately said "Viburnun." Wow! I told him I was impressed. And what was the tree beside us that I've been trying to turn into an oak? "Black locust," he said. Hey yes, a locust! But it's got prickles. We said "honey locust" in unison. How grand to learn the President knows plants!

The day Gary photographed the cucumbertree we looked at bushes. He thought my sketch was of of *Viburnum carlesii* Koreanspice. But when I led him to the bush just east of the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Matainence Shed, he seemed doubtful and went home to check.

He called to say it might be a *Viburnum burkwoodii* Burkwood viburnum. Their flowerheads are shaped the same, like snowballs or small cauliflowers, They change from pink buds to white flowers. The plants differ in the shape of their leaves and time the flowers appear. Burkwoods come first; late March to early April. Their leaves are slender ovals, twice as long as wide. Koreanspice bloom in late April to early May. Their leaves are chubby hearts with nipped-in tips. Both smell grand. I made the sketch April 25, '08 so it could be Koreanspice.



*Viburnum tomentosum* Doublefile viburnum is a lot easier to identify. The attractive outer flowers are snowy, showy and sterile. The beady, little, inner flowers are fertile. The outer flowers are the come-on and the inner flowers deliver the goods. They grow in flat plates, easy for any human or insect to see. They are named doublefile because the flowers march 2 by 2 along the branch. Only, not always. This flower stood alone. When I asked about the arrangement, Regina Alvarez said she thinks it may depend on sunlight. She says that maybe sunny locations bring forth double blooms and shade could reduce flower production to one. Both of us fancy this theory but we don't know if it is true. I sketched this one April 29, '08 beside the benches on the south side of Azalea Pond. It's been there for years.

There are new plantings around the Azalea Pond. Great Solomon's seal with long rows of dangling white bells has been joined by false Solomon's seal. The leaves are oval, pointed and alternate along the stem. The flowers are creamy and frothy. They cluster at the end of the stem.

Also in this area are bright yellow orchids. They are hollow yellow balloons called lady's slipper. Regina says she ordered them 2 years ago and her nursery man said he only had a few left which he would sell her at discount. The plants were put in and forgotten. This year they came up and Martin Calzadilla, the Zone gardener, led me to them. Many of the birders stop to enjoy their color and shape. A native orchid seems pretty special.



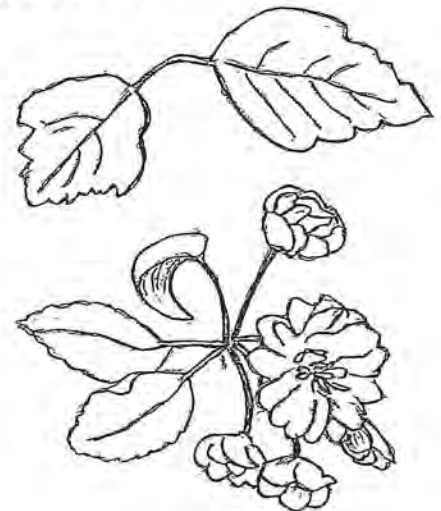
As April slipped into May, more birds arrived and some of them came down in the trees. One blue-backed bird got birders out of the park and over to 153 West 89 St. It was a cerulean warbler and it was darting through young, low pin oaks that lined the street. When I arrived I greeted groups of old friends and was bemused at the sight of bird photographers aiming mighty scopes at this tiny bird. They hoisted their hardware and we all rushed left or right as the bird chased insects from tree to tree. People smiled for fleeting looks and we explained what the commotion was about to mystified pedestrians. For years I have been thinking the cerulean's black strap crosses at his neck, like a choker. Not so. It crosses slightly lower, over the collar bone above its white breast. Sibley describes the cerulean as "uncommon and declining." This bird, seen May 4, was reassuring. It was discovered early in the morning and was there all day. Those alerted even got to see it on their way home to Sunday dinner.

For May 7, class members not only showed up but brought guests. Connie Wiley brought her brother and sister-in-law who are gung-ho birders. The class saw lots of nice birds but many watchers rushed off to appointments before the big treat. We had heard of an Indigo Bunting but couldn't find it in the trees. Then in the Gill, I saw the indigo in wet leaves. It was being shoved off by grackles but returned to enjoy foraging in enough sunlight to show off its gorgeous blue back. Right behind it was a male Baltimore oriole, down for a drink and easy to see. We followed the Gill to the source and saw a male rose-breasted grosbeak low in the trees and at the water were a male and female scarlet tanager. Folks, it doesn't get better than that. In just minutes, we had clear views of all the big beauty birds of spring.

On Wednesday, May 14, the park was bursting with birds. As my class entered, Baltimore orioles were calling to each other near the Alice statue. Two males came down long branches over the sidewalk and displayed for us, so that everyone got to see them.

We admired the grafted pink horsechestnut near the East Drive and stopped as we passed the wedding-party end of the Boathouse. Flanking the entrance and facing the parking lot are 2 cherry trees of great charm. As their round, pink buds open, they look like roses. Kam Hollifield used to supply the name of these trees. How I wish she could tell me again. How I hope one of my readers will be able to do so.

The class climbed the hill and turned left. Before we reached the Point, we turned right and climbed to the bench on top of Hackberry Hill. From that clearing, we searched the tall tulip tree to the west of us. In the tree we saw 2 gorgeous scarlet tanagers in bright sunlight. There were murmurs of pleasure from the group, especially from those who left early the week before.



In Maintenance Meadow we saw magnolia warbler, common yellowthroat, and best of all, 2 bay-breasted warblers. We circled the walk over the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Transverse to the south side of Turtle Pond and there was a yearned-for Blackburnian warbler as a finale to the morning.

On May 11, we received a Mother's Day present. It was a dickcissel, a bird of the plains. It is named for its call, which we didn't hear. The bird was on rocks and in bushes south of the Falconer statue and north of the small restaurant. It came out on the grass of the sloping meadow to eat elm seeds. When my group arrived, at least 60 people lined the fence to watch. Some birders think about 300 people saw the bird that day.



Dickcissels look dull brown from the back but not from the front. They have been called "little meadowlark" because of the yellow and black markings on head, throat and chest. Dickcissels are smaller, about the size of house sparrows and like house sparrows, the males wear black throats. Both sexes have a yellow breast and the male has a yellow eyebrow. This male's eyebrow was not very yellow.

Two centuries ago, dickcissels were common in these parts when we had much more open grassland. They are still common in the prairie states but they are being crowded out by increased farming and construction.

I think I have seen this bird only once before. I seem to remember chasing it with other birders either in a graveyard or a dump in Elizabeth, NJ. I consulted Geoffrey Carleton's precious compendium, "The Birds of Central and Prospect Parks." The bird was cited in September and October of 1922, '39, '49, '52 and seen by such luminaries as Ludlow Griscom and Roger Tory Peterson. In September of 1954, Jeff Carlton found the bird in Shakespeare Garden and took a young Peter Post to see it. A dickcissel was reported in December, on the 1991 Christmas Bird Count. Two birders claimed seeing it in the Reservoir Section. Many people went out and looked after that count, but didn't find the bird. I gave the two spotters forms to fill out. Each prepared written descriptions and a drawing was sent with their reports to Dick Ryan who was in charge of the Lower Hudson Count. The sighting was accepted. In the afternoon of May 16, 1998, a male dickcissel was seen in Shakespeare Garden. That makes a total of 7 records in our park for the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I think May 11 is the first for this century. It's our second spring citing, and it broke all witness records. For many it was a life bird.

Birders who were in the park on the afternoon of May 14 got to see another rare bird. Half-way down the Point was a chuck-wills-widow, a bird also named for its call. This one was a female and had no white marks on the tail. She sat silently on a low branch while birders looked at her and took her picture. These are southern birds, but because of global warming, more of them have been seen in our area in the past 2 or 3 decades. They belong to a group called goatsuckers and all but the nighthawk are named for their calls. They hunt insects at night and roost by day. Smaller night hawks and whip-poor-wills, are more apt to be seen in the park.

As I explained, this spring got away from me. This one was so spectacular it stopped me in my tracks and forced me to make more than 30 sketches. They don't capture the beauty but let me remember the banquet. You'll get park reports for late May in the May-June newsletter.

\*\*\*\*\*

I will do a free walk for the **Linnaean Society of New York on Saturday, June 14**. We meet at the **Boathouse, 9:30 AM**. We will see **birds, trees, and plants** that were classified by **Linnaeus** long ago, before the Revolutionary War when New York was a colony. My lists are long and require my concentration. Your polite cooperation can make it a pleasure for us all.



# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol.14, No. 3

May–June, 2008

### Breeding Bird Census

This summer, New York City Audubon is conducting a 2008 census of breeding birds in Central Park. Such a census was done here in 1998 and produced nesting data for 31 species of birds. I covered Hallett Sanctuary for the first census and tabulated several singing wood thrush. For me, the highlight of that count was to see 2 courting kingfishers face each other on a branch beside the 59<sup>th</sup> St. Pool. The male seemed small and timid. He held a little silver fish in his bill, a gift for a bigger female. Cautiously, he moved toward her and presented his offering. She snatched it, ate it and flew off. Neither the wood thrushes nor kingfishers produced young.

Ten years later, there is a second breeding bird census in the park. It lasts six weeks—from May 24 to July 18. Every participant must tabulate birds at least once a week, at most, twice a week. Each bird name is tabulated in 4-letter clusters; usually two from the first word and two from the second. So Wood Thrush would be listed as WOTH. Some others are: American Robin, AMRO; Baltimore Oriole, BAOR; Gray Catbird, GRCA; House Wren, HOWR; Northern Cardinal, NOCA; Red-winged Blackbird, RWBL; Tufted Titmouse, TUTI; and Downy Woodpecker, DOWO.

Bird behavior is reduced to these two-letter codes: SO, Singing, TD, Territorial Defense; CO, Copulating; CF, Carrying Food or Fecal Sac; CN, Carrying Nesting Material; NE, Nest; YO, Nestling or Fledgling without parents. Got all That? There will be a test.

I asked Chuck McAlexander to do this count with me in Section 20, and I am very relieved that he agreed. He is terrific at spotting birds and jotting down letters for computer crunching. Each week we watch birds and mark their locations on maps of our area.

On a map, Section 20 looks like a pretzel or spaghetti, right at the heart of the Ramble. It was designed that way by Frederick Olmsted to give working-class New Yorkers a bucolic experience in their first public park. In 1858-9, he filled the area with green plants placed along twisting paths beside lake and stream. People came to stroll through what seemed like miles of natural beauty, but actually covered just a few city blocks. Now, 150 years later, we census birds.

But not all birds. Missing from our bird list are Pigeons, House Sparrows, and European Starlings. They were all imported, and bred with vulgar success. Now these “junk” birds are ignored, so that census attention is focused on the others. Starlings are both plentiful and noisy. The young shriek as they run after their parents and peck them for food. We tabulated one starling—the very first bird we saw. It was young with blah-gray feathers and a bright yellow gape beside the bill. It seemed old enough to walk, but too young to scream for parents.

“Junk birds” aside, what species represents the largest group of park nesters? American robins. Our robin entries equal all the rest of our bird sightings. We’ve noted a young bird in the nest with a white gape beside the bill, adults with nest material or food, and spotty, clown-like young on the ground feeding themselves. Robins will complete a third nesting after this census is over. In fall, zillions gather in the park to migrate south. But in spring they return in about the same numbers as they did the year before. There must be lots of robin road-deaths in the South.

We’ve been pleased to see 2 wood thrush nests in the Ramble, both in Section 20. Female wood thrushes select the nest site and build the nest. One of the sites is very near the first wood thrush of last year. The other nest, West of Azalea Pond is quite near the site of last year’s

second nest. Birders look wise, call this behavior "site specific" and it opens up a can of worms. We know the sex of each builder but not the generation. Was one of the builders last year's mother? Were the builders both her daughters—one from last year's first nest and one from last year's second nest? Does that make them half sisters? The difference between this year's nests and last year's is altitude. In '07 both nests were built high, in '08 they are much lower. That drop may be influenced by the crowd in the neighborhood when the thrushes arrived. this spring. Now, this year's nests are empty. Birders say they have seen young on the ground. Wood thrush nest twice and we wondered where they would build next. Anita and Howie Stillman led me to a new nest northeast of the top of the gill. It may be high from the ground but almost at eye-level from the sidewalk above. The thrush sat low in her nest and watched us guardedly.

Cardinals nest twice and often the first nest is low in bushes, before the trees leaf out. We were greeted by a male cardinal who hung around to be fed. We tossed him peanuts which he broke up and carried away. We followed him to a bush on the men's sunbathing rock at the northeast edge of Tupelo Meadow. Was she sitting on eggs? No. Young were heard crying for food. A week later the nest was empty.

Several visits later, we tossed nuts in Muggers' Woods and immediately saw a male and female cardinal. Suddenly, there was a battle on the sidewalk. Two males began butting to push each other away from the food. They were joined by two females who flew at each other and pecked. The fight stopped when one female and one male flew off. Then a tufted titmouse landed on the fence and watched me expectantly. We have heard TUTI call to each other for weeks but this was the first clear sight of one. I tossed nuts which were grabbed by a grackle. But after several tries, the titmouse did get nuts and broke them into smaller pieces on the sidewalk. He left but came back several times to collect a nut, break it in bits, and fly off left. I am sorry we never found the nest since titmice nest only once a season. Over the years I have seen just 2 titmice nests, both of them low.

While we were in Muggers' Woods, we saw a male downy woodpecker going up and down a tree, then to a nearby one. Suddenly, Chuck spotted another downy on the ground, not hopping or flying but crawling. We realized the ground bird was young and the tree bird was its father, guarding it. I noticed there was something odd about the young bird's head. It had a strip of red across the TOP of its head, not down at the nape. Jeff Kimball managed to take pictures before the young bird disappeared. We all agreed it was the first young downy we had ever seen. When I got home I consulted my Sibley bird guide. Sure enough, the young birds wear red head bands. Sibley does not sex this picture so maybe they all wear this mark. Earlier we saw what we thought were 2 males, but I later realized were an adult and a young downy. Since then we have seen a female with a young bird which was old enough to climb the tree trunk for food. I guess the field mark moves down or disappears when the young bird can feed and fend for itself.

Deb Allen tells me the all our young flickers wear the black mustache. But only the males keep them as adults. Well, if young flickers have them, they don't need gapes to show feeding parents where to shove the grub. Sibley doesn't show a young flicker, alas.

On our 5<sup>th</sup> Census of Section 20, we visited Martin Calzadilla in his garden south of 79<sup>th</sup> St. and beside the East Drive. We admired a stand of crimson flowers that look like 4<sup>th</sup> of July explosions. They are called Bee-balm or Oswego-Tea *Monarda didyma*. Bees, hummingbirds and hummingbird moths will visit the flowers. Their crushed leaves help take the sting out of insect bites. American Indians made medicines from the plant and after the Boston Tea Party, colonists used the leaves to make tea.

We heard a catbird that is nesting in the thick bush behind the flowers. He came up and gave us an area. We also heard house wrens trilling to each other. Eventually, one of them flew to the bare top of a ginkgo tree to belt out his song. He was replaced by a mourning dove, much bigger, but calmer. Soon it was the catbird's turn, so the place seemed to be a concert hall for the whole neighborhood.

Nearby we saw a tree where a robin sat in her nest, half-way out on a long, horizontal branch. Diane George, who joined us that day, and is a terrific nest spotter, drew our attention to the bottom of the robin's nest. It was decorated with a very long strand of narrow, tan paper. The paper was tucked and looped and tucked again before it fell to wave in the breeze. It was computer tape, about 1/2" wide and perforated with "tractor feed holes" to hook onto nest twigs. Wood thrush and catbirds also dangle streamers beneath their nests to repel intruders. Snake skins are popular. In spring, snakes molt and wriggle out of the old skins. Birds find a skin and use it. We have no snakes and clear, plastic streamers are used. But this is the first nest I've seen decorated with computer tape. I have some of this paper. I fold the left and right sides, and rip the tape off. I use the Ivory Bond paper to sketch on.

When I returned after rainy nights and winds, I couldn't find the robin nest with streamers. But in the Boathouse Parking Lot, we found a robin nest in a pin oak on the median strip, over the bicycle rental stand. The nest is sturdy and at the base are frayed strips of computer paper. It must have been storm-ripped from nest 1, and blew south to nest 2.

This robin flies in to feed her young. Beneath them, the computerized snake skin waves in the air above unknowing and unseeing bikers. When we returned to nest 1, my friends pointed out the now streamer-less nest where young are being fed.

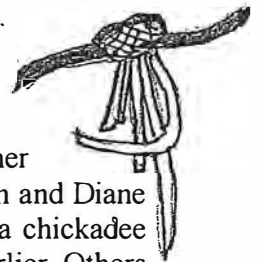
For our 7<sup>th</sup> visit to the park, we covered a wooded area just south of the Weather Station. A male cardinal appeared and looked us over for a nut. A female joined him and Diane tossed nuts on a rock. He fed her a nut, then both birds fed themselves. Suddenly a chickadee appeared and also took nuts. Next it was a male titmouse, I think the one we fed earlier. Others were watching. In came 2 male red-bellied woodpeckers---one adult and one almost so. They were followed by a grackle, and I think a blue jay. The chickadee was a surprise. Chuck saw it again at the paved circle area with benches, south of the Castle. The chickadee was collecting a worm, so it is feeding young. Earlier, we saw a young male cowbird in grass near the East Drive. Chuck wondered who raised it. Not cowbirds. We hope it is too young to mate. Two male turkeys are strolling around the park. We saw one of them near the Humming Tombstone.

We ended that day's census at Indian Cave where we heard 2 house wrens call to each other. Suddenly there was a loud squawk and we saw 3 wrens chase each other in circles. When one of them landed, it turned into a Carolina wren, which the house wrens were trying to eject. In that area we have seen male and female Baltimore orioles. The week before, the male oriole was feeding 2 young. All of them were perched on a horizontal branch. A week later, we saw a female, gleaning tiny insects from leaves and from the bare wood on a branch.

There's a Great Crested Flycatcher (GCFL) in Central Park. Perhaps a dozen birders have seen it. Great-crested arrive here as late as the second week of June, but usually move on. In 1955, Peter Post and Mrs. Messing saw great-crested flycatchers breed here. Sadly, not this year.

### **Linnaean Flora and Fauna for a Linnaean Walk**

Lenore Swenson asked me to do a June walk for the Linnaean Society of New York. I said I would do one on the plants and animals that were classified by the great man for whom the society was named. Linnaeus traveled in Europe, discovering and naming plants. But he never



went to Asia or set foot on this continent. Instead he encouraged his best students to travel, collect, and bring back specimens from all over the world. The young man selected to come here was Peter Kalm. I called the Swedish Consulate here, to learn how to pronounce his name. If you remove the K and the M, the AL inside sounds like PAL, a friend. It's not a Swedish name. Peter was born in Finland. He was trained as a minister and then a naturalist, with the aid of a rich patron. He studied with the great Dr. Liné or Linnaeus, 9 years his senior, and accompanied his teacher on a tour through Russia and Ukraine. Linnaeus encouraged him, promoted him and sent him off to America. He left Sweden in October 1747 but a storm blew his ship against the coast of Norway. In February, he fetched up in England. Due to a shortage of ships, he waited half a year for passage. He spent the time learning English, meeting people and collecting letters of introduction. Eventually he sailed on the Mary Gally, and had an easy crossing studying sea creatures and plants. Off the coast of Maryland, his ship ran aground on a sandbar, slid free, and he landed in Philadelphia September 15, 1748. He spent the rest of the year in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York collecting samples and conversing with intellectuals, and their leader, Ben Franklin. In New York City, he noted Black Locust, Lime (or Linden), and Elms. He spent time in the Swedish community of Raccoon, NJ where the pastor of the Swedish congregation had died. Kalm often substituted in the pulpit and in 1750, he married the pastor's widow. Peter Kalm's diary is delightful reading and was published by Dover Publications, Inc.

In 1753, Linnaeus described 700 North American plants and mentioned Kalm as the collector of 90 species. A lot of collecting had been going on over the previous century, and not all of the 90 species were new. But about 60 species were. Later Linnaeus's total was upped to 780 and Kalm's 60 were founded on specimens he collected. Linnaeus named the laurels for Peter K. and the proud recipient always referred to them as *Kalmia*.

On the day of the walk, Gary Lincoff pointed out a mountain laurel *Kalmia latifolia* which stands beside the Gill, south of the Azalea Pond. Fittingly, it was covered with white flowers. Near the end of the walk, Gary led us to another shrub. He began eating its red berries so we did, too. They were delicious. Two of the shrub's common names are Serviceberry and Juneberry. When it flowered in May, I sketched it as Shadbush *Amelanchier arborea*. These bushes are planted on the east side of the Upper Lobe. They were not classified by Linnaeus.

But lots and lots of plants that adorn our park owe their scientific names to him. Wonderful Lenore Swenson made a list of the plants as we saw them. **Trees and Shrubs:** Willow Oak, Hackberry, Red Maple, Pin Oak, American Elm, Persimmon, Kentucky Coffeetree, Cucumber Magnolia, Horsechestnut, Sweet Gum, Privet, Mountain Laurel, Sassafras, Red Mulberry, Tuliptree, Black Locust, Norway Maple, and Ginkgo. **Plants:** Coral or Trumpet Honeysuckle, Jerusalem Artichoke, Common Milkweed, Broad-leaved or Common Plantain, Yellow Wood Sorrel or Oxalis, Gill-Over-the-Ground, Ostrich Fern, Dandelion, Royal Fern, Sensitive Fern, Twinleaf, Broad-leaved Dock, Day Lily, Marigold, Zinnia, Cardinal Flower, Geranium, Columbine, Cinnamon Fern, Stinking Hellebore, Yellow Flag Iris, Lillu-of-the-Valley, and Hollyhocks. Take some plant guides and this list to the park and over the summer you can give yourself a crash course on what is there. **Birds** are easier to list because many of them are summering elsewhere. In Central Park we saw Rock Pigeon, Mourning Dove, Chimney Swift, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Eastern Kingbird, Blue Jay, American Robin, Gray Catbird, European Starling, Northern Cardinal, Common Grackle, Baltimore Oriole, House Sparrow, and Mallard. Neile Emond took **beautiful** pictures of Linnaean flowers and butterflies.

# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 14, No.4

July~August, 2008

### Ferns at the Blockhouse

The oldest building in Central Park is a fort, called the Blockhouse. It was built in 1814 to protect New Yorkers from attack during the War of 1812. People from Columbia University and workers from downtown rushed to build its walls from local boulders, hoist a roof and mount a cannon on top of it all. Fifty years later, Central Park was extended from 106 to 110 St. Now park land surrounds the rocky lookout and structure at 109 St. The walls have been restored but the roof and cannon are gone.

In the spring, I visited the Blockhouse with a group of bird watchers. We were on a Central Park Conservancy tour led by Neil Calvanese, Vice President of Operations, and Regina Alvarez, Director of Horticulture. On the north side of the building I was delighted to see the wall covered with old-fashioned ferns. Regina said that Neil liked looking at the ferns on this wall. So I asked him if he would visit the Blockhouse with me to look at the ferns for my newsletter. He said yes.

On July 21, I met him at the 79<sup>th</sup> St. Yard with Neil Emond (Neil 2), who was there to photograph fern specimens. We piled into an SUV, crossed the West Drive, passed the umbrella magnolia (flourishing!) and stopped at the top of the rise at the edge of the buildings. Neil pointed to a sea of greenery behind the fence.

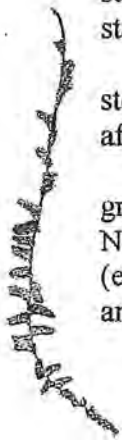
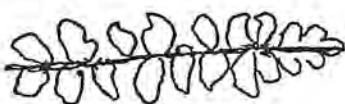
It was bracken, a plant I thought had been removed. Not a bit. Neil said the bracken had come into the park in the roots of a *Kalmia*. The bracken was removed from the roots and planted separately. When I asked for the common name, he said mountain laurel, and pointed to the bush. Of course! Linnaeus named the genus after Peter Kalm, the Linnaean disciple who discovered laurels and many other plants when he was here from 1749 to 1751. I wrote about him in my last newsletter.

**Bracken** *Pteridium aquilinum* (L.) grows over most of North America. The stand we saw was 2 to 3 feet high. In Oregon they can grow to 6 or 7 feet. The leaflets are broad and triangular. Bracken spreads from underground roots and reproduces from spores in July and August. It grows in fields, forest openings, pastures and waste places. If grazed in large amounts, it may be poisonous to cattle. This is the only stand of bracken in the park. Neil cut me a 2-foot-long sample. These stalks are as large as this page.



We piled back into the SUV and drove north to the Blockhouse. We climbed the low steps and around to the north wall. In June, this wall was festooned with green ferns. In late July, after days without rain, lots of plants looked tired and brown.

Neil climbed to the wall and found us an **Ebony Spleenwort** *Asplenium platyneuron*. It grows from 6 to 18" tall. The fertile fronds are long, erect and put out spores from May to November. The sterile fronds are short and spreading. The stalks are shiny and dark brown (ebony). It grows in old fields, woods and roadsides. I have seen it on the wall of the Blockhouse and on the wall around Central Park. My sketch is from the wall at Fifth Ave. facing the



Guggenheim Museum. Ebony Spleenwort can root in old walls where old mortar has crumbled enough to make a nurturing soil of lime.

While Neil Emond was taking pictures of ebony spleenwort, Neil Calvanese used his loupe to examine other ferns. A loupe is a small, round, powerful magnifying glass used by watchmakers, jewelers and naturalists. He selected a fern and hauled out a heavy book with clear and delicate drawings.

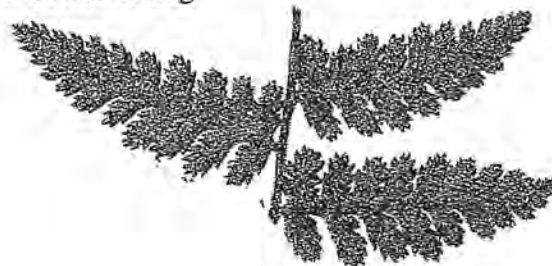


I asked him what he was looking for and he said **Blunt-lobed Woodsia** *Woodsia obtuse*. I looked it up in my Dover Reprint "How to Know the Ferns" by Frances Theodora Parsons. I handed the book to Neil and he compared his sample with her drawing and said they were the same. This fern grows 10 to 20" tall. The leaflets are widely spaced along the stalk and their lobes are round and blunt. The spore cases are scaly and when they ripen, hundreds of spores are expelled from July to October. My sample dried up before I could sketch it so I am grateful that Neil E. took this picture.

We looked for **Fragile Fern** or Brittle Fern *Cystopteris fragilis* but didn't find a fresh sample. Fragile fern grows in rocks and woods all over North America in spring and fall but can die back in hot, dry summers. The fern grows 6 to 12" tall. The stalks are brittle and the leaflets are thin, widely spaced and grow out farthest at mid-stalk. This plant resembles blunt-lobed woodsia but the leaflets have pointy tips.

On July 28, after days of rain, I went to Fifth Ave. It was about 8AM, and not crowded when I started checking the park wall for ferns. There were only a few but they looked fresh and new. I suspect that leaflets bunch together on a new frond and spread out as the stalk grows. It was easy to find the shiny, dark stems of ebony spleenwort at 86 St. Then at 88 St. I saw what I think is a fragile fern. It makes a graceful curve from the pinched tip out to the swollen middle and narrows toward the root.

I looked at the edges of its leaflets and they are definitely pointy, but you need more power to see the pattern. Try a magnifying glass on these leaflets and you will see the points. If you are out wearing binoculars in this season of plants and insects, you can use your bins to see more. Just turn them backwards and look through the large end for a closer view of a flower or bug.



### At the Reservoir

On the day I scrutinized Fifth Ave. ferns, I stepped into the park and went to the South Pumping Station where I met Chuck McAlexander and Doug Murray sitting on a bench. They had been on the west side of the Reservoir where they saw a very drably marked merganser which they thought was a hooded because it looked small. Before he left, Doug held up a cluster of balloonlike seed pods and asked me what they were from, Goldenraintree. After the tree blooms in July it puts out these Chinese lanterns. The pods start out light green and ripen to brown.

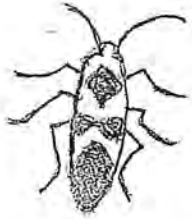
In his wonderful book "New York City Trees," Ned Barnard says the tree was first planted here in 1809 by Thomas Jefferson from seeds that were sent to him from France. Originally, the tree came from Northern China. It was planted by the graves of Chinese officials for thousands of years. There are several Goldenraintrees to see around the Reservoir.

We walked along the eastern side of the Reservoir. It was breezy and cool in the shade. On my way to the Pumping Station I heard my first cicada announce his presence. Soon we heard four or five more.

We rounded the northeast corner of the Reservoir and as we walked west, we saw a cormorant in the water and a barn swallow in the air. We passed the North Pumping Station and Chuck spotted a Question Mark butterfly. He could see the silver "question mark" on the underside of the forewing. That's lots quicker than checking the leading edge of the topline forewing for an extra black mark. Fewer marks under and over makes it a Comma. More on both sides and it's a question mark. Chuck thinks we see more question marks than commas.

We began looking at the pods of milkweed plants. On the top of a pod we saw 2 red and black insects, facing back to back and mating. One of them remained and I sketched it. We measured it against part of my pencil and decided it was about  $\frac{3}{4}$ ". I peered around the curve of a pod and discovered lots of tiny, all-red, all-round insects. With them were 2 larger ones, also red, but rectangular. Their backs were shiny, minutely pockmarked and freckled with round, black dots. Were they minders of the little ones or was it a general picnic?

I later learned about 3 insects that visit milkweed for the seed. The pink, pockmarked boxy one is a Milkweed Longhorn *Tetraopes basalis*. The female antennae are long and the male antennae are almost the length of their bodies. There are more than 2 dozen species of *Tetraopes* and they all feed on various kinds of milkweed.



The orange and black bug I sketched is either a Small Milkweed Bug *Lygaeus kalmii* (named for Peter Kalm) or Large Milkweed Bug *Oncopeltus fasciatus*. Small is found over most of North America and into Mexico, Large is found in eastern United States and Central America. I have studied my sketch and believe it is of a large milkweed bug, a day or two less mature than the mating pair in "Bugs, Beetles, Spiders, Snakes" by Ken Preston-Mafham, Nigel Marven & Rob Harvey. I don't know what the tiny red M&Ms are, but they seem to be larva.

As we moved along I saw a lovely little butterfly, standing with its wings folded back to show it was a red-banded hairstreak. A curve of red-orange crossed the middle of the forewing and hind wing. Both bands are edged with white but the red on the hind wing is thicker and the white margin zig-zags along it like summer lightning. This little butterfly wears black and white stripes on its antennae and matching striped stockings. Pippi, look to your laurels. I tried to sketch this hairstreak later but my efforts look lumpish. Check it out in a butterfly book.

When I leaned forward to admire the butterfly, it flinched but stood its ground. Then I noticed the bush it was surmounting. I took a sample and made this sketch of what I learned is a Hoary Mountain Mint *Pycnathemum incanum*. The leaves look dusty feel fuzzy and the lower ones have white hairs (hoary) on the underside. The round flat flower heads should be thickly covered with small 1/3" white flowers. By the time I got my sample home only a fringe of them remained. On the plant they were irresistible. A large crowd of insects was working over every cluster. They were all intently feeding and there were no fights.



We saw honey bees and bumble bees and 2 kinds of wasps. I learned the largest creature there was a Great Black Wasp *Sphex pensylvanicus*. They have black bodies and iridescent blue wings. I would tell more but they're not in my insect books.

Neil Emond called that day to say he had been at Turtle Pond where he saw lots of them and photographed them visiting pink sedum (Live Forever?). He was the one who gave me the wasp's scientific name.

The second kind of wasp at the hoary mountain mint was a Great Golden Digger Wasp *Sphex ichneumoneus*. As you can see from the first part of its scientific name, or Genus, it is cousin to the Great Black Wasp, though at less than an inch, it is smaller. Most of the body is blue-black with an orange-gold face, legs and half of the abdomen. The wings are smoky yellow. With these wasps it's handsome looks and ugly does.



After visiting flowers, the females become ground nesters. When they find hard, bare, sandy land they dig a tunnel. The tunnel is vertical, and she digs 3 to 7 horizontal tunnels radiating off of it. Then she hunts crickets or longhorn grasshoppers as livestock. She grabs her prey, stings and paralyzes it, then hauls it to her burrow. She places each victim in a tunnel and lays one egg upon it. When all the tunnels are filled, the nest is closed for the winter. In spring the eggs hatch and the young begin to eat their still-living victims. This diet gives the young a good start for the next generation. I do not know which insects Great Black Wasps harvest but I suspect the scenario is similar. Cicadas now sing in a large chorus over the park, and they are being hunted by cicada killers that will stun them and haul them away. The cicadas are bigger and heavier than their killers and already we are seeing cicadas on the ground that are bright and green and living, but paralyzed. They were too heavy to carry.

At the water edge of the Reservoir we saw a male amberwing dragonfly perched on a twig. He was waiting for a female to show up. Also in the area we saw an eastern pondhawk and a blue dasher. This is the first time I've seen any of these dragonflies this year.

When I was at the Boathouse parking lot Neil Emond pointed to a chipmunk and photographed it. I had heard about 2 chipmunks but this was my first look at one in Central Park. This one looked nervous and hid. I called Anita Stillman to learn if she has seen the chipmunks. No. She visits the park regularly and now, after the Nest Count, sees lots of young cardinals and blue jays around the Ramble. High in a tree, she saw 3 tufted titmice. Was one of them young? They were too far away to tell. Yesterday she and Howie were at Balcony Bridge where they saw 2 yellow warblers, the first warblers for the fall migration. Lots more could be here in a week.



# THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 14, No. 5

September~October, 2008

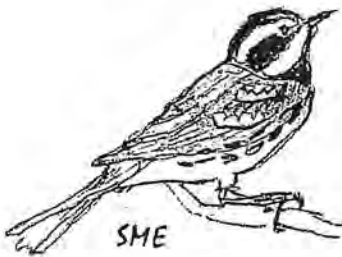
### Autumn Surprises

Every year we wait to welcome the glory of fall, the best season in North America. And every year the wait seems longer. This year, warm weather, clouds and rain have kept the park green. Low trees and bushes turn yellow, maples flutter clusters of scarlet, and sumacs flaunt wine-red sprays that wave good-by. The nights are cold and the mornings nippy. Saturday, October 25, we had light rain followed by high winds. Neil Emond was at the bird feeding station Sunday morning and photographed a huge limb as it crashed to the sidewalk. A work crew cut it up and removed it. How lucky, they said, that the rain was light. Rain-soaked ground followed by battering winds could have forced old trees to slip their roots and come down.

For birders, the fall migration was frustrating. Starr Saphir called it "lackluster." Birds were here one day, and gone the next. In the spring she saw many species of birds and many more individuals. It was her best migration in 10 years. She thinks this fall migration was knocked out by storms that traveled up the coast every week. Birds hunkered down and waited. Then she thinks, they flew non-stop to make up for lost time and miss the next storm. In a decade, we won't have to guess. There will be large maps of weather patterns with the location of migrating birds. Imagine that! On Saturday, Starr's group was uptown in the park before the rain. They were stunned to see huge flocks of grackles. She thinks some 600 birds darkened the sky, moving south. Neil Emond thought perhaps 140 were in the Ramble on Sunday. More than 100 were seen on Monday. Oh to see maps of their passage!

We had 3 rare birds to the park this fall, due I think to west winds.

The first was a black-throated gray warbler *Dendroica nigrescens*. David Speiser found it at 9:45 AM, October 12 at Tanner Spring and began taking pictures. (Go to [www.lilibirds.com](http://www.lilibirds.com).) Crowds of birders gathered, and the bird rewarded them by returning to drink from time to time. We searched the trees. Tony Lance looked high into a distant oak. "I think I've got it," he said. Like chiming bells, the people around him said they did too. I saw a tiny gray bird with a dark line along the edge of its wing. We waited half an hour for a closer look, but left before the bird returned.



On the way out of the park I bumped into Roger Pasquier. When I asked, Roger smiled and admitted he was going to see the bird. Yes, he saw the first one here May 24, 1970. The record was published in the Proceedings of the Linnaean Society in 1974. On that May day, Roger called me to spread the word. I rounded up the troops and presently we all poured out of the subway and into a grove of trees near East 85 St. We looked and looked without success. How did Roger find that bird? It was singing an unfamiliar song. And it was there from 8:45 until 1 PM. After a while we gave up on the bird and repaired to the Boat House. After lunch, most of us left the park. Bill and Wilma Bauman walked north and sure enough they saw the bird. This October, Roger went to Tanner Spring and saw a second black-throated gray. He may be the only living birder to have both park records.

A Western kingbird was seen early on the same day but not later. I saw one about 15 years ago at the Upper Lobe. The wings and tail are longer than an Eastern Kingbird and the belly is yellow, the dark tail has white panels on each side. A pity most of us didn't see it.

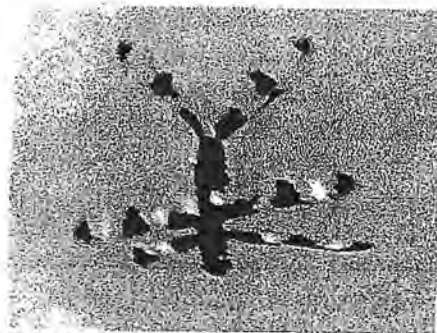
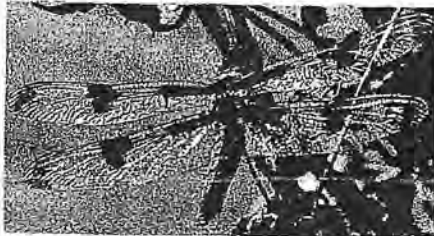
Many birders did see a Connecticut warbler at the Pinetum. There were 2 and one had a

darker chest. Both wore white eye rings with a nick at the back of the eye. Both worked the grass for insects as did yellow-rumped warblers, joined by palm warblers in yellow (eastern) or tan-brown (western) morphs. This fall there have been many reports of chats—more than I ever remember. But the yellow-breasted bird I yearn to see is a meadowlark. It's been seen in the Wildflower Meadow and the North Ball Fields. Pat Pollack has also seen it in the trees at the southern edge of Sheep Meadow. How wonderful to end the season with a bird from the prairies.

### Late Summer and Fall Insects

This has been a fantastic year to learn about insects in Central Park. It's good to see old friends such as dragonflies, butterflies and ladybugs. It's reassuring to see honeybees, and thrilling to meet sweat bees, leafhoppers, milkweed bugs and picture-winged flies. The photographs by Neil Emond have opened this world for me and now for you. You can see his shots in glorious color and generous size at <http://picasaweb.google.com/neilemond>. My thanks to Pat Dubren for her picture of leafhoppers. Thanks to Richard Lieberman for taking us to a hop tree *Ptelea trifoliata* and showing us the leafhoppers, to Tony Lance for the honeybee hive in an old black cherry *Prunus serotina* and to Nick Wagerik for 2 kinds of picture-wings in Shakespeare Garden.

All twelve-spotted dragonflies *Libellula pulchella* wear 12 black wing bands. The rest of the Female's wing is clear. When she is ready to mate, she goes to the water, is seized by a waiting male and the two form the wheel position. If they fly high above, you'll see that his 12 black spots are separated by 10 white ones.



Twelve-Spot Dragonflies Mating

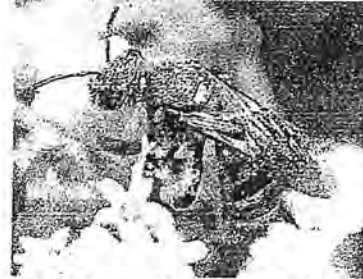
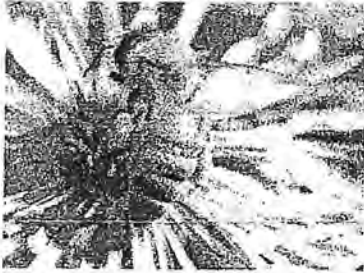


Two-marked Treehoppers

Treehoppers leap to escape danger. These Two-marked *Enchenopa binotata* on a Common Hoptree *Ptelea trifoliata* wear 2 white marks on a shield that protects the head and back. Females make tiny slits in tree branches and lay eggs. They guard the young and excrete "honeydew" to attract ants. The ants feed on the sweet and protect the eggs.

Honeybees have finally been seen in numbers in our park. **A.** They have joined bumble and carpenter bees on the flowers and **B.** have built this hive in a cherry tree near the Point. Another nest was reported near Hershhead. **C.** Green bees are tiny. The head, thorax and abdomen are metallic green. They have smoky brown wings and pollen catchers on their legs. Pollen sticks to the tibia and is carried to the underground nest. We saw these in the new garden north and east of the King of Poland Statue

Honey Bee *Apis mellifera*



The Green Bee: Sweat Bee *Augochlora* sp.  
– possibly *Augochlora pura*

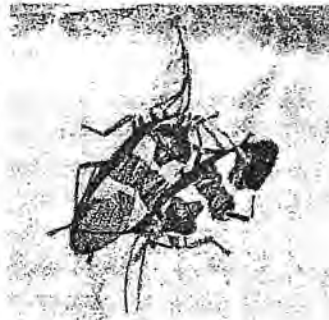
Common milkweed *Asclepias syriaca* attracts many insects. **A.** Monarch butterflies sip nectar which is poisonous to predators. **B.** Red-banded hairstreaks also dine on the flowers. **C.** Large milkweed bugs and nymphs suck the pods. **D.** Clusters of ladybugs glean the leaves for smaller insects. **E.** Pearl Crescent butterflies go to many kinds of flowers including milkweeds. They spread wide, look up and out as they sip.



Monarch Butterfly  
*Danaus plexippus*



Red Banded  
Hairstreak *Calyopsis*  
*cecrops*



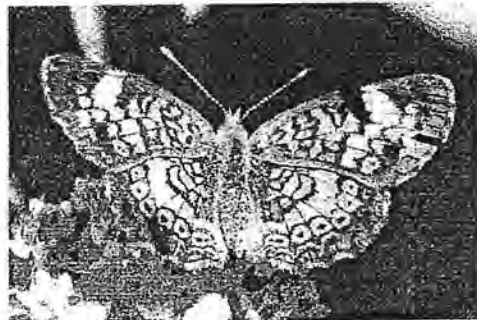
Large Milkweed Bugs  
*Oncopeltus fasciatus*



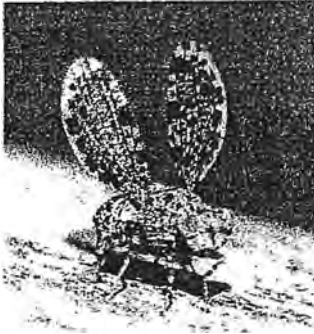
Milkweed Nymphs



Asian Multicolored  
Lady Beetle *Harmonia axyridis*



Pearl Crescent Butterfly *Phyciodes*  
*tharos*



Picture-winged flies are named for their banded or spotted wings. They feed on decaying plant matter. **A.** The peacock fly *Callopistromyia annulipes* has spots on its wings. The wings are shaped like old-fashioned tennis rackets and it waves them from side to side as it walks. **B.** *Delphinia picta* was named by Johann Fabrius, a student of Linnaeus. It may have a common name in Swedish, but none in English. It wears white triangles on both edges of the dark wings. We saw 2 picture-winged flies run over the top of fence posts at Shakespeare Garden. Each displayed what looked like a tiny pin at the end of the abdomen. We decided that the projections were ovipositors and both insects were females.

### Remembering Betty

Betty Bradley joined my Wednesday bird class about half a decade ago. Last year, she tripped and fell, while the class was trying to see a screech owl on the Point. Class members got her to a hospital and stayed with her until she could leave. We were delighted when she returned 2 weeks later. This September, we learned she fell again and was in St. Vincent's hospital. She was released and on a beautiful Wednesday, as the class was looking at birds, she died at home.

I went to her memorial service held in the Church of the Holy Apostles at 9<sup>th</sup> Ave. and 28<sup>th</sup> St. It is a landmark church established in 1844. The squat little building is topped by a great tall spire and the two make a cheerful match. I arrived in time to hear the striking of the bell, 91 times for Betty's life, and read the sign over the door, "There shall be no outcasts in the Episcopal Church." I gazed at the ceiling, a cluster of curved triangular panels gracefully fitted to catch, augment, and smoothly disperse the sound of music. During the Processional, Communion and Recessional I listened to the music of Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) played on a van den Heuvel pipe organ from Holland. The organ and choir were excellent and the congregation sang hymns vigorously, in unison and on key. I have never been surrounded by a congregation that sang with such spirit.

The Rev. Elizabeth G. Maxwell gave the eulogy and I learned that Betty was born in Oak Park, Illinois, worked in Chicago, and then moved permanently to New York. She was a model, a dress designer and a buyer, first of fashion then in gifts. She dressed simply but elegantly and carried herself with style and grace. She enjoyed concerts, the ballet and watching birds in Central Park. She learned she had cancer just before she died. Good that she avoided the wait.

After the service we gathered for a remembrance and I learned Betty was fiercely independent, took great pleasure in life and in the church. I told of her role in the bird class, her fall and our concern. For several years she baked and gave me bread when the zucchinis were just ripe in the farmer's market. I ate each gift slowly, to make it last. We all miss her.

# The Elliott Newsletter

## Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 14, No. 6

November~~ December, 2008

### The Christmas Count

The first Christmas Bird Count in Central Park was conducted on Christmas Day, 1899. The first and only bird counter was Charles Rogers, a 12-year-old who reported what he had seen. So did bird watchers in Princeton and a few other places farther afield. The purpose of these counts was to wean hunters from the sport of killing birds for Christmas to the pleasure of discovering birds and tabulating them for publication. Those who took part enjoyed themselves and told friends.

The first national bird count was held a year later on Christmas Day, 1900 and 25 reports were published in the January 1901 issue of *Bird Lore* magazine. In his second Central Park count Charles Rogers reported seeing 12 herring gulls, a downy, 4 starlings, “abundant” white-throated sparrows, 2 song sparrows and a robin. Charles probably bragged to boys he knew.

A year later Charles, Clinton Abbott and George Hix counted birds in Central Park, but not together. George went early and reported 4 species of which 1000 were herring gulls and 51 were starlings. When Charles arrived the day had turned damp and overcast. He saw the gulls, about 100 white-throats and a golden-crowned kinglet. He also reported seeing 3 bluebirds on Dec. 15. Clinton Abbott arrived late morning to count birds in light rain and south winds. His report added fox sparrow, cardinal and brown creeper to the park list.

Clinton Abbott and Isaac Bildersee made Central Park reports the following year despite the weather. On Christmas Day they peered through snow and sleet and hiked over snow on the ground. The wily Charles went a day early. He spent 4 hours under cloudy skies on bare ground and was rewarded with a **chaffinch**, which with all those starlings was imported from England.

Seven people made six reports for the fifth census of Central Park. It was cold and one of them reported 4 inches of snow on the ground. All of them saw the black-capped chickadee, most saw the hairy woodpecker, two saw the hermit thrush and there were single reports of junco, red-shouldered hawk and American crow. Isaac Bildersee was high man with 13 species of birds.

The following Christmas four people made three counts of the park. George Hicks came early and searched the north end. I am not sure how far north he traveled but some of it must have been new ground. He left the park but returned to the Ramble in the afternoon. His find of the day was a **European goldfinch**, another import.

The weather for the seventh Central Park count was cloudy, windy and cold. Rogers and Hix were there, but not together. Each of them saw 14 species of birds, including red-tailed hawk, red-breasted nuthatch and purple grackle. On Dec. 23, Abbott and R.E. Stackpole saw a grackle and a **chaffinch**. I don't know if it was the same chaffinch seen earlier, but it was the last recorded.

Anne Crolius was probably the first woman to do a Christmas Bird Count in Central Park. On the ninth count she reported 16 species, including American goldfinch, towhee and Carolina wren. She returned for the tenth count and again listed 16 species, this time with winter wren, brown thrasher, sharp-shinned hawk, American goldfinch and, best of all, a male Baltimore oriole which had been hanging around for two weeks.

In the following years the park counts were done by young males, lone rangers all. But for the 17<sup>th</sup> Central Park count during World War I, an all-women team made the count. Mrs. Fisher, Ruth Fisher and Farida Wily saw 10 species and 631 individuals including 13 black-capped chickadees, but missed the rare brown-headed (boreal) chickadees that were thrilling local birders.

Lots has changed since the early days of this count. Now thousands of people go out in groups all over the country to count and list zillions of birds. In Central Park we divide into 7 groups to cover 7 sections of the park. At noon we go to the Arsenal for soup and then report every bird in every section of the park.

This year we were welcomed first by Adrian Benepe, Commissioner of Parks, who introduced John Flicker, President of the National Audubon Society. Looking out over a room bulging with birders, Mr. Flicker told us that we are a part of a really important endeavor. "The fact that we are out there year after year after year takes on increasing scientific importance. When our children and grandchildren look back at our counts, hopefully they will be doing the same thing, and maintaining this amazing, wonderful tradition." President Flicker said he wanted to "recognize somebody who has carried out this tradition perhaps better than anyone in the room---Irving Cantor." Then he asked Irv to come up and thanked him on behalf of Audubon.

Irving Cantor did the Central Park bird count in 1935. He said it was very different 73 years ago. There were very few bird watchers in those days and Irv did the park count by himself. It was 21 degrees and the park was covered in snow. He was out from 9:30 to 2:30, got 16 species, and his report was published in *Bird Lore* magazine. He said he had a few birds we didn't see on this count: a green-winged teal, 2 pintails, a pheasant and 18 wood ducks. He counted 175 black ducks but only 40 mallards, which illustrates how the mallard has taken over the black duck. They are closely related species, he explained, and they've interbred so much that the mallard is now the dominant species.

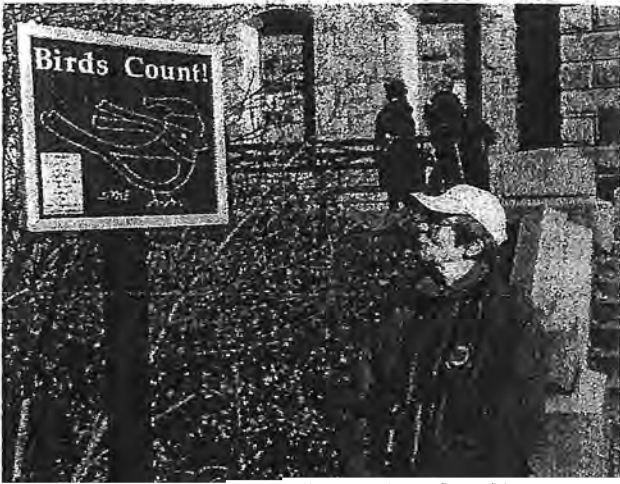
Irv told me later that he started out bird watching when he was 12 and made that Central Park count when he was 15. Not only was it bitter cold with snow on the ground, there was no one to do the count with him. The park had no bird-feeding station and the birds cleared out in December. Irv joined the Bronx County Bird Club, which was full of vigorous young males, including such icons as Roger Tory Peterson. The following year he was invited to take part in the Bronx count. He gladly accepted and continued to do that count for many years.

John Flicker is right. The scientific value of this national count is that we do it year after year and so learn more about a continent of moving birds. I began participating in the park counts in the 1970's, when they were run by Dick Sichel. He continued serving as compiler into the 1980's but stopped for health reasons. In 1985, I was asked by Audubon to succeed Dick as the compiler. The number of birds and bird counters continued to grow. For the 100<sup>th</sup> count we saw 68 bird species and 6469 individuals. In 2004, when I had run the Central Park count for 20 years, it seemed a good time to stop. We ended that count with a party at the Arsenal. When we had eaten, I went to the podium to begin our census. I was surprised when Parks Commissioner Adrian Benepe appeared and spoke of my years of service. I was honored and grateful when he presented me with a cheerful award. The award is a plaque of my logo (a bird in winter hat and muffler) and the admonition "Birds Count!"

After the count, people went to Tavern on the Green to see what was reported as a saw-whet owl. But, some people said this bird looked bigger and the chest stripes were different. Birders checked their guides. Some left and returned with telescopes. Cheers broke out when it was declared a **Boreal owl** *Aegolius funereus*. (formerly called a Tengmalm's owl). This international star wasn't imported, it had arrived on its own. It is

seen in the US along the Canadian border and high in the Rocky Mts. It also lives in Norway, Sweden, Finland and China. The boreal owl's visit in 2004-5 was a first for the park, the city, and one of few sightings in the southern part of the state.

The bird stayed around the restaurant for days. Tourists came from other states and countries to see this rarest of birds. Would the bird have been found without the Christmas Count? Maybe not. Tavern on the Green is seldom visited for birds.



This year, a camera crew has been making a documentary about birders in Central Park. They asked if the bird plaque could be put up at the Reservoir, where the Christmas Count begins. The plaque was in a park shed because it needed a hook to hang it up. After a search it was found, given a sturdy wooden frame, put on a stand, and filmed by the crew. Neil Emond took this picture, and even hauled the plaque out of the park. Thanks to everyone who helped with the return of my award!

Birders grumbled about the results of the 2008 count. There were no rare birds and the total population wasn't great.

Well, the morning's count produced 55 species of birds and 6009 individuals. I do not know how many people took part, but the Arsenal room was bulging with birders as we did the final count. There were big populations of some species, ranging from 100 to 979 birds. These were Canada goose, mallard, northern shoveler, ruddy duck, ring-billed gull, herring gull, rock pigeon, blue jay, tufted titmouse, American robin, European starling, white-throated sparrow, common grackle, and house sparrow.

Counters were pleased to see small to very small numbers of birds including wood duck, gadwall, bufflehead, hooded merganser, pied-billed grebe, sharp-shinned hawk, Cooper's hawk, red-tailed hawk, American kestrel, merlin, American coot, red-headed woodpecker, red-bellied woodpecker, yellow-bellied sapsucker, downy, Northern flicker, black-capped chickadee, brown creeper, Carolina wren, winter wren, ruby-crowned kinglet, hermit thrush, gray catbird, mockingbird, brown thrasher, cedar waxwing, Eastern towhee, song sparrow, dark-eyed junco, cardinal, red-winged blackbird, house finch, pine siskin and, American goldfinch.

We counted a wild turkey which was then taken into care and has been moved to Pelham Bay Park to be with other turkeys. A common loon came in to the Reservoir for the holidays, but alas, not in time for the year's list. Large flocks of pine siskin have been wheeling over the park. It's amazing to see so many.

### The Feeding Station

The bird-feeding station was begun in the 1970's, although park and bird lovers put up a feeder or two in the '60's. Since then, many people have served the birds and the birding community by stocking a great variety of feeders in various locations. On October 15, 2008, Neil Emond began providing seed in the Evodia Field.

He says his supply of seed comes from gifts. Half of it has been donated by Irene Warshauer. The rest Neil buys from an Eastside Petco and trundles it to the park. That seed is paid for by donations from bird watchers, tourists and park lovers. Neil records each gift on his spread sheet. He also puts out suet (fat trimmed from beef), a gift from Lobel's, who are also on the East Side. Neil has given them photos of happy birds eating their gift.

The seed feeders are made from large plastic jugs with entrance holes on the sides and filled with sunflower seeds. They are hung from trees by wire too thin for raccoons and squirrels to climb. The wire is wrapped around the cap of the jug at one end and twisted at the other end to make a hanger that hooks over a tree branch. Raccoons learned to unhook the jug and let it fall for their dinner on the ground. So Chuck McAlexander made a brass loop 8 to 9" in diameter. The top of the loop hangs over a tree branch and the jug hook hangs from the bottom of the loop. Raccoons did not learn how to remove the hook at the bottom. Perhaps lifting it off required a third paw, or the balancing act was too tricky. All was well for the feeding birds, for a while. Then a brass loop was found badly bent and the seed scattered. So Chuck made a new loop of stainless steel. It is not flexible enough for a raccoon to bend and it won't rust.

Another new design is pleasing birds and bird watchers. Chuck took a 3-foot-long wire and made a hook at one end to hang from a tree branch. The other end is connected to a fruit feeder by a corkscrew hook. The fruit feeder is a cylinder made of plastic pipe. It's lighter than metal and won't rust. Inserted into the pipe are about a dozen pegs that hold slices of oranges and apples and provide perches for feeding birds. Below the fruit feeder hangs a cocoanut. It's been hollowed out and filled with a mix of beef fat, cracked corn, red and white millet, corn flour, wheat flour and cayenne pepper. The pepper repels the mammals that have lots of taste buds in their mouths. But birds don't, and eat the pepper with the rest. Neil is afraid that some of the squirrels now brave the pepper for the dinner. If they start to think of pepper as a condiment, we are all in trouble, says Chuck.

Aside from hanging feeders, a food mix called gruet is being applied to the trunk of several trees near the feeding station. Gruet is a mix of suet, grain and pepper. No sooner is it pressed into the grooves of the bark than birds show up. Gruet is a treat for tree-clinging birds such as white-breasted nuthatch, downy and red-bellied woodpeckers. Even sparrows try to cling to the bark for a bit of the mix before they lose their grip and drop to the ground. Overhead long mesh bags or stockings hold niger thistle. These small black seeds attract house finches, goldfinches and this year, flocklets of pine siskins.

Neil attends the feeding station almost daily. He says it's a lot of work but it is very rewarding. He enjoys watching the birds and explaining the feeders to tourists, school children and aspiring bird watchers. He also takes in donations.

This winter Neil reported our first bird-feeder death. He assembled his long, 3-piece pole and raised it to unhook a plastic gallon feeder from a branch. He lowered the feeder and found a dead goldfinch inside. Its breast feathers were disturbed and looked as if it had been attacked. A week earlier he found a tufted titmouse inside a feeder. The bird was alive but shivering. Neil left it alone and filled other feeders. When he returned the bird was gone. Perhaps birds dive into the feeders to escape from predators. But it would be hard to spend a bitter cold night in an empty plastic feeder. Bird lovers are always glad to see so many small birds deep into winter, as are the hawks. The hoop and corkscrew drawings (left) are Chuck's. The fruit and cocoanut feeder (right) is Neil's.

