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Lancaster County Bird Club celebrates 75 years

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Members of the Lancaster County Bird Club with famed birder and illustrator Roger Tory Peterson, in middle of photo with face turned sideways, at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in the late 1940s. (Lancaster County Bird Club photo)

Seventy-five years ago almost to the day, a small but eager group of birdwatchers met at Stahr Hall on the campus of Franklin & Marshall College and declared themselves the Lancaster County Bird Club.

Now, on the club's 75th anniversary, club members are celebrating their proud lineage.

Very few community birding clubs in the United States can boast the sustained interest, accomplishments and pantheon of famous birders as the Lancaster club.

Says noted ornithologist and author Scott Weidensaul, "There are few local bird clubs in the country with as rich and long a history, and as robust a present-day impact, as the Lancaster County Bird Club."

Still, the lasting appeal of the club may be much simpler, suggests former president and 41-year member Jay George of Manheim.

"It's a very congenial group willing to help people out to identify birds," he says.

Adds Lloyd Hassel, 92, a resident of Woodcrest Villa, "I have lots of good memories of the people, as much as the birds."

The club grew out of an association with F&M. Particularly influential were Dr. H. Justin Roddy, a naturalist and professor at Millersville State Teachers College for 40 years before becoming curator of the college's museum, forerunner of the North Museum, and Dr. Herbert Beck, a chemistry professor and ornithologist.

The club's first meeting was in January 1938. In the club's inaugural program, Beck spoke of his best birding days, including observing more than 150 passenger pigeons in York County one September day in 1888. He was one of the last persons to see the doomed birds in Pennsylvania.

Among the club's first actions was to plan field trips to Bush River, Md., and the New Jersey shore. This placed the club in the forefront of the idea of having "bird walks" where like-minded birders get together for outings in the field.

Now called field trips, they remain a fixture of the club.

Such communal birdwatching events did not become a fixture among bird clubs around the United States until after World War II, according to an article by birding writer Peter Dunne.

The minutes of early club meetings show how the birding landscape has changed in Lancaster County. A game protector spoke to the club on the decline of the bobwhite quail, a bird that has since vanished from the county.

Titillating observations were shared of northern mockingbirds and red-bellied woodpeckers, birds that are common here now.

In 1950, the club proudly recorded a record 69 species of birds on its Christmas bird count, a 24-hour canvassing of birds that's become a tradition for bird clubs across the country.

Contrast that with the 107 species that club members tallied on the Solanco Count in 2011. That count was founded and is still led by birding guide Bob Schutsky of Peach Bottom.

Bird conservation then, as now, was important for the club. When a bald eagle was found dead in East Drumore Township in 1938, apparently shot, the club offered to compensate any farmer losing livestock from the bird of prey.

Nor was the club shy about going to bat for conservation. The club took to the radio and took out newspaper ads in protest of a pigeon shoot in Leola.

The club petitioned the Pennsylvania Game Commission not to remove protection on hawks and in 1947 persuaded the Lancaster Brick Co. to create a wildlife sanctuary around the "brickyard swamp."

Tire and gas rationing during World War II forced the club to cut back its meetings and stop field trips. Once, during a blackout in the middle of a meeting, club members passed the time with a discussion about starlings.

Club membership rose steadily, reaching 261 in 1947. However, the club's treasury began to run low and a few times loyal members bailed out the club when coffers dipped into the red.

Roger Tory Peterson, the most famous birdwatcher of them all, was feted by the club at a dinner at the Hotel Sutter in Lititz in 1952. There is a photo from the late 1940s of club members birding with Peterson at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary.

To pump more finances into the club, it began hosting screenings of Audubon Wildlife Films. They turned out to be widely popular. One night in 1961, more than 1,200 people showed up at F&M's Hensel Hall for two showings.

Still, membership plummeted, dipping to 11 in 1960. Interest eventually rebounded, going from 100 in 1968 to more than 200 by 1975.

Bird club members distinguished themselves, observing the state's first mountain bluebird at Middle Creek in 1974 and seeing the first Atlantic puffin recorded in Maryland on a field trip in 1975.

The 1970s also saw two club members rise to national fame.

In 1971, Theodore A. Parker III became the first person to record 600 species of birds in North America in a single year. He was co-holder of the world record for birds observed in a single day.

Parker, who was killed in a plane crash while doing research work in Ecuador in 1993, would become recognized as perhaps the greatest field ornithologist of all time. He could recognize the calls of all 4,000 bird species in the New World.

Like many others, Parker's birding skills were honed by club member Harold Morrin of Millersville. Morrin's birding skills, however, were eclipsed by his mentoring skills and affability.

Morrin would routinely take off in the middle of the night and drive for hours to see a rare bird, often dragging along developing birders. He traveled around the world to see birds and was recognized by birders across the globe.

"He never claimed to be an excellent birder," recalls Schutsky. "He always said he just birded with good people."

Morrin died earlier this year at age 88. The club's annual scholarships for nature-related projects are named after him.

More recently, bird club alumnus Andrew Mack has been at the forefront of conservation efforts in Papua New Guinea. He is a former collections manager for birds at the Academy of Natural Sciences.

Jeff Lapore joined the club when he was an elementary school student. His photographs of birds and wildlife have been published in many worldwide magazines, textbooks, calendars and brochures.

As birdwatching became more of a respected nature sport nationwide, rather than a fringe hobby, the Lancaster County Bird Club enjoyed a similar boost in popularity.

A series of presidents from 1978-1987 was made up of birders known well outside Lancaster County. They included Jan Witmer, Shirley Bubb, Schutsky, Morrin, George and Steve Rannels.

In 1984, the club published "A Guide to the Birds of Lancaster County, Pa." In 1986, membership ballooned to 410. The club's high watermark for membership was 532 members in 1989-90. Current membership is about 276.

In the 1980s, the club was asked to become affiliated with the National Audubon Society, birding's largest national group.

"None of us saw a good reason to do it," recalls Schutsky. "We have good speakers, collect a lot of data, had good field trips and good birders."

Local and regional field trips, a mainstay in the club's history, remain. A new wrinkle was added in 2011 when the club began offering all-age birdwatching trips for beginners.

The club's role as citizen scientists also has expanded. In addition to the traditional Christmas bird counts, the club has migration counts, winter raptor surveys and an annual tally of birds seen in Lancaster County throughout the year - 267 species in 2011.

Two rare hummingbirds recently in Lancaster County were attracted by bird club members.

The club, like many environmental groups, is alarmed at the trend for youths to be disengaged from the natural world. That's why club member Bettina Heffner volunteers to show the joys of birdwatching to elementary students at private schools.

"We're trying to get children out into nature," says Barbara Hunsberger, current club president.

The loss of youthful nature lovers affects the club directly as the average age of members continues to inch higher.

One thing that has endured and hopefully won't change is a club that welcomes beginning birders with open arms.

It's what drew Ann Wilson of Paradise Township.

She had always been interested in birds but didn't have the skills or guidance to go further.

"I was thirsty for information," says the recently retired school administrator. That changed when she became a bird club member.

"One thing that helped me connect was the people in the club are very interested in sharing information and they are very enthusiastic about having you along. It's sort of easy to be new."

Happily, she found the members she accompanied not only knew birds intimately, they could point out what plants the group was walking through and the insects being flushed.

Now, birding has become a rewarding passion for her.

"It gets you outdoors and you can connect with other people that share your enthusiasm, your interests and, many times, share your values about natural habitats."

UPCOMING LANCASTER COUNTY BIRD CLUB EVENTS

NEXT MEETING: Friday, Dec. 14, 7:30 p.m., Farm & Home Center, 1383 Arcadia Road.

NEXT FIELD TRIP: Saturday, Feb. 16, Shark River Inlet, Manasquan River and Barnegat Light, N.J. Contact Doug Anderson at 203-2482 or doug.anderson@pennmanor.net.

NEXT BEGINNER BIRDING TRIP: Saturday, March 2, 4 p.m., Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area. Contact Roger Stoner, 393-9030.

TO VOLUNTEER FOR A CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT: Solanco Count, Sunday, Dec. 16, Bob Schutsky, 548-3303; Lititz Count, Sunday, Dec. 30, Bruce Carl, 368-4824 or carls94@pted.net; Lancaster Count, Saturday, Jan. 5, Barbara Hunsberger, 393-4091.

TO ORDER 75TH ANNIVERSARY T-SHIRT OR BASEBALL CAP: Short-sleeve T-shirts in adult sizes small, medium, large and extra large, \$11; caps, \$13. Orders due by Jan. 31 by contacting Barbara Hunsberger, 393-4091 or phunsberger@comcast.net.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON THE CLUB: www.lancasterbirdclub.org.

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