

Birds of a feather: Talbot County Bird Club turns 65

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TUNIS MILLS — Chiggers and ticks, oh my. Birders dress with pants tucked into their socks to keep these bad bugs out. And don't forget the dreaded poison ivy. There is no belly-aching here. You dress to stay dry and warm.



Dr. Wayne Bell setting out for a morning bird watching adventure.

On a chilly fall October morning, a group of 20 birders meet on a 300-acre estate outside of Tunis Mills. There are groves of old growth trees just down the path. There is a bald eagle's nest. The sun is just coming up, filling soybean fields full orange light. This is the Talbot County Bird Club, and it's been doing this for 65 straight years — every Sunday.

The leader of the birding group is Wayne Bell. He loves birds. He sees birds and hears birds in an intimate way that takes years of observation. He even has an uncanny sensitivity to wind and thermals and what kind of birds to expect in which conditions. He also holds a doctorate from Harvard University.

While at Harvard, he expanded this love to ecology in general, this time encouraged by Pulitzer Prize winner E. O. Wilson, at a time when the field was transforming itself from descriptive natural history into a predictive, quantitative science. Every birder learns from a birder who knows more about birds.

Education is near and dear to Bell. You can see him light up when someone sees something for the first time. He teaches throughout the year. He wears muddy Muck Boots and is easily approachable.

“Let’s say six birding trips,” Bell said. “Three in the spring and three in the fall. I am also teaching a class at The Chesapeake Forum on birding. It is run through the Eastern Shore Community Foundation. I have been in the club for 30 years. It goes back to the ’80s.”

The place where they are mucking through woods, pastures and shorelines has a home that was begun building in 1669. The Tilghman family built the original structure. The wooden structure was replaced with bricks in the 1800s. In 1905 the Starrs bought the Hope House at auction on the courthouse steps for \$13,000.

Electricity wasn’t put until 1950.

“My parents acquired the house in 1965 and I have been cutting the grass ever since,” said Peter Stifel, current owner of the Hope House.

The land and the health of the birds go hand in hand. There is an invasive grass called fountain grass that has taken over the Hope House’s pasture. Stifel, who has a



Wayne with Talbot Bird Club members searching the tree limbs this early morning in Tunis Mills

doctorate in geology, has a long view of time and global warming. He told the club to enjoy the birds while they still can.

Part of the point of tracking all these birds is to see how their various patterns are changing. They are an indicator species.



Bell is rarely seen without his notebook, making notes of the birds seen as well as what to mention during his next class with Chesapeake Forum.

“Ecological indicators are useful tools for measuring changes over time and provide valuable insights into how and why the environment is changing,” Dr. Roger Lederer is quoted as saying on the Chico State University website.

“We can measure the changing status of the environment, such as biodiversity — fewer species, more species, and/or different species; the

reasons for these changes (habitat destruction or degradation, pollution, climate change, introduced species, etc.), and the response to those threats — conservation, revegetation, new laws or policies, and public knowledge. By monitoring ecological indicators over time, baselines can be established from which trends can be quantified and addressed.”

Lederer was a famous ornithologist who taught at Chico State University in California. At this point even casual birders can help document the birds’ behavior.

“I have been so impressed with this group of people. You can see that they are all avidly interested,” said Bettye Maki, president of the Talbot County Bird Club. She has been in the birding club for three years.

“We have had five new members just this month,” Maki said.

The Talbot Bird Club is a chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society, serving Talbot and Dorchester counties. It holds meetings with different speakers every time. It also offers a youth program of the Youth Maryland Ornithological Society Club. The club organizes monthly trips for youths and regional birding competitions.

“We have field trips every Sunday,” Maki said. “Plus an extra one yesterday on the tip of Black Walnut Point on the tip of Tilghman Island looking for hawks. They were supposed to have them migrating through with this cold spell.

“We had sharp shinned and coopers and five broad wings, which you don’t see that often,” she said.

The Talbot Bird Club is collegial and inclusive. It welcomes anyone who has an interest in birds, whether a novice or experienced ornithologist, and whether you enjoy watching birds at your feeder or traveling throughout the state. Members learn from one another and are willing to share their knowledge. There is a real sense of humble joy in learning more about birds, birders say. And there was a warm atmosphere within the group as it walked through the forest. There were definitely birders just getting started and birders who have been at it for years.

The founders started the club 65 years ago.

Every member of the club uses the eBird app on their smart phone to track their sightings. This quantifies the behavior of the birds.

“Wayne keeps track of every bird and then we will all get that count,” Maki said. “I will send it to every one of us. And what I do is go over the count after birds that I actually have not seen, I delete them from the count. And then it goes into our eBird list.”

eBird is a citizen science count of birds that is run by Cornell University. With a smart phone you not only give your list of sightings, you also have a GPS marker to tell them exactly where you saw, say a yellow bellied sapsucker or a white breasted nut hatch.

“That way they can keep track of the birds in the area,” Maki said. “And we also do a fall count, a spring count and a Christmas count. Those are really important counts because we are hitting different times to be here and find what birds are passing through, what birds are staying. Right now you know the birds that are here might still be still be migrating. By Christmas, that should be a pretty good count of the birds that actually stayed.”

Cornell runs another program called NestWatch. Citizen scientists find newly built nests and check on them every three days until they fledge. Maryland also has a program called the Breeding Bird Atlas, which finds and tracks what birds are breeding here.

It is all done online and the data is sent to Cornell — a sort of a bird census.

The state is divided into quad maps. Each quad is divided into six equal parts, then separated into smaller blocks. Talbot County has 41 blocks.

“When it is time for an Atlas, we switch our phones over so that what birds are going in are part of the Atlas,” Maki said. “We each get a three-mile area that we volunteer to cover. So my phone would be set for that three-mile area. Whenever I record a bird, it automatically knows that I am reporting up from that area.”

Maki has also found another good use for the GPS function.

“You can see the lines,” she said. “When you get lost like I do in these big woods. That way I feel safe. You know I can just go off in the woods and go off trail and not worry about it.”

To be a good birder you have to look very closely and you have to be able to identify birds by their calls. Right down to the ring around an eye or yellow patch on a breast can make an identification definitive. Was that an eastern screech owl?

“I look forward to hearing yelps of pleasure out in the field when you discover a species for the first time,” Bell said.