

Bird Lore: In-town birdwatching possible anywhere

- By Larry Waltz

Ring-billed gulls often are seen in parking lots and garbage dumps, and are identified by their black band encircling a yellow bill.

- PHOTO COURTESY OF Bobby Brown



Peregrine falcon fledglings perch on the Market Street Bridge in Williamsport.

- PHOTO COURTESY OF Wayne Laubscher

If you live in the Central Susquehanna valley — be it Sunbury, Shamokin, Lewisburg, Muncy or towns in between — there is every good reason to enjoy birdwatching in town.

Birds are literally everywhere, not just in so-called “natural” areas. And, to our joy, they have adapted to and adopted the urban scene in amazing ways.

Whether you are looking out your backyard window, waiting for the bus, walking across campus, enjoying a park bench, strolling a street, walking on your lunch break, parking your car at the supermarket, going to the hospital or your worship event, there are birds to see and acknowledge by their size, shape, color, sound and behavior.

Birding in a city

Permit me to use metro-Williamsport as an in-town/urban birding example.

With concentrated human activity — people chatting, street traffic, businesses, restaurants, etc. — the birds, being used to their human companions, are more approachable. In a parking lot, you might find pigeons, “black birds,” starlings, crows, grackles, gulls or house sparrows.

Often, movement is the initial birdwatching clue, not vocalization. You learn to ignore the urban din.

So-called countryside species also can be seen in town, if you look carefully. These may include wrens (house and Carolina), American robins, northern cardinals, mockingbirds, sparrows (house, song, chipping and white throated), brown thrashers, tufted titmouse and white-breasted nuthatches.

Birds are attracted to sites providing food, water, security and shelter, either onsite or nearby. Bird presence is not always predictable, but when you are lucky, ask yourself why. Plan to revisit those parks, athletic fields, campuses, cemeteries, etc. that seem to be attractive.

Take a moment and observe a hedge or a tree. When on the river walk, note that some birds are attracted to calm water, others to rough. Rocky water edges and river islands when water is low, each have their attraction. Trees with limbs hanging over water are used by divers.

The city is vertical and provides “cliff-like” sites. There are bird-friendly ledges that attract peregrine falcons on the southeast top corner of the Genetti Hotel as they keep an eye on pigeons.

Until recently, ravens used a Broad Street, Montoursville, building façade.

Market Street Bridge has fledged falcons. Hundreds of pigeons at a time can be seen neatly spaced like soldiers on electrical wires right over the beltway traffic.

Hundreds of crows are known to be drawn in the winter to inviting lights and warmer temperatures. Night hawks and chimney swifts fly overhead in summer evenings at Bowman Field’s baseball park.

Of course, binoculars are a helpful tool, but you should not forgo the joy of appreciating birds as you are about your everyday routine. The more you pause, look and listen, the more you will enjoy identification. When you are ready, be more intentional by walking with a friend or participating in an Audubon field trip.