

The PSO Pileated



February 2025

The Newsletter of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology

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From the President's Desk

The migratory exploits of birds receive a lot of attention from birders and the popular press. I am part of that crowd, having spent countless hours reading and wondering about the unfathomable journeys of birds, especially the daring ocean-crossings of Blackpoll Warblers, Bar-tailed Godwits, and the seabirds that go months without touching land. The superpowers of birds that do not take a break when fall migration winds down. They are on full display in winter and, to me, are just as fascinating. The ability of tiny kinglets and chickadees to survive our Pennsylvania winters and of owls to find prey through snow cover are among the many bird feats worthy of our wonder and study.

One of my favorite winter activities is watching my backyard feeders through a snowstorm. A well-stocked feeder is a magnet for birds before and during a storm as other food sources become harder to access. I try to sprinkle some extra seed on the ground as the snow falls, guaranteeing a constant flow of juncos and white-throats. This winter's first snow storm

brought a few Purple Finches to my feeders and a Ruby-crowned Kinglet discovered the availability of suet. The constant buzz of activity through the flurries illustrated how both birds and birders adjust their activities to survive - and hopefully thrive - through winter.

Winter is clearly a critical time for birds. They must make it to spring not just with their heart still beating and wings still flapping, but strong enough to complete a timely migration and start the energy-intensive process of finding a mate, building a nest, and raising young. For the resident and short-distance migrant birds that stay through the winter in Pennsylvania, that means finding reliable sources of food, seeking shelter from the harshest winds, and conserving energy by slowing down their metabolism.

For birders, winter presents some challenges along with great opportunities for exploration and discovery. While some hobbies take a long winter break, birders find nearly empty public parks and trails an invitation to enjoy even the coldest days. Much like the birds, with just a

few adaptations, we can thrive through the winter. An extra layer or two of clothes, mittens, boots, and a thermos of your favorite hot beverage can be the difference between a day remembered for great finds and a hasty retreat to the car or home.

Winter is also an ideal time to start birding by becoming familiar with our resident species. Once a beginning birder has learned to differentiate Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers, and the calls of titmice, chickadees, and nuthatches, as they are much more prepared

for the deluge of new sights and sounds that comprise spring migration. Try to bring a new birder along on your next winter birding outing.

As the first-ever Winter Atlas project in Pennsylvania is sure to document, there is so much bird life to enjoy in winter. With a little inspiration from the remarkable winter feats of birds, I hope you adapt and thrive during your winter birding.

Brian Byrnes

PSO Golden Eagle Field Trip to Waggoner's Gap Hawkwatch 2024

Every November, we do a Golden Eagle trip, this time a little later in the season than usual--the 3rd weekend. As we cycle through our favorite three sites, it was time to return to Perry & Cumberland County to sit on their comfy rocks and explore the skies at Waggoner's Gap. The site is on the crest of Kittatinny Ridge north of Carlisle, on a parcel of land now managed by the PA Game Commission and staffed by a full-time paid counter during fall migration in collaboration with Hawk Mountain.

We once again lucked out and got some good weather, which is nice, but the winds are also very important and Saturday the 16th had forecasts for nice NW early and most of the day. Earlier in the week several hawkwatches had some great numbers of Goldens so we were quite hopeful. I left Juniata County early, joined by Jessie Sauder who picked up Aden Troyer and his grandson Paul to help us.

We arrived before 8 am and there were already some counters there who actually started at 6:30am with early winds and were able to already count 2 goldens. Long time counter Ron

Freed and Paul Fritz know when to be there early and it paid off.

It didn't take long for us to get our first Golden Eagle of the day, and the morning was very active with the high winds, we were thankful that the temps were above normal, or it would have been much more uncomfortable for us. It is always good to have layers to put on or take off depending on how the day fares out.

Soon some of our regular trip attendees arrived with Tiffany Willow to steal my snacks, Joe Gyekis brought a couple new birders from PSU, Evan Mann with family, and many others who haven't been to Wag Gap or even a hawkwatch before. For a mid-November ridge, it was strangely warm, but for people expecting 50 F weather like how it feels down in the valley, the wind chill from the altitude was there to remind you to bundle up properly.

Official counter Brandon Brogle came to get us organized, then other elder counters like Dave Grove and Gene Wagner joined the fray.

As noon approached, the winds did die down and the number of birds declined too. We saw almost a dozen Golden Eagles and they had 15 on the day. We were able to enjoy several dozen Bald Eagles, and high numbers of Red-tailed Hawks. Other species we saw were: Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Cooper's Hawk, Red-shouldered Hawk, plus plenty of Turkey and Black Vultures. There was a distant falcon call early to the north and at the end of the day. A Merlin was also seen peeling through the north, found by Brandon. Other species found either by sight or sound were: American Pipit, a handful of Purple Finches and Pine Siskins, at least a dozen Common Loons, and American Herring Gulls among 30ish species tallied in all.

Sunday the 17th didn't call for helpful wind and it was much colder. I thought I would be one of the early ones getting there by 7:30 am but when I realized the actual forecast, I knew there were more wise sages that knew not to be there so early. I did get to enjoy the hungry mt birds, some even landed on my head as I was sitting still in the quietness of the mountain and rocks. By 8 am Tiffany arrived, then Vern Gauthier. Brandon made his way in to let us know the winds wouldn't be as helpful but we were ready to see what would come down the pike. We were entertained by some early

Siskins, a flock of mixed Blackbirds, a large group of Cedar Waxwings who stayed around the mt most of the day, Robins as well. It took several hours before our first raptor of the day came through; we did get 1 single distant Golden Eagle to the north.

A field trip from a Maryland birding group joined us on the mountain as well as a few new friends who came for our PSO trip. Andy McCann came with his young son Adam who I haven't seen in a long time. It was fun to see his son explore the mountain and rocks like many of our birding posse have done over the years. The years of my kids coming and exploring are over, but I do enjoy seeing it for others. I remember when Dave Grove used to let my kids run a clicker on monarch butterflies which are also counted in the earlier part of the counting season. This year marked 20 years I have been birding and hitting Wag Gap almost annually up until the last few years.

As Sunday made its way through, the winds did keep changing on both sides of the mountain. There were times we had to strain to see birds at the far end of the valley to the north, then back to the south, and a few overhead. We were just thankful we had some birds to count after the morning was so quiet. All the raptor species we had on day 1 returned on day 2 but

Save the dates!



in lower numbers overall. Other species highlights were: Pine Siskin, Purple Finch, Canada Goose and American Pipit. I was still able to have 30ish species on my ebird report.

While no Goshawks made appearances, they are still very light in numbers compared to decades ago. They just had a name change from Northern Goshawk to American Goshawk, I was hoping to find my first one with the new name, it had been 3 years since I last saw one and it was at Wag Gap.

I always look forward to the golden eagle hawkwatch weekends and we have been rotating 3 locations, so in November of 2025 we will return to Hawk Mountain and in 2026 we will hit Allegheny Front. We always have to gamble when we pick a weekend so far in advance as weather and winds have so much to do with the luck and success of the field trips. If

there was heavy rain or fog, we might bail on the ridge to go look for waterfowl in the surrounding region, but bitter cold and howling wind just means bring a sleeping bag and another couple layers of clothes for shelter. If you haven't been to a hawkwatch before or in a while, these types of groups are nice as you can feel comfortable coming in with a group, probably many are new as well but we are all friendly and helpful. You don't have to know what you are seeing, you just have to listen, pay attention and maybe point out something you see. Those counters and attendees can't see everything and appreciate help. If it isn't too busy, they will help you point out species and field marks as things come by. Even the best counters and locations can have birds shake their heads on hard ID's.

Chad Kauffman

SPONSORS NEEDED FOR THE 2025 PA BREEDING BIRD BLITZ

The Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology (PSO), with statewide membership, is looking for Sponsoring Partners in our annual Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation (B4C).

The B4C is an eleven-day statewide birding competition held annually in June since 2021 which seeks to raise funds for avian related conservation in Pennsylvania. Over the course of the four years, we have raised \$67,318, with 2024 being our best year yet as we received \$22,290 in donations.

PSO has funded conservation projects with non-profit organizations across the state,

including Hawk Mountain, Erie Bird Observatory, Manda Conservancy, Western PA Conservancy, the Ned Smith Center for Nature and Art, the Willistown Conservation trust, the Foundation for Sustainable Forests, the Pocono Environmental Educational Center, and the Allegheny Land Trust.

Additionally, we have received support from several Pennsylvania Audubon Chapters and Bird Clubs, including Todd Bird Club, South

Mountain Audubon, Conococheague Audubon, Quittapahilla Audubon, and Lycoming Audubon.



Photo courtesy of Mike Jackson

To build interest in and grow the B4C, we look to Sponsoring Partners to provide a donation or matching funds but are open to other arrangements as well. Information about our Sponsoring Partners will be included in B4C Press Releases, on the B4C Website, the PSO Newsletter, and anywhere else the B4C is promoted.

Thank you for your consideration in joining Pennsylvania's birding community as we work together to make a difference for all of Pennsylvania's birds!

PLEASE CONTACT VERN GAUTHIER AT blitz4conservation@gmail.com IF YOU HAVE ANY SPONSOR IDEAS OR CONTACTS.

2025 PSO Birding Festival & Sponsorship Opportunities



The 2025 PSO Birding Festival will take place September 26-28, 2025 at the Delta Hotel by Marriott Allentown-Lehigh Valley. This year marks the 34th PSO Birding Festival and its first visit to Lehigh County, an area rich in fall birding opportunities and ornithological

history. The event will feature field trips led by local experts, speakers, and vendors with everything a birder needs: optics, books, art, and more. The banquet on the evening of September 27 will feature the presentation of PSO's annual awards and a keynote address by Holly Merker, co-author of *Ornithotherapy: For Your Mind, Body, and Soul*.

Sponsorship opportunities are available to support the event and engage PSO members with your business or organization. Sponsorships may be paid through the PSO website at <https://pabirds.org/festival->

[sponsors/](#). Or send a check to PSO, 2469 Hammertown Rd, Narvon, PA 17555-9730

Sponsorship payments must be received by June 15, 2025 to ensure inclusion on Festival materials.

For more details, please contact PSO President Brian Byrnes at brianjbyrnes79@gmail.com.



2025 PSO Birding Festival Sponsorship Levels

Pileated Woodpecker – \$2,000

- Four complimentary festival and banquet registrations
- Logo and link on Festival website
- Recognition on Festival agenda provided to attendees
- Logo on Festival tote bag distributed to attendees
- Option to include a brochure with Festival packet
- Recognition at banquet
- Recognition on PSO social media posts promoting the Festival

Bald Eagle – \$1,000

- Two complimentary festival and banquet registrations
- Logo and link on Festival website
- Recognition on Festival agenda provided to attendees
- Logo on Festival tote bag distributed to

attendees

- Option to include a brochure with Festival packet
- Recognition at banquet

Ruffed Grouse – \$500

- Two complimentary festival and banquet registrations
- Logo and link on Festival website
- Recognition on Festival agenda provided to attendees
- Logo on Festival tote bag distributed to attendees

Northern Cardinal – \$250

- One complimentary festival and banquet registration
- Logo and link on Festival website
- Recognition on Festival agenda provided to attendees

Special Birding Opportunities for PSO Members

One Spot Left

Montana: Glacier to Grasslands, an 8-day/7-night trek across the Treasure State starting June 25, 2025. Montana is a large, ecologically diverse state with a wide array of habitats, with a correspondingly diverse array of birds. Lead Guide (and Montana resident) Josh Covill will begin the tour in Glacier National Park, legendary for its immense natural beauty. A great diversity of birds is possible in Glacier, from boreal specialists like Spruce Grouse, Pine Grosbeak and Boreal Chickadee, to more 'Pacific' birds like Varied Thrush and Chestnut-backed Chickadee, and 'Mountain West' classics like Western Tanager, Lazuli Bunting, Townsend's Warbler, and Dusky Grouse. The second portion of the tour will focus on the

seemingly endless shortgrass prairies of the northern Great Plains. This region is a bird factory, with many species nesting here during the short summer breeding season. Birds calling the prairies home include Chestnut-collared and Thick-billed Longspurs, Ferruginous Hawk, Black Tern, Long-billed Curlew, Burrowing Owl, Sprague's Pipits, Baird's Sparrow, Upland Sandpiper, Golden Eagle, and many more.

Visit <https://www.hillstarnature.com/glacier-grasslands-pso-2025> for details and to register.

Registrations from the tour include a donation to support PSO. You will not want to miss out on this exciting birding opportunity!

Jeff Kenney

2025 PSO Award Nomination Process

Dear PSO Members,

We are excited to open the nomination period for PSO's 2025 awards and youth scholarships. A nomination from a PSO member is required for an award or scholarship, so I hope you will take a moment to read the descriptions below and consider if you know deserving individuals or organizations. All nominations are due by March 31, 2025. Thank you for your continued support of PSO.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Hendricks, on behalf of the Awards and Nominations Committee

The **Earl Poole Award** is presented annually to a person (or persons) who have made significant contributions to Pennsylvania's ornithology. This may be in the form of research, volunteer efforts, publications, field work, or any other pursuit that has increased our knowledge and understanding of birdlife in Pennsylvania. To nominate someone for this award, please send an email to Carolyn Hendricks at carolyn.hendricks53@gmail.com with a brief explanation of the person's

accomplishments. Past winners of the award can be found at <https://pabirds.org/earl-poole-award/>.

The **Conservation Award** is presented periodically to an individual or organization that has had a positive impact on bird conservation in Pennsylvania. To make a nomination for this award, please send an email to Carolyn Hendricks at carolyn.hendricks53@gmail.com with a brief explanation of the person's or organization's accomplishments. Past winners of the award can be found at

<https://pabirds.org/conservation-award-2/>.

Youth Scholarships are available to attend the 2025 PSO festival in Lehigh County, September 26-28, 2025. The scholarships cover transportation, lodging, and meals for a child and parent/guardian. Please note that a parent/guardian or an adult designated by the youth's parent guardian must attend the festival with the scholarship recipient. To nominate someone for a youth scholarship, please visit <https://pabirds.org/youth-scholarship/> to download the brief application form, and email the completed form to Joe Gyekis at gyekis9@gmail.com.

2025 Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology (PSO) Breeding Bird Blitz for Conservation (B4C):

Funding Opportunity for Conservation Organizations

Blitz Dates: June 6 – June 16, 2025

Application Deadline: March 1, 2025

Seeking: Nonprofit organizations that support the conservation of [Bird Species](#) of Greatest Conservation Need in Pennsylvania. Selected organizations will be identified as a

Conservation Partner (CP) with PSO for the B4C in 2025. Applications for projects of up to **\$10,000** will be considered.

The B4C began in 2021. Since then, we have partnered with non-profit organizations across the state. Together we have raised \$67,318 in conservation funding.

In 2024, we raised \$22,290 for three CPs and split the funds equally between them. In 2025 there will be a change in how we determine our fundraising goal and how the funds are distributed to our CPs. If 100% of the goal is reached, each CP will receive 100% of the agreed upon funding for each CP. If the goal is not reached, each CP will receive a percentage of the agreed upon amount, to be determined by set funding guidelines of the PSO Conservation Committee.

Previous CP awardees cannot apply again for two years after their award presentation. E.g., organizations that were a CP in 2023 or 2024 should not apply to be a CP in 2025. If you have any questions about the B4C or the application, please email the PSO Conservation Committee: blitz4conservation@gmail.com

Partner Expectations:

We are excited to develop a strong and collaborative partnership with your organization. As your partner, the PSO Conservation Committee is committed to promoting your organization and its projects.

Here's what you can expect from us:

- Promotion: We will highlight your organization and project on our website, publish articles in the PSO Pileated, in press releases to the public and other conservation-related nonprofits.
- Fundraising: We will dedicate our efforts to meet or exceed the fundraising goal set for 2025 by enthusiastically recruiting teams to participate in the B4C and encouraging teams to actively seek donations.

In return, we ask our partner organizations to:

- Form and register a team to participate in the B4C.
- Make a sincere effort to raise a minimum of \$500 in donations in support of the B4C.
- Provide a report within a year of receipt of funding detailing how the funds were spent. A summary of the reports will be published in the PSO newsletter.

With this partnership firmly in place we are confident that we can reach our shared goals.

PSO will fund:

- Bird-safe Habitats – Direct habitat conservation, habitat management or enhancement, land protection, invasive species removal, and native plant species plantings.
- Conservation Education – Adult or school age education programming related to bird conservation in Pennsylvania.
- Conservation Monitoring and Science – Monitoring or research on Pennsylvania bird populations or species with an applied conservation focus.
- Threat Mitigation – Efforts such as reducing bird building or window collisions, vehicle collisions, pesticide use, and impacts from outdoor cats.

PSO will not fund:

- Administrative costs.
- Habitat enhancements that are part of a required habitat offset (such as wetland banks) connected to new construction/development.

Past Conservation Partners:

The B4C began in 2021. That first year we partnered with Hawk Mountain, Manada Conservancy, and Western PA Conservancy. Since then, we have partnered with non-profit organizations across the state including Erie Bird Observatory, the Ned Smith Center for Nature and Art, the Willistown Conservation Trust, Hawk Mountain (for a second time), the Foundation for Sustainable Forests, South Middleton Township, Rider Park, the Pocono Environmental Educational Center, and the Allegheny Land Trust.

Other:

If you have any questions about the B4C (which will be held June 6 – 16, 2025) or the application, please email the PSO Conservation Committee: blitz4conservation@gmail.com

PSO Conservation Committee members are Laura Jackson, chair; David Barber, Brian Byrnes, Vern Gauthier, Carolyn Hendricks, Mary Alice Koeneke, Rich Rieger, and Karter Witmer.

Please submit the application below by email to blitz4conservation@gmail.com by March 1, 2025.

Laura Jackson

2025 B4C Application:

Non-profit Organization:

Project location (address or description, include county):

Mission statement:

Property owner (current or proposed, if applicable):

Organization’s website:

Brief description of the project and its goals:

Contact person and position:

[Species of Greatest Conservation Need](#) that will benefit from the proposed project (please list all that apply):

Mailing address:

Email address:

Timeline for project completion:

Phone number:

Itemized Proposed Budget (both expected income sources and expenses):

Project title:

Raven Reporter

Tales of Discovery
about
Pennsylvania Birds



Hooters, Tooters, and Screemers

Winter begins owl breeding season. It is often mistakenly said that all owls hoot. Many do, but some owls in Pennsylvania make other kinds of vocalizations. They toot. They chortle. They whinny. They screech. They scream. They murmur when you get too close. Most are nocturnal most of the time, but they also can be found in daylight if you know where to look.

Owls are perhaps the most challenging birds to document. Finding them is very rewarding. Getting a new owl in your Atlas block or your favorite birding hotspot will make your day --- or night.

It all starts with Great Horned Owls courting. They do hoot! There are many descriptions of Great Horned hoots, but I always like the “Morris code” description. Even before the sun goes down, you can hear the exchanges between a pair of Great Horned Owls and the territorial hooting between males in nearby territories, but they hoot even more after dark. As far as we know, Great Horned Owls are permanent residents in Pennsylvania (although there may be some “floaters” moving around), so hooting is a pretty good indication of territorial birds throughout the year. I have

heard pairs calling back and forth as early as November and more regularly in December and January. A pair will call back and forth in a dueting for long periods. The low-pitched hoots carry for long distances. Although female Great Horneds are larger, they have a higher pitched hoot due to their smaller syrinx. The two genders can be told apart even without seeing the birds. Great Horned owls will nest in tree cavities, but they also adopt old crow nests. Females can sit tight and gaze at the curious human observers. In summer, young Great Horned Owls can be heard calling with hawk-like rasping screams when they want attention. They sometimes perch on top of telephone poles and call out for food. Both adult sexes can also scream as a contact call. The juvenile begging call is one of the mystery sounds of

nature and puzzles many people living out in the county. It is a good vocalization for Atlas volunteers to learn.



Barred Owl photo by Doug Gross

The Barred Owl is the deep woods hooter. It is more of a mature woods and swamp bird than the Great Horned Owl which is likely to live in farm country and the edge of town as well as the woods. Barred Owls are territorial throughout the year. The Barred Owl is

the nocturnal ecological equivalent of a Red-shouldered Hawk and often

found in the same places. Barred Owls give a deep “who cooks for you” mostly at night, but sometimes in the middle of the day.

They will call back and forth in a pair-bonding duet by night or by day. They also make some really amazing sounds called “caterwauling” that can include monkey-like screams and

cackles, usually in the middle of the night. I have heard these incredible maniacal sounds while camping.

The Long-eared Owl is perhaps Pennsylvania's greatest mystery bird. It is listed in Pennsylvania as a Threatened species and perhaps deserves to be called Endangered. Long-eareds are most often associated with evergreen conifers whether in semi-open or wooded habitats. They sometimes nest in the same wooded area where they roosted in winter. So, it is a good idea to scour the area around a known winter roost site in the spring for nesting. They usually adopt an old crow nest or another large stick nest, usually in an evergreen conifer. Long-eareds may be the most nocturnal of our owls in their vocals, but their roosts and nests can be discovered during the day. The advertisement song of a male Long-eared Owl is a series of evenly spaced "hoo" notes.

They can be given soon after sunset, but almost always in the dark. Any Long-eared Owl nesting site should be kept confidential and reported to the PA Game Commission's Wildlife Recovery group.

The Eastern Screech-Owl is probably the most common nightbird in the state. They have a broad taste in habitats, found in deep woods as well as parkland and yards with trees. And it does not hoot. The screech-owl's whinny is one of the most familiar night sounds in the state.

Screech-Owls also chortle, sometimes close to homes. They can be surprisingly familiar and tolerant of humans, perching at low heights in backyard trees while looking for prey. I have stood within 20 feet of them on several occasions without their objection. They often "sing" in spring and early summer and then resume their whinny calls later in the summer after their young have fledged out. The summer song is usually a shortened version of the spring advertising song. Screech-owls are cavity nesters and will adopt an appropriately sized wood nest box.

Our smallest owl, the Northern Saw-whet is a bird of the mountain forests. Their mating song is a tooting that sounds like a small truck backing up. It is easily imitated. Individuals also mew to each other as well making other sounds. The first state-wide nocturnal bird monitoring project (Project Toot Route) involved this species and was successful due to an army of volunteers that followed a protocol and dared to go owling where no birder had gone owling before. They found saw-whets in many places where it had never found never before and also documented many other birds that called in the night. Saw-whets generally stay low in the forest, often within a few feet of the ground and fly near eye-level from post to post. It is a good practice to sit down and watch for the silhouette of the owl as it responds to an audio lure or to each other. Do not play a saw-whet call for long periods, because you may attract a Barred Owl to a saw-whet when it is looking for prey. I have seen Barred Owls respond to saw-whet calls and also pursue saw-whets that were "tooting" out in the open. Most saw-whets nest above 1500 feet in woodlands, but

some can be found at wood edges and blueberry thickets. Their tooting can be drowned out by the sounds of spring peepers, because they are often found in wet woods. Saw-whets seem sensitive to heat and are found nesting in cooler habitats, often near water.

The Barn Owl is a true screamer. Their calls can be spine-tingling. Most will nest on private property, mostly in farm buildings. Barn Owls also will nest in large tree cavities and embankments, so it is good to keep an open mind about where they are found. This owl has one of the longest breeding seasons of any species found in the state. They can nest in fall and early spring as well as the summer months when you would expect them. They hunt widely over open areas, sometimes far from their nest. I have heard them call as they hunt. Any new Barn Owl nesting site should be shared with the

Regional PGC office which have been studying this species and engaging private landowners with Barn Owl and American Kestrel stewardship.

Short-eared Owls are considered Endangered in the state. They are birds of open habitats, now mostly reclaimed strip mines in Pennsylvania. Short-ears can be thought of as the night-time equivalent of Northern Harriers. Their floppy flight is oddly graceful. Although they are beautiful to see and experience, one of the best ways to detect Short-ears is by ear. As they pass overhead, they often bark to each other, sounding a bit like terriers. The advertising song is a long tooting call given from an elevated perch. Short-eared Owls are ground-nesters so care should be taken not to tread on the nest or attract the many nest predators to it. Any Short-eared Owl breeding observation should be reported to the PGC in order to enable protection of a breeding site and add to the agency's Endangered species monitoring for

management. They are migratory, so a wintering Short-eared Owl observation may not indicate a breeding population.

But, wintering ground data are important to this third Atlas and for the sake of conservation.

The status of all these owl species is a bit of a mystery. None of the standard bird surveys adequately count them, much less monitor trends. Owls are susceptible to West Nile Virus, so their populations may be a bit diminished since the Second Pennsylvania Breeding Bird Atlas.

They also are impacted by prey populations and human interference. So, your owl observations can be very illuminating even if they are made in the dark of the night.

Good Owling!

Doug Gross, Dagross144@verizon.net



Conservation Chat Room:

Oil and Birds Don't Mix

We've all seen pictures of dirty birds covered with a black gunk when offshore oil pipes burst in the Gulf of Mexico or when ships like the *Exxon Valdez* spew their toxic plume into Alaskan waters, only to kill thousands of birds. You might be too young to remember the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, but I remember it very clearly: on March 24, 1989, the ship ran aground in Prince William Sound, Alaska, spilling 11 million gallons of crude oil.



Since 1972, Pigeon Guillemots have declined by 85% in Prince William Sound, with an estimated current population of less than 2,000 birds.² Photo by Becky Matsubara.³

The Valdez spill affected over 1,300 miles of shoreline, killing an “estimated 250,000 seabirds; 2,800 sea otters; 300 harbor seals; 250 Bald Eagles; as many as 22 killer whales; and billions of salmon and herring eggs.” It was one of the largest environmental disasters in our history.¹

I’ve visited Prince William Sound two times since the accident and learned that some bird populations might be irreversibly harmed. Even now, many years later, Pigeon Guillemots, Marbled Murrelets, and Kittlitz’s Murrelets still face a long road to recovery.

Maybe you do remember the largest oil spill in U.S. history? The Deepwater Horizon spill from a blown out well began on April 20, 2010, and released 206 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico over 87 days. According to The Center for Biological Diversity, “the spill likely harmed or killed about 82,000 birds of 102 species,

including black skimmers, brown pelicans, clapper rails, common loons, laughing gulls, northern gannets and several species of tern; about 6,165 sea turtles; as many as 25,900 marine mammals; and a vast (but unknown)

number of fish — from the great bluefin tuna to our nation's smallest seahorse — plus oysters, crabs, corals and other creatures. A

common rule of thumb estimates actual mortality at likely 10 times higher than reported.”⁴

Sadly, there have been hundreds of oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico. Millions of gallons of oil remain in the Gulf today, continuing to poison wildlife for generations. Oil spills also continue to pollute inland Alaska, as well as waters off America’s coasts in addition to the Gulf of Mexico. Although tanker spills have decreased, the risks of inland pipeline spills and deepwater catastrophic spills have increased.

That’s why January 6, 2025, brought some good news for birds and other wildlife at risk to oil spills. Using his authority under section 12(a) of the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act (OCSLA), President Biden issued memoranda to withdraw significant portions of the Outer Continental Shelf from future oil and natural gas leasing, including the entire U.S. Pacific and Eastern Atlantic coasts, the Eastern Gulf of Mexico, and the remainder of the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area offshore Alaska. The withdrawal areas announced today encompass

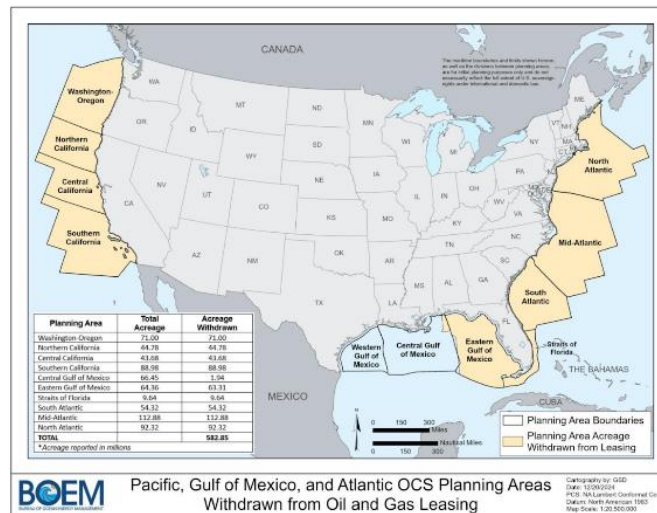
more than 625 million acres – and represent the largest withdrawal in U.S. history. The map to the left shows the areas along the Pacific and Atlantic coasts that are now off-limits to oil and gas drilling.

Of course, there is the fear that

the new administration will reverse this protection, since the pledge to, “Drill, baby, drill” is in direct opposition to protecting our coastal

beaches, wildlife, and economies. Past efforts provided a test for presidential powers when Trump issued an executive order to reverse

Pacific Gulf Atlantic Withdrawal (January 6, 2025)



Map available at: <https://www.doi.gov/media/pacific-gulf-atlantic-withdraw-map>

Obama's action to prohibit drilling in Alaska's waters. According to Newsweek, "the U.S. District Court for Alaska found that Trump did not have authority to roll back the Obama action. Before an appeals court heard the case, Biden took office and reversed Trump's policy, restoring the protections."⁵

The takeaway message from that action is that it would take an act of Congress to undo Biden's latest action to withdraw federal waters from future drilling permits. Will it come to that? Only time will tell.

You may be wondering how Biden's action will impact gas prices and oil production. Under the Biden Administration, leases and drilling increased oil production so that the U.S. is now the top country -ever- in oil production and exports to countries around the world. Thanks to other areas of oil production in Alaska and the Gulf of Mexico, there is a steady supply of oil. Many of the withdrawn areas have poor oil resources, leading one expert to state that this order will have very little impact on oil production or gas prices.⁵

Unfortunately, Biden's efforts to increase industrial wind turbine projects in the Gulf of Mexico threaten many species of migrating birds and come with a caveat that at least three lease sales in 2025, 2027, and 2029 must be allowed for oil drilling in order to lease for industrial wind projects in the Gulf. Furthermore, under the terms of a 2022 climate law, at least 60 million acres of offshore oil and gas leases must be offered in any one-year period before any offshore wind leases can be offered.⁶

Wildlife is caught in the middle of energy development – whether it's renewable energy such as large wind turbine projects or offshore fossil fuel development. Our greed for energy fuels the threat of extinction. Research findings published in 2019 showed that we've already

lost 3 billion birds since 1970 – how many more birds have been lost in the past six years?

To end on a positive note, according to the White House, "President Biden conserved more than 670 million acres of US lands, waters, and ocean – more than any president in history."⁷ That is something to remember as we face the many environmental challenges over the next four years.

Laura Jackson, PSO Conservation Chair

Bedford County

1. <https://darrp.noaa.gov/oil-spills/exxon-valdez>
2. <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/c030a214acf14012bbe0656c6d0867b0>
3. "Pigeon Guillemot (breeding adult)" by Becky Matsubara is licensed under CC BY 2.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/?ref=openverse>.
4. https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/public_lands/energy/dirty_energy_development/oil_and_gas/gulf_oil_spill/a_deadly_toll.html#:~:text=As%20many%20as%2025%2C900%20marine%20mammals%20may%20have%20been%20harmed,headed%20whales%20and%20sperm%20whales.
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