



# RIVERTOWN NATURALIST

The Newsletter of the Hudson River Audubon Society, a Chapter of National Audubon

February - May 2024

## Shai Mitra: Enjoying Birds on Long Island

Wednesday, March 27 at 7 PM

We're delighted to have Shai Mitra in person to talk about the birds of Long Island. The region is both a year-round and spring/fall migration hot spot, plus it's an easy day's travel from us. Its prime position on the Atlantic Flyway attracts migrating birds; the varied habitats –ocean, sound, ponds, scrubland– provide year-round and seasonal birds with nesting sites and nourishment.

Shai will tell us about the many places to observe birds, and the specialties of each season. In spring, warblers and shorebirds are noteworthy visitors (and some will stay to nest). Summer is good for shorebirds as well as beachgoers. Fall brings spectacular migrations of hawks, as well as other species heading south.

Shai has studied birds in the US and internationally for over 40 years. He's currently an assistant professor of biology at the College of Staten Island, with research interests in avian ecology, evolution and conservation. He is a graduate of Cornell University (BA'89) and the University of Chicago (PhD'96). He edits NY State Ornithological Society's *Kingbird* magazine.

7 PM refreshments / 7:30 presentation

In person

Lenoir Preserve Nature Center

19 Dudley St, Yonkers 10701

## Don Riepe: Jamaica Bay, A Love Story

Don Riepe, speaks on Wednesday, April 17 at 7 PM

Don Riepe's relationship with Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge has gone on for over 40 years. He has worked with birds, plants, management issues, and wildlife of all sorts, both vertebrate and invertebrate. Jamaica Bay is part of the Gateway National Park System, located next to JFK International Airport. This preserve, surrounded by concrete, is a hot spot for non homo sapiens: over 340 species of birds, 108 species of finfish, 70 species of butterflies, 700 species of moths, have been found there, breeding, migrating through, overwintering, or accidentally wandering in.

Don's talk will be about the amazing vitality of Jamaica Bay which he has witnessed up close for decades. Urban wild life, raptor management, marsh restoration, terrapin

research, marine debris removal – he'll talk about all that, and show his terrific photos.

Don retired as a manager of Jamaica Bay in 2003. Now, as the American Littoral Society's Jamaica Bay Guardian, he leads walks there and organizes marsh restoration. Don has written many articles on natural history; his photographs have been widely published. He leads nature & bird tours both nationally and internationally.

7 PM refreshments / 7:30 presentation

In person

Lenoir Preserve Nature Center

19 Dudley St, Yonkers 10701



Don with young owls. Photo: Don Riepe



Black Skimmers at Breezy Point beach. Photo: Don Riepe

# 100th Bronx-Westchester Christmas Bird Count Results

**Saturday, December 23, 2023**

The Bronx-Westchester CBC celebrated its 100th count. The count's lineage goes back to the 1924 count started by the famed Bronx County Bird Club. The count found 121 species plus 4 count week and tallied 35,354 birds.

Highlights included two new species for the count. A MacGillivray's Warbler was found in the Riverdale section of the Bronx, and two Ash-throated Flycatchers, one in the southern section of Pelham Bay Park, one in Mount Vernon. The cumulative species for the count now stands at 236.

Other highlights were Cackling Goose, Surf and White-winged Scoters, 3 Red-necked Grebe, 2 Semipalmated Plover (4th count record), Iceland Gull, Clapper and Virginia Rails, 5 Great Egret in 4-5 locations, including Tibbetts Brook Park in Yonkers and a flyover in Hastings-on-Hudson, Red-headed Woodpecker in Marshlands Conservancy, 4 Chipping Sparrows, Baltimore Oriole at a Yonkers feeder, 7 Orange-crowned Warbler (also a new high count), Nashville Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, and Palm Warbler.

New high counts were 81 Wild Turkey (75 in 2007) and 76 Common Loon (65 in 2020).

We had 20-year highs for; Clapper Rail, Killdeer, Eastern Screech-Owl, Belted Kingfisher, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Golden-crowned Kinglet, American Pipit, House Finch, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. We had a 20-year low for Black-capped Chickadee.

Only one Canvasback, a male in the Hudson off the Beczak Environmental Education Center and one Northern Pintail were found.

Count week birds included Greater White-fronted Goose, Black Vulture, Clay-colored Sparrow, and Cape May Warbler (never seen on the count).

Misses include Snow Goose, Ruddy Turnstone, and Dunlin.

The Hudson Valley group, which includes Hastings, Dobbs Ferry and Ardsley, found 56 species, including a Great Egret, 4 Barred Owls and an Orange-crowned Warbler. The Yonkers group tallied 61 species, including the Baltimore Oriole, a Great Egret, 4 Green-winged Teal, 3 Killdeer and an Orange-crowned Warbler.

For a full breakdown of the numbers visit our web site

NEXT YEAR'S COUNT will be SUNDAY, December 22, 2024

*Michael Bochnik*

*Bronx-Westchester CBC Compiler*



MacGillivray's Warbler. Photo: Hazel Erikson/  
Audubon Photography Awards



Ash-throated Flycatcher, Central Park, New York.  
Photo: Maxine Roeder/Audubon Photography Awards

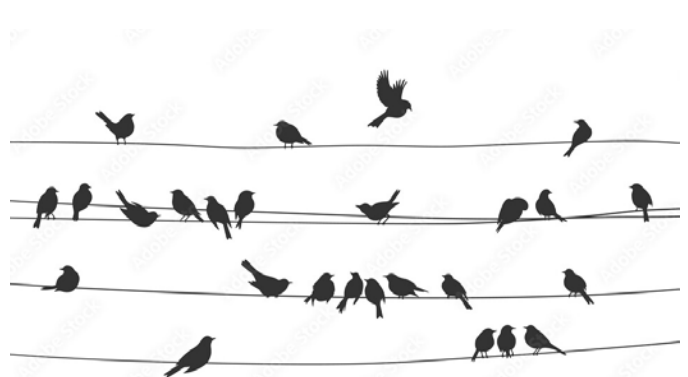
## Hudson River Audubon Society Turns Fifty

Help us celebrate! Save the date, Sunday, June 2. The festivities will start at noon, at the Lenoir Preserve Nature Center, 19 Dudley St., Yonkers.

We plan a casual lunch, foot long heroes (meat and vegetarian), drinks and a big birthday cake.

Michael Bochnik, our Field Trip leader, will give a talk on how to spot birds. He will lead a walk to our Butterfly and Hummingbird Garden, looking for birds and butterflies. Debi Dolan, our Conservation chair, will lead a walk around the preserve. You'll learn about its plants, birds and wildlife.

RSVPs to [info@hras.org](mailto:info@hras.org) will be required by May 22 - you may bring a check to the program that evening. Cost is \$15 per person, payable by check to Hudson River Audubon Society. Checks may be mailed to P O Box 616, Yonkers, NY 10703 or paid by credit card on [www.hras.org](http://www.hras.org).



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## Save the Dates

Everyone is welcome to join our field trips, no matter what your level of birding ability; field trips are free and open to members and non-members alike. Bring binoculars! Bring lunch and refreshments for all day trips. Dress for the weather.

For more information on field trips, call Michael Bochnik at 914-953-7409 or visit [www.hras.org](http://www.hras.org). Mike may also be con-

tacted by email at [bochnik@cs.com](mailto:bochnik@cs.com) for more information. If you have questions about the weather, cancellations will be posted on the website.

Bring binoculars. If you want a loaner pair email Michael, [bochnik@cs.com](mailto:bochnik@cs.com).

## Upcoming Field Trips and Nature Walks

**Saturday, March 16 at 9 AM**

**Bird the Long Island Ponds**

**Meet at Mill Pond: 2935 Merrick Rd., Wantagh, NY.**

We will look mostly for ducks. Good possibility for Red-heads, Ring-necks. Also, some land birds and definitely Black-Crowned Night Herons. Bring a scope if you have one. Joseph McManus, leader. Note that we will have a program, Wednesday, March 27, 7 PM, at Lenoir Preserve, on Long Island birds. See first page.

**Saturday April 28, 2024**

**Early Migration and More**

**Pelham Bay Park (southern zone) at 8 AM**

**Meet in the parking lot of the Aileen B Ryan Recreational Complex at Middletown Road in the Bronx.**

This has become a hotspot for many migratory species. We will look for early arrivals as well as raptors that work the old landfill. Jack Rothman, leader.

**Saturday, May 4, 2024**

**Central Park**

**Meet at West 77th Street entrance on Central Park West at 8 AM**

Early spring migration will bring in warblers such as Black-and-white, Northern Parula, Nashville and Black-throated Blue Warbler. Mostly level walking. Bird can be down low instead of high in a tree for some great viewing.

**Saturday, May 11, 2024**

**Rockefeller State Park Preserve**

**On Rt 117 in Pleasantville**

**Meet at 7AM. There is a parking fee, but free with an NYS Empire Pass.**

It's the height of spring migration. Most of the eastern warblers might be seen along with other migrants. Eastern bluebirds will be already busy nesting. Pileated Woodpecker is also a good possibility at the park.

**Sunday May 12, 2024**

**Mother's Day Warbler Walk**

**Lenoir Nature Preserve**

**19 Dudley Street, Yonkers**

**Meet at 9 AM at the Nature Center**

A Hudson River Audubon Tradition! A leisurely bird walk to celebrate Mother's Day. We will visit the butterfly garden and have refreshments back at the nature center afterwards.

**Sunday May 26, 2024**

**Shawangunk NWR, Ulster County**

**890 Hoagerburgh Road**

**Town Of Shawangunk, Wallkill, NY**

**Meet at 8 AM**

This is the old Galeville Airport now a grasslands refuge. Meadowlarks, Bobolinks, Grasshopper and Savannah Sparrows and more as we explore the refuge for grassland species. No shade, bring water.

## Members Night Wednesday, June 26

We invite all our members to show their best bird and nature photographs of 2023-24. Whether you've taken backyard or travel photos, show us your best birds, animals, plants and landscapes.

Tell us why these photos appealed to you and where you took them. We ask you to limit your presentation to 5 minutes, so all will have a chance to talk and we won't be going home at midnight.

Send 5 to 10 images by June 23 to Michael Bochnik, [bochnik@cs.com](mailto:bochnik@cs.com). We prefer you organize your photos in PowerPoint, but if that's not possible, send jpgs. If your files are too large to email, get in touch with us at [info@hras.org](mailto:info@hras.org) by June 10. We'll figure something out, we may ask you to mail a thumb drive.

Refreshments will be served at 7 PM; program begins at 7:30 PM.



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## Recovering from the Winter Blues

Volunteer in our Butterfly and Hummingbird Garden. There's nothing like the smell of warming earth in a garden to reaffirm the joy we feel, of plants waking up from dormancy. No matter what your level of skill or strength, we can find a way for you to help. Willingness is everything; you will work with our skilled gardeners.

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Email James Judy [jjjudy54@gmail.com](mailto:jjjudy54@gmail.com), our Garden Chair. He will let you know about organized volunteer days. Sign up for our e-newsletter on [www.hras.org](http://www.hras.org). Garden volunteer days will be sent to you via email. They will also be posted on [www.hras.org](http://www.hras.org).



Monarch butterfly perched on Echinacea flower. Photo: Natalia Jones on Unsplash.

### Save the Date!

## Time and Time Again: Calendars Now and Then

Wednesday, May 22 at 7 PM  
Lenoir Preserve Nature Center  
19 Dudley St, Yonkers

Alberto Guzman, Professor Emeritus  
City College of New York

If you think that it's 2024, and most of you do, thank Pope Gregory XIII. In 1582, he reformed the Julian calendar (thanks, Julius Cesar) so the months would stay in the right season, no December in summer. It's the most widely used calendar, even if not the only one around. Muslims, Jews, Chinese, the Eastern Orthodox Church all have different calendars. The calendar has had a long and complicated history. Professor Guzman, a mathematician and an astronomer, will talk about how we have come to think of this year as 2024.

Refreshments at 7 PM, talk at 7:30 PM

Pope Gregory XIII, 16th century



# A Message from the National Audubon Society

Audubon achieved important victories to help protect both birds and people throughout 2023. These accomplishments come from the hard work and dedication of our members, chapters, volunteers, and staff. Thank you so much for all you do for birds and the world we share.

This past year, Audubon launched the Flight Plan, its new five-year plan to protect birds and the places they need across the hemisphere, or as we say, “bend the bird curve.” Audubon pushed for stronger climate action at COP28 and co-sponsored Climate Week NYC, helped secure more water for birds and

people across western landscapes, and followed individual birds as they made their epic annual journeys to better understand what they need along the way.

Audubon worked on the ground to protect and restore vital habitats and natural spaces in state and national legislatures, secured important Lights Out wins in North Carolina and beyond, and celebrated a century of conservation work in Texas and New York. The list of inspired conservation efforts goes on and on.

*Source: National Audubon Society*

## HRAS Bird-a-Thon

**Saturday, May 18, 2024**

Teams set out to see as many bird species as possible to raise money for the chapter (rain date May 19). So far, two teams have been organized, the returning favorite, the Raven-Loonatics, and the Bird Nerds. New teams most welcome, so are individual birders – contact Michael Bochnik, [bochnikm@cs.com](mailto:bochnikm@cs.com)

Hudson River Audubon’s Bird-a-Thon will be held Saturday, May 18th (rain date May 19th) to raise money for the chapter. Teams will cover Westchester County to find as many bird species as possible. We should see over 100 species. Your contribution will support all our activities and programs.

You can help by making a pledge today. A Bird-a-Thon is like a walk-a-thon, bike-a-thon or any other “thon” in that we ask people to pledge X amount of money per lap, mile, or as in our case, bird species seen, within a 24-hour period. The combined list for the teams should be between 90 to 125 species. Pledges can be given for a flat rate such as \$25.00 or you can pledge per species such as 25 cents/bird. If we see 120 species your pledge will come to \$30.00. We will send out reminders after the Bird-a-Thon on how much you pledged. Thank you for your generous support! Please make checks out to Hudson River Audubon Society. You can also contribute at [www.hras.org](http://www.hras.org) with a credit card.

### HUDSON RIVER AUDUBON BIRD-A-THON PLEDGE CARD

- I am happy to pledge \$ \_\_\_\_\_ per species in support of your bird-a-thon.
- I prefer to pledge the enclosed gift of \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- I will give you an additional \$ \_\_\_\_\_ if the \_\_\_\_\_ team spots a \_\_\_\_\_ (bird species).

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone or email (optional) \_\_\_\_\_

Send to:

**Hudson River Audubon Society**

**P.O. BOX 616**

**Yonkers, New York 10703**

Make Donations Payable to HUDSON RIVER AUDUBON SOCIETY.

If you would like to form your own team to raise money, or possible join another team, contact Michael Bochnik at [bochnikm@cs.com](mailto:bochnikm@cs.com)

## Proposed Construction of a Movie and TV Production Facility in Hastings-On-Hudson

**The film studio has been an item that has been under discussion.**

As the new year began, efforts were accelerating to make the southwestern section of Westchester a movie and TV studio megaplex. Recent activity included the sale of the property where a new studio campus is planned in Yonkers and a series of meetings on a proposed \$100 million studio campus in Hastings-on-Hudson.

Just over the border with Hastings-on-Hudson and west of North Broadway is the site of a planned movie and TV production facility. Electric Owl Studios, based in Atlanta, has proposed constructing a \$100 million movie and TV production facility with six soundstages on 20 acres of the Graham Windham Schools 24-acre campus at 1 S. Broadway. Graham Windham would retain four acres to be used for its continuing daytime programs. Electric Owl has reached out to the community

to get the input of residents, community groups and village departments such as fire and police.

Electric Owl Studios was co-founded by Michael Hahn and Dan Rosenfelt, both of whom are experienced in developing and operating movie and TV production facilities.

One of the major positives Hahn emphasized was that the entire project would be designed to be environmentally friendly to the extent of being the greenest production studio in the world. He pointed out that the Electric Owl studio campus currently being built in Atlanta has numerous green and energy-saving features.

He said that the project would generate about \$3 million a year in local taxes for Hastings-on-Hudson while not adding to the financial burden of the local school system. He added that Electric Owl is not seeking any tax breaks or incentives.

### NATURE WALKS 2024

**Sunday, March 10 at 9:30 AM  
Lenoir Preserve Nature Center  
19 Dudley St., Yonkers**

Winter isn't over until the Vernal Equinox, which is on March 19, at 11:06 PM. Nature doesn't observe so precise a calendar. There are signs of spring to be noted everywhere. The humble skunk cabbage produces its own heat to help its growth. You might see a small circle of melted snow around one of its sprouts.

Debbi Dolan, [turlan@optonline.net](mailto:turlan@optonline.net), our Conservation Chair, will lead a walk on Sunday, March 10, looking for plants and animals and birds beginning to welcome spring.

[Register with Debbi](#); she will let you know if walk needs to be cancelled because of bad weather.



## The Birds of Shakespeare

**On Zoom  
Tuesday, April 23rd at 7 PM**

Maine-based artist Missy Dunaway is creating a series of paintings to catalog all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's plays and poems, some 65 in all. She is roughly one-third of the way towards her goal.

Birds afforded Shakespeare a rich metaphorical palette. Dunaway's beautiful, ingenious paintings incorporate the birds, as well as their habitats and the allusions made when Shakespeare mentioned them in his works.

Missy Dunaway is a 2010 graduate of Carnegie Mellon University. Among her many awards have been a Folger Institute Fellowship which supported, in part, her Shakespeare project, and a Fulbright Fellowship. Her bird paintings can be viewed at [www.birdsofshakespeare.com](http://www.birdsofshakespeare.com).

April 23rd is Shakespeare's birthday. We're all celebrating. Bronx River Sound Shore Audubon organized this program, with support from Bedford, Central, Hudson River and Saw Mill River Audubon Societies.

Register for Zoom at [www.brssaudubon.org/programs](http://www.brssaudubon.org/programs)



## Science Watch - Our Long, Lousy Relationship

“Lice are part of our lives and history.” — M. Ascunce

Humans and lice go way back—even before we were human. Lice have been sucking primate blood for 25 million years and we are a veritable lice ecosystem with three kinds that exclusively call us home.

Our most loyal companion, the human louse, *Pediculus humanus*, likes us so much it has branched into two sub-species, *Pediculus humanus capitus*, the head louse, and *Pediculus humanus corporis*, the body louse. The former clamps onto our hair shafts, while the latter makes do by clinging to our clothing. Both are obligate parasites that live on our blood. The third species we host, the crab louse (*Phthirus pubis*), grips our thicker pubic hairs. It diverged about three million years ago from a related louse that lives on gorillas and we can speculate on how it got to us.

The body louse diverged from the head louse over 100,000 years ago when we gave it a safe haven by wearing clothes. Although closely related, the two parasites don’t interbreed even where their habitats overlap (think neckline), but can be forced to do so in the lab. DNA sequencing shows that the nearest relative of *P. humanus* is *P. schaeffi*, which lives on our closest relative, chimps, and the two louse species diverged when we did from chimps about 5.6 million years ago.

Sequencing lice genomes adds to the insights of our evolutionary history and migration patterns gained from fossils. For example, in 2008 Dr. David Reed,

Human pubic (crab) louse.

Credit: PHIL, DPDx, CDC



Human head louse and egg (nit) attached to a hair shaft. Credit: Josef Rieschig



an entomologist at the University of Florida, Gainesville, FL, and his colleagues, compared mitochondrial DNA, inherited only from females, of human head lice from around the world. The DNA samples fell into two groups that diverged about a million years ago when two early *Homo* species in Africa split. One lice lineage stayed with us, but when we left Africa much later, we became infested with the other from direct contact with a now extinct group of humans in the New World, probably Neanderthals.

Now a study in the November 8, 2023 issue of *PLOS One* led by Dr. Reed and Dr. Mary Ascunce, presents sequencing data of stretches of nuclear DNA from 274 head lice collected from people in 25 places around the world. The data reveal two distinct genetic clusters, suggesting human head lice arrived in the Americas twice. One cluster linked Asia, Africa and Central America with a tight linkage between Honduras and Mongolia. The second linked samples from Europe and North America.

“These lice are mirroring the colonization of the Americas, the two migration waves,” says Dr. Ascunce. The first cluster represents the earliest migrants to the New World from Africa through Asia about 23,000 years ago and sup-

ports the idea that they entered from Siberia. The second cluster denotes the arrival of modern European colonists. They brought their lice which spread to the first peoples already infested with their own.

Sequencing of lice nuclear DNA is in its infancy and already an enigma has arisen. The two genetic clusters show less hybridization between them than those from other regions. It could simply be that lice from the two clusters don’t readily interbreed.

Fossil evidence shows that Neanderthals left Africa about 600,000 years ago, much earlier than modern humans did, and that we interbred in Europe about 50,000 years ago, something Dr. Ascunce wants to examine in more detail. She had hoped the study might shed more light on Neanderthal liaisons by finding DNA derived from Neanderthal head lice, but they were missing from this study.

“New ongoing studies are being done using whole genome sequences from human lice, so stay tuned for more exciting research on that,” she said. “The team will look for any type of close contact from sharing sleeping sites to fights to interbreeding.”

— Saul Scheinbach



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*Sappy Spring!*

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