

## A HISTORY OF BIRDING FOR CONSERVATION IN DELAWARE

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*Abstract.* Though often considered to be birdwatching clubs, ornithological societies and their members have contributed to bird conservation through avian research, education, and advocacy and have raised funds and awareness for protection of birds and their habitats. The Delmarva Ornithological Society (DOS), founded in 1963, has successfully promoted bird conservation through awareness, citizen science, advocacy, and direct action. Examples include bird surveys such as Christmas bird counts and spring censuses and a youth birding program. In 2002, DOS volunteers coordinated a year-long avian survey of the Russell Peterson Refuge, and those hours were a significant match that resulted in an \$800,000 North American Wetlands Conservation Act grant for the restoration of marsh habitat. In 2005 DOS began a two-year project to establish the number of Delaware breeding American Kestrels (*Falco sparverius*) and develop strategies for restoration. The study had an interactive website that overlaid sightings with land use. In cooperation with The Conservation Fund, DOS sponsored a Bird-A-Thon and purchased land that was prime horseshoe crab (*Limulus polyphemus*) and shorebird habitat. Bird-A-Thon money was also used to co-host a new hawk watch in Delaware. The Delaware birding trail, a joint effort of DOS, Delaware Audubon, and Delaware Fish and Wildlife was completed in 2007. DOS efforts have strengthened coalitions in Delaware and have brought money and results to avian conservation. The knowledge and passion of local volunteer birders, communicated through DOS meetings and the internet has invigorated avian conservation activities.

*Key Words:* conservation, Delaware, Delmarva Ornithological Society, history.

### A HISTORY OF BIRDING FOR CONSERVATION IN DELAWARE

*Resumen.* Aunque se consideren clubes de aves, las sociedades de ornitología y sus miembros han contribuido a la conservación de pájaros por medio de las investigaciones, la educación y la defensa de aves, y han reunido fondos y fomentado conciencia para la protección de los pájaros y su hábitat. La Sociedad de Ornitología de Delmarva (Delmarva Ornithological Society - D.O.S.), fundada en 1963, ha promovido la conservación de aves por medio de fomentar conciencia, ciencia de ciudadanos, defensa y acción directa. Ejemplos incluyen estudios de pájaros, tales como el conteo navideño de pájaros, el censo de primavera y programas educativos para jóvenes. En 2002, voluntarios de la D.O.S. coordinaron una evaluación de aves del Refugio Russell Peterson que duró un año, y esas horas resultaron en una concesión de \$800,000 bajo el Acta de los Pantanos Norteamericanos (North American Wetlands Act) para la restauración de la hábitat pantanosa. En 2005, la D.O.S. empezó un proyecto de dos años para establecer la cantidad en Delaware de cernícalos americanos (American Kestrels - *Falco sparverius*) criadores y para desarrollar estrategias de su restauración. El estudio tenía una página en el internet que combinaba observaciones y uso de tierras. En cooperación con el Fondo de Conservación (Conservation Fund) la D.O.S. patrocinó un "Birdathon" y compró terrenos que eran hábitat de cangrejos horseshoe (*Limulus polyphemus*) y pájaros playeros. El dinero coleccionado en el "Birdathon" también fue usado para co-patrocinar una nueva vigilancia de gaviñales en Delaware. El sendero de observación de aves de Delaware, un esfuerzo colectivo entre D.O.S., Audubon Delaware (Delaware Audubon) y Peces y Fauna Delaware (Delaware Fish and Wildlife), fue completado en 2007. Las obras de la D.O.S. han reforzado coaliciones en Delaware y han contribuido a la conservación de aves. El conocimiento y la pasión de aficionados locales de pájaros, transmitidos en reuniones de la D.O.S. y por el internet han vigorizado actividades de conservación de aves.

### INTRODUCTION

Birds and their habitats have been threatened since the first settlements in North America, and conservation movements since the late 1800s

have recognized this and worked to protect birds. Starting with the recognition that decorative women's hats decimated egret populations and that unregulated hunting and harassment caused the extinction of the passenger pigeon,

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concerned citizens and a few politicians worked to improve conditions for bird populations. President Theodore Roosevelt is often recognized as the first environmentally friendly president. During his tenure from 1901–1909, he protected approximately 230 million acres, including 51 Federal Bird Reservations, the first one being Pelican Island in Florida where plume hunters had decimated egret populations.

At a much more local level, ornithological societies and bird clubs were springing up at the dawn of the twentieth century. The Delaware Valley Ornithological Club (DVOC) was founded in 1890 and by 1920 there were 22 bird clubs in the United States, ranging from Philadelphia to Portland to Pasadena. Many of the first Audubon Societies were created to combat the excesses of commercial hunting (Wells 2007). As the twentieth century expanded, the number of bird clubs grew, and though many members used clubs as a way to enjoy shared birding experiences, conservation was often a recognized purpose. In the founding volume of the Maryland Ornithological Society Bulletin in April 1945 there is a statement that reads, "There is today in the United States a very wide interest in the conservation of wild birds. This is manifested in the great interest which the public shows in proposed legislative enactments for bird protection..." (N.L.K. 1945).

Today, ornithological societies throughout the country, sometime known simply as bird clubs, are as varied as their members, and they have no nationally defined role. Ornithological societies can be vitally important because federal and state agencies often lack sufficient resources for specific bird conservation projects. Ornithological societies can raise funds from the private sector and have flexibility in programming bird focused education and outreach. In addition, members of ornithological societies can advocate where public agencies often must remain politically neutral. Their members are often passionate, knowledgeable, and committed, and by providing large numbers of volunteers working large numbers of hours, they contribute to national and local bird focused research and their hours can sometimes be leveraged for public and private funds. In few other fields have non-paid experts contributed as much.

#### CASE STUDY: THE DELMARVA ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The Delmarva Ornithological Society (DOS), founded in 1963, is a volunteer membership organization whose mission includes "the conservation of birds and their environment." It

was founded during a time of increased birding in the state, largely by a group of DuPont company scientists who birded on weekends, and the membership today is approximately 250 people. DOS is an ornithological society that has successfully incorporated conservation into not only its historic mission, but into its yearly activities. Conservation in DOS has four aspects: awareness, citizen science, advocacy, and direct action. Each of these aspects depends on members to organize, direct, and manage.

#### FOUR ASPECTS OF CONSERVATION

##### *Awareness*

Conservation begins with awareness through field trips, which constitute the backbone of DOS. Birding can be a window into the natural world—as people learn to appreciate birds, they also learn about the lands that the birds inhabit. The organization has both novice and experienced birders, and field trips often go to wild places in the state—some of which are protected and some are not. In 2008, a youth birding program called Delaware Dunlins was formed to initiate and encourage young birders, and by December, over fifty children aged five to sixteen were enrolled. As people of all ages become aware of birds and attuned to their needs, they also become aware of the need to conserve and protect their habitats.

##### *Citizen Science*

Citizen science has always been part of the DOS mission. The first formal survey this author found in Delaware was the Hoopes Reservoir Bird Census Survey in 1943, conducted before DOS was formed. A second Hoopes Census in 1964 was conducted as one of the first surveys of the newly formed society. Delaware birders have conducted Audubon Christmas Bird Counts regularly since 1939, and the first one in the state was in 1907. The Spring Roundup, a statewide census during the height of spring migration, has been conducted since the founding of DOS in 1963.

DOS was a sponsoring organization of the first Breeding Bird Atlas (BBA), that was conducted from 1982 to 1987 and was a major volunteer effort instituting a formal protocol throughout the state. That BBA resulted in *Birds of Delaware* (Hess et al. 2000), the ultimate reference work for birds in the state. Delaware's second BBA will go from 2008 to 2013. DOS will be a primary partner and many volunteers will be DOS members.

From 1999 to 2000, DOS coordinated an avian survey at the Russell Peterson Refuge, located in the city of Wilmington along the Christina River. The volunteer hours became a significant match for the \$1.6 million restoration of the tidal freshwater marsh. Today the site boasts a operating nature center with programs conducted by the Delaware Nature Society. DOS and its members have conducted many, varied bird surveys for the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife, Delaware Nature Society, and private non-governmental organizations and landowners over the years. Much of this data has been entered into Cornell Lab's eBird database, and copies of all of the surveys are held at the Delaware Museum of Natural History.

The Delaware Shorebird Project is another citizen science project that many DOS volunteers have been involved with. This project started internationally and still employs members of the British Trust for Ornithology. Project partner Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife cannonets and bands shorebirds as part of the monitoring and study of the populations of Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*) and other shorebirds along the Delaware Bay. DOS volunteers measure and band birds, becoming part of the international team of scientists. Skilled birder volunteers are also needed to "re-sight" the birds along the Delaware Bay, finding banded and flagged birds and recording the flag information. Volunteers come from around the world and around the nation to help with this project.

In 2005, DOS embarked on an independent multi-year study of the American kestrel (*Falco sparverius*) which, according to Audubon Christmas Bird Count data from Delaware and the region, shows a steady decrease since the mid-1980s (National Audubon Society 2002). The goal was to discover how many kestrels were currently breeding in the state and to develop strategies for their conservation and restoration. In 2007, volunteer surveyors combed the state looking for breeding kestrels throughout the 'safe dates', days where breeding was assumed since that species was not migrating. Volunteers entered sighting data on an interactive page on our website, and the kestrel sightings were overlaid with land use data to determine which land use was the most successful for breeding. In the 2007 breeding season, 53 survey volunteers covered 14 218 km and spent nearly 600 hours in the field. Despite this effort, volunteers recorded only 33 sightings, several probable families, and only two confirmed nests. In contrast, the first BBA (1982–1987) estimated 200–500 pairs breeding in the state.

The Ornithologist is the journal of the Society, and it has published research by members since the first issue in the year of DOS's founding. Through this publication, members have contributed ornithological observations and research to the knowledge of birds in the state. Included are Spring Round-up data, seasonal reports, state records, and authored papers.

#### *Advocacy*

Advocacy has been a gradual, but inevitable, development. DOS is not overtly political, but members have testified for horseshoe crab harvesting limits, written letters, and attended many public hearings for land use changes affecting bird habitats. Horseshoe crab harvest limits are now in place, due in part to DOS testimony. Members have been on the State Wildlife Action Planning Committee and have been involved with the Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge's Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Our scientific approach and authentic knowledge of birds gives us credibility.

#### *Direct Action*

Direct action for conservation translates into member designed specific projects. Since 1993, under the direction of the research chair, DOS has worked to place and repair Osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*) platforms throughout the Delaware River estuary and inland bays. At last count, members of the research committee have built and installed over 70 platforms, and they have become a source of technical advice for researchers, governmental agencies, and landowners dealing with osprey platform issues. DOS members have also installed and monitored bluebird (*Sialia* spp.) houses, working with groups such as the Delaware Nature Society and the Boy Scouts of America.

Port Mahon Road, famous throughout Delaware and the region as a shorebird staging area, is the sight of our Adopt-A-Highway responsibility. For over a decade DOS volunteers have annually removed a variety of trash that stretched the imagination. As part of our international commitment, DOS members collected and donated 67 pairs of binoculars from members which were delivered to the American Birding Association for their Birders' Exchange program.

A few projects involved partnerships with other organizations that have an interest in birds. The Delaware Birding Trail was a joint project of DOS, Delaware Audubon, and the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife. DOS provided guidance, raised funds for the publication, and DOS members wrote the script and provided

the photographs. It premiered in December 2007 and has been well received by local and out-of-state birders and non-birders. Partnering with The Conservation Fund, DOS initiated a Bird-A-Thon in 2007 to purchase land for shorebird and horseshoe crab habitats. The first year goal was \$15 000, and participants succeeded in raising \$28 000. DOS helped purchase seven acres of prime habitat, and with the remainder underwrote a new hawk watch at the Delaware Nature Society's Ashland Nature Center. The 2008 goal was \$40 000 to contribute to the purchase of 60 acres of prime habitat and again underwrite the Ashland hawk watch, and it was raised from both corporate and volunteer funds.

## DISCUSSION

DOS has accomplished all of its activities as a totally volunteer organization. Not only do the members participate in conservation activities, they conceive and design them as well. A conservation committee was formed in 1995, and in the past four years has been exceedingly successful at raising money through the Bird-A-Thon for hands on activities and advocacy. However, the conservation ethic is broader than the committee and has influenced many DOS activities. Many members are highly skilled, knowledgeable, enthusiastic, dedicated and motivated birders who care deeply about the future of birds and their habitats. Their passion is enhanced by the shared experiences of being with other like-minded birders.

Delaware is small enough that most birders know each other, and contacts and communications are enhanced through meeting in the field while birding, monthly meetings, and the *FLYER*, our newsletter. In addition, modern means of communication such as our website and DE-birds, the local birding listserv, are now considered indispensable. Through the internet, we are able to communicate not only bird reports but all club activities, including ones that are conservation oriented. In addition, this communication has fostered an online community that has a social component and has invigorated the club. DOS conservation goals have been realized not only by the passion, knowledge, and commitment of its members, but also the ability to communicate this statewide.

Many activities would not be successful if DOS had not worked with other organizations. It partnered with The Conservation Fund to purchase land for shorebird habitat. It partnered with Delaware Fish and Wildlife and Delaware Audubon to garner matching funds for land restoration and the birding trail. It partnered with the Delaware Nature Society to create

the Ashland hawk watch. Not only do birders know each other, most avian conservation minded people in Delaware know each other. DOS members know which people and which agencies to call for guidance, for partnerships, and for both financial and manpower help.

## CONCLUSION

DOS has recognized that conservation takes many forms: awareness, citizen science, advocacy, and direct action, and a weaving of all of these threads. To quote Howard Brokaw, a DOS Honorary Member who was also the Chairman of the American Bird Conservancy for eight years, "We are beyond the point where interested people need to be awakened. Now people are saying, 'What can we do? What action can we take to save bird habitat?' Birds are one of the strongest ways to improve conservation efforts." (Personal communication)

In today's world, birding and conservation go hand in hand, and we have a responsibility to recognize local resources and coordinate all interested parties to a common conservation purpose. We also have a responsibility to train the youth of today who will be the leaders of tomorrow. Birders in Delaware and around the world realize that the future of birds is in our hands.

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