

Habitat works

The newsletter about designing, restoring and managing wildlife habitat.
Spring 2021



Osprey rescue



Habitat Works is published by Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to designing, restoring and managing wildlife habitat and establishing a more sustainable agriculture through direct action, education and research in partnership with public and private landowners. We welcome your comments and contributions.

The Ospreys

Story and photos courtesy of Brian Hope.

The Moorings is a community on the Magothy River near Annapolis, Maryland.

PART 1—This (2020) may be the most successful year for the Ospreys at The Moorings since CWH erected a nest pole some years ago. The Ospreys built a very strong nest and produced three babies. The babies are growing fast, and if all goes well they should be starting to fly by the end of July. They are already about half the size of the adults.

Ospreys eat only fish, and if you are lucky you will see one of the adults dive into the river and come up with a fish for the family. Once the babies start to fly, they will have to learn how to fish.

Ospreys migrate in fall, all the way to South America, some as far as southern Brazil. They usually travel down the East Coast to Florida, then across to Cuba, then to South America. Some travel as much as 3,500 miles! The female usually migrates in August, leaving the male to teach the babies how to fish. By mid-September, all the birds should be on their way south. The adults do not travel south together and do not meet again until the following spring, when they return to this area. Once the babies can fly and fish efficiently, they head south. They will not return next year but will stay in South America until they are 16 months old. Assuming they survive their migration, they will probably return to the area where they were born. Ospreys can live as long as 20 years. It is estimated that there are some 10,000 Ospreys in the Chesapeake Bay area.

PART 2 *It is now mid-July*, and the three Osprey chicks have grown to about three-quarters of the size of their parents. The nest is getting crowded, and we rarely see both parents in the nest with the chicks. All three chicks are flapping their wings vigorously and have hovered briefly above the nest. One of them flew

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down to the rocks below the nest and easily flew back up. For the Ospreys, learning to fly is known as fledging. All three will soon be fledglings.

PART 3 *Two of the three Osprey chicks began flying on this date, July 16.*

They are now fledglings. Their mother is still feeding them, since they have not yet been taught to fish. The third chick, who appears to be male—since his breast feathers are mostly white, unlike the females, whose breast feathers are largely a dark brown—began flying on the 20th.

The nest is occasionally empty now, though there is often one fledgling there, and sometimes two or three, resting from flying efforts or feeding on fish delivered by one of the parents. You can often see one of the parents sitting on the channel daymark about 100 yards to the east of the nest.

The fledglings will continue to practice their flying skills and will soon learn to fish for themselves.

PART 4 *As of this date, August 7,* all three fledglings are practicing their flying and strengthening their wings for their upcoming migratory flights to Central and South America. They are also learning to fish. Expert Ospreys, we are told, catch a fish about once in every four tries, so these young fledglings have quite a way to go to reach that level of skill.

The fledglings are now quite large, almost as big as their parents, though their coloring is somewhat different from the adults'. The feathers on their backs are speckled with white, while the adults have uniformly brown feathers on their backs.

On August 8, an Osprey got caught in the wires a homeowner placed on the railings of their upper deck to prevent Ospreys from landing there. People on the beach noticed it was struggling and contacted the owners in Denver. They got a key, and I was able to extricate the bird.

The parents will probably depart on their migratory journeys sometime later this month, and the young birds will most likely hang around until early or mid-September.

At this point, the nest is looking rather ragged. Much of the material carefully assembled by the adults has fallen out.





This photo was taken on July 16, 2020. It shows the first fledgling, a female (note the dark feathers on her breast), having landed on top of the chimney at 542 Moorings Circle.

Next spring, the platform will have a brand-new nest, probably built by the same pair who built this year's nest. The young birds are very busy, and it is relatively rare to see all three of them in the nest at one time.

PART 5 *It is now the end of August.* The two adult Ospreys are still around, though we don't often see them together. The three fledglings have not been in evidence in a couple weeks. Since the nest is almost completely demolished at this point, there is little space for the large birds to stay there, so the fledglings may be roosting elsewhere. It is also possible that they have not survived, but they were big, sturdy birds and we do see Ospreys flying around, so if the young birds have learned to fish, they are probably resting elsewhere. We will probably never know.

The time for migration is fast approaching. One day soon, perhaps as late as mid-September, the birds will be gone from the Magothy and on their way to their winter homes. If they survive the long trip both ways, we should see them next March. ●

GO GREEN!

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Help us save trees and use more of our funds to benefit wildlife and the Chesapeake Bay by having your copy of *Habitat Works*

delivered via email. Simply send an email to info@cheswildlife.org with "Newsletter by email" in the subject line, and be sure to include your name and address in the message so we can check it against our mailing list. Upon receipt of your email, we'll send a reply to confirm your request for an electronic version of the newsletter.

Nesting Structures for Centreville

In March of this year, CWH partnered with the Centreville Parks Advisory Board in Centreville, MD, to install three Bluebird houses along the town's Millstream Trail at Millstream Park, as well as four Wood Duck nesting boxes in the Mill Stream Branch that runs alongside the trail. CWH also worked with the Parks Advisory Board in 2019 to replace a damaged osprey nesting platform and install a new platform near the Centreville Wharf.



Top: Audreanna Hudgens and 3 ½-year-old Jackson Curry tamp down the soil around a CWH-installed Bluebird house in Centreville's Millstream Park. Bottom: CWH Habitat Technician Phil Boyd prepares to install a Wood Duck nesting box at Millstream Park. Right: A new nesting box will provide an artificial cavity for Wood Ducks.

Managing Nesting Boxes

CWH has overseen an active nesting structure program for more than 35 years. By keeping abreast of research on the best designs and placement for our different structures and predator guards, we have been able to evolve the program to better serve our native wildlife. Regular maintenance and monitoring are critical to the well-being of native birds that use these nesting structures.

Increased development and other habitat changes have led to soaring populations of English House Sparrow and European Starling. Unlike many native birds, these two species can thrive in highly populated areas. They compete aggressively with native cavity nesters in that they kill both adult birds and the young that they trap in the structures. ●



There are a few actions you can take to help the native birds that you want to use nesting boxes:

- Place boxes only in appropriate habitat.
- Do not place boxes in highly developed or disturbed areas.
- Avoid placing boxes in areas that receive a great deal of pesticide application.
- Maintain and monitor boxes regularly.
- Bluebird boxes and Martin housing should be checked weekly during the nesting season.
- Wood Duck boxes should be checked yearly.
- Nesting structures should be installed on a post with a predator guard.

Nesting structures that are not maintained properly may cause more harm than good to the native bird population. Keeping your structures free of non-native birds and in good working order will help you care for the native birds that rely on your help to thrive.

For more information about appropriate habitat and monitoring, or for assistance in managing your boxes, contact CWH at 410-822-5100 or info@cheswildlife.org.

HUMMINGBIRD HACKS



By Andi Pupke, Education & Outreach Director

Photo by Donna Tolbert-Anderson

As the weather warms and we look forward to spring and summertime activities, most of us eagerly anticipate the return of our backyard hummingbirds. Of the many things you can do to invite them to your yard for the season, feeding nectar is a fairly easy one.

The recipe for hummingbird nectar: combine 1 part refined white sugar with 4 parts water. It is best to boil the water for 1–2 minutes, remove from heat and then stir in the sugar until it dissolves completely. Never use honey or artificial sweeteners.

It is crucial that you do not add red dye or use premade nectar. Both are harmful, and premade nectar contains preservatives. It is particularly important to change the feeders every other day and to thoroughly clean them to prevent harmful mold growth. I keep extra nectar feeders so I can hang a new filled feeder at the same time I take down the old one to be emptied and cleaned.

To clean your feeder, use a solution of one part white vinegar and four parts water. Use a bottle brush when needed, and rinse with water at least three times before allowing to dry.

Hang several feeders around your home. To prevent one hummingbird from dominating all the feeders, hang them far enough apart that the birds cannot see each other.

Make sure you hang at least one where you can easily watch them. If possible, hang feeders in the shade to prevent nectar spoilage.

To complement the nectar feeders, add plants to your yard that will provide ample nectar and extra color. Some hummingbird favorites are Beebalm (*Monarda* sp.), Coral Honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervirens*), Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*) and Sages (*Salvia* sp.). Hummingbirds will visit many flowering plants, so don't limit your options.

These beautiful little birds also like to nest in deciduous shrubs that are very twiggy, so adding shrub islands to your yard may increase your chances of having a hummingbird nest near your home. ●

WINTER COMPANY



Education & Outreach Director Andi Pupke reflects on her encounters with a Hermit Thrush at her home this past winter. We hope that Andi's story will help you identify this social little bird when the season rolls around again.



This winter, I have been keeping company with a Hermit Thrush. I cannot say we are friends, because this pale brown bird often seems annoyed with me. The relationship started in late fall on one of my morning trips to the barn to collect seed to fill the birdfeeders. I noticed a bird following me along our driveway from the house toward the barn, hopping from limb to limb about five feet off the ground. I thought it was a sparrow to start, but as we approached the barn I got a better look at it.

It was clearly a Hermit Thrush, with a mostly pale brown body and a creamy speckled chest and throat.

This thrush was staying close enough to me that I could see its reddish brown tail and wings. As it hopped about on the ground and low limbs, its tail constantly flicked in high alert.

I tossed down some dried mealworms for the thrush, and the bird quickly

hopped over and started feeding. Every morning since then, I am met by the Thrush shortly after stepping out of the house, and it follows me to the barn to collect the mealworms for its breakfast. It has allowed me to get close enough to take photos and seems to scold me if I am late.

Many other birds have now taken advantage of the morning mealworm ritual. The Hermit Thrush is often joined by White-Throated Sparrows, Titmice, Chickadees, and the ever-vocal Red-Bellied Woodpecker. All enjoy the easy meal and compete with one another for the food.

As the only thrush found in Maryland during the winter months, the Hermit Thrush's understated beauty can really shine on bleak winter days. Its habitat consists of open woodlands of conifers or mixed woodlands and thickets, but it does not nest on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, preferring to move farther north to do so. An unassuming bird that lurks in the understory of the northern forest during the breeding

season, the Hermit Thrush will nest on the ground or in low vegetation, seeking open spots below small conifer trees or shrubs. It can also be found nesting in spots near berry or fern thickets, pasture edges and forest roads. A variety of birds use thickets and low vegetation for nesting and raising their young, but these areas are also browsed heavily by deer, which can remove important habitat from the landscape and harm the Thrush's breeding success.

I will miss the Hermit Thrush when it leaves in spring but will look forward to the arrival of its cousin the Wood Thrush and its beautiful flute-like "ee-oh-lay" song during the spring.

During this long winter, I have enjoyed birdwatching even more than normal and have perhaps made a new friend. ●



Ask Andi

By Andi Pupke, Education & Outreach Director

I saw this Hawk in my driveway. How can I tell if it is a Sharp-Shinned or a Cooper's Hawk?

The differences between a Cooper's and a Sharp-Shinned Hawk are subtle, but the shape and size can help with identification. Remember, these two birds look enough alike that it is excusable not to have a definitive ID.

They are both Accipiters, with a long tail and short, rounded wings that are adapted for hunting among trees. They hunt for songbirds, oftentimes near bird feeders, and small mammals.

The photo you sent in looks like a juvenile Cooper's/Sharpie. Both hawks have brown backs and brown stripes on their chest and underparts throughout

their first year of life. Adults will have blue-gray backs and orange barring on their chests.

The biggest difference is the size of the birds. The Cooper's Hawk is about six inches bigger than the Sharpie. Cooper's Hawks are around the size of a crow, while Sharp-Shinned hawks are roughly the size of a Blue Jay. This size difference can be deceiving in the field when you cannot do a side-by-side comparison. Size also varies greatly between the sexes (they otherwise look similar), with females up to a third larger than the males. A female Sharpie can be remarkably close to the size of a male Cooper's Hawk.

When the bird is perched, look at the shape of the head. The Cooper's Hawk has a large, dome-shaped head, while the Sharpie has a smaller, smoothly rounded head. You should also look at the tip of the tail when the bird is flying. The tip of the Cooper's Hawk's tail is often rounded, while the Sharpie's tail is flat.

This is a long way of saying that I cannot tell if the bird in your photo is a Cooper's Hawk or a Sharpie, but the next time you see this bird, you may be able to take note of the size, head shape, posture and tail shape to help you with the ID. ●



Don't forget to sign up (or apply) for Phragmites spraying this fall!

Phragmites (*Phragmites australis*) continues to invade the waterways of the Eastern Shore and other parts of Maryland at an alarming rate. It's that very tall reed that blocks the shoreline view. Because it grows so thickly, it can destroy a wetland's fragile ecosystem by choking out beneficial and native wetland plants.

It will soon be time to start thinking about having the Phragmites on your property treated. If it has been treated within the past three years, start looking for your sign-up form in the mail around the beginning of June. If you are new to the area and would like to learn more about Phragmites or request an application, contact Mary at 410-822-5100 by July 31.



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Where Would We Be Without Insects?

With summer just around the corner, bugs abound. Here's a reminder of how beneficial they really are.

Insects influence their environment in five key ways:

1. They aid decomposition, stimulate the breakdown of organic materials, enhance soil fertility and plant growth, burrow in soils and increase its porosity and ability to hold water.
2. They eat plants and influence where their hosts can grow. Sometimes they kill trees and other plants to reduce competition, and many times they feed on trees without killing them, in ways that actually improve the health and long-term growth of trees and forests.
3. They are a key food source for other animals, thus playing a major role in the food chain.
4. They help disperse seeds, fungal spores and even other invertebrates from one place to another.
5. They are pollinators, and in this role they help control the movement of plant species.

In these varying roles, forest insects can help to control plant succession, dictate which plants will grow or thrive in particular areas, and invigorate plant communities.



Prothonotary Warbler by Donna Tolbert-Anderson



Bumblebee on Buttonbush