

The Broadwing



Publication of the Montclair Bird Club
April 17, 2020 Extra Edition

Montclair, NJ
Volume LXV, Number 4.5

New Jersey geese exercising their unqualified authority to cross any street at any time. They even ignore the double-yellow line. Let us know how you feel about changing the masthead with each issue.

President's **Second** Message April 2020

This may be the first time you will receive two Broadwings in one month. There is a May 2020 issue in the works, but we wanted to remind everyone the June is issue is the photography issue to make up in a small way for not having our annual June Members' meeting.

This following paragraph was from the first April issue. Please let it be a reminder that your contributions to the Broadwing are welcome.

While our traditional content has revolved around members' trip, sightings, and a myriad of other outdoor experiences, maybe we can vary that a little bit. I would love to see contributions from members that deal with social distancing, coping with closed parks, but more importantly any work that makes us feel good about anything. If we get enough material from members, May will be the Member Issue. Please send your story of any length to MontclairBirdClub100@gmail.com.

Now would be a great time to start submitting pictures for the June issue. At four pictures per page, 10 to 16 submission will be the ideal number of photographs.

Sandy

In This Issue

Continuing with a purple theme, Rick Wright re-introduces us to one of our local birds.

The second article from Donna Traylor will make everyone wish they lived in the wilds of New Jersey.

Field Trips

All field trips are open to Bird Club members and the public at no charge. When scheduled field trips resume, notices will be sent to the entire membership.

An Opportunity for the Indoor Ornithologist

Rick Wright

Purple Grackle



With so many of our favorite springtime birding sites inaccessible, most of us are spending a lot of time at our windows, enjoying the lingering birds of winter and eagerly looking forward to the northbound migrants to come. Some, of course, have already arrived. American

robins, red-winged blackbirds, brown-headed cowbirds, and chipping sparrows are back in force, and big, brash common grackles are lording it over all the other visitors to the feeders.

Nowadays we call all of them “common,” but it wasn’t that long ago that birders here in the east had two backyard grackles to look out for. From 1944 to 1948, the American Ornithologists’ Union, then and perhaps now the final arbiter of taxonomic status, recognized as separate species the purple grackle, *Quiscalus quiscula*, and the bronzed grackle, *Quiscalus versicolor*. The “split” was not universally popular, but it made its way into the handbooks and field guides, including, of course, the second edition of the Peterson guide, published in 1947. Birders who grew up with that book—and there are many of us, as the next edition did not appear until 1980—learned to look at their grackles differently. Now, when so much of our birding is done from a window, seems the right time to revive the practice of distinguishing the grackles, even if they are once again considered “just” subspecies.

We are fortunate here in New Jersey to have both purple and bronzed grackles visit our backyards. Nearly all of the grackles we see in winter, from November to February, are bronzed grackles, while the breeding birds whose songs and display flights are so conspicuous right now are almost entirely not.

Both of our modern field guides, the Sibley guide and the National Geographic guide, briefly discuss the identification of purple and bronzed grackles, but the most thorough explanations are found the literature published in the years leading up to the 1944 split. Birders

today can use a checklist of characters abstracted from Frank Chapman's work on the species, requiring attention to the back, rump, tail, wings, and belly.

The bronzed grackle—our abundant migrant and winter bird—has the back and the rump uniformly “brassy bronze to olive-green,” without bars or spots of iridescence. The tail is purplish black. The primaries, the longest flight feathers of the wing, are black; the secondaries are violet with a bronze tinge, as are the coverts of the wing; there are no iridescent tips to the coverts. The belly tends to be less saturatedly black than the flanks.

The purple grackle has a “bottle-green” back, with an often concealed iridescent bar across the base of each feather. The rump is purplish or violet with a bronzy wash; at least some feathers of the rump show iridescent spots at the tips. The tail is greenish or bluish black. The primaries are blackish green, the secondaries purplish violet. The wing coverts are decidedly purplish, usually showing iridescent tips. The belly is bluish, purplish, or violet.

The fly in the ointment, and one of the reasons that the two grackles are no longer classified as separate species, is that they interbreed freely, producing hybrids and intergrades with intermediate patterns and colors, so-called Ridgway grackles. The signs of such intergradation are subtle, especially in living birds observed in the field: a mixture of purple and “brassy bluish-green” in the upperparts and a contrast between the rump and the remaining upper parts.

The current party line, laid down in the 1999 *Birds of New Jersey*, is that all of New Jersey's breeding grackles are purples. Nearly a century ago, Frank Chapman proposed that determining the true status of the grackles in our area was “an



opportunity for the outdoor ornithologist.” Now it proves an opportunity for the indoor birder, too: Are all of our breeding grackles purple grackles? When do the last bronzed grackles depart in the spring? Do any bronzed grackles or obvious Ridgway grackles linger into summer? When do the bronzed grackles begin to reappear in autumn? The answers are probably feeding in your backyard right now.

Rick Wright leads Birds and Art tours in Europe and the Americas for [Victor Emanuel Nature Tours](#). His most recent publications include the Peterson [Reference Guide to Sparrows of North America](#) and the ABA [Field Guide to Birds of New Jersey](#). Rick and his wife, the medievalist Alison Beringer, live in Bloomfield with their family: Avril, budding birder, and the world's best birding dog, Gellert.

Stay at Home Birding 101

Donna Traylor

It's a strange new world we find ourselves in. While practicing social distancing, acclimating to electronic school and work schedules and trying to keep stress levels to a tolerable level, the seasons go on. With the scary reports flooding the airwaves by the second week of March, many of us resolved early to hunker down and limit any human one on one contact. Luckily, Mother Nature still provides a welcome learning center and theatre of natural activities just outside our windows.



Carolina Wren

Late Winter/early Spring can be a bit of a humdrum time in our backyard. We were spared the fury of major snow and ice storms this year, but Winter still has a grip on our surroundings. Trees are still bare, some mornings present us with a shimmer of ice in the stream/beaver pond, and the winds are still chilly out of the north. Our juncos and white-throated sparrows are still flitting about the yard and woods in good numbers. Although they have been daily visitors at the feeders for months now, there is a

difference. And that difference is song. The lilting melody of the white-throats is enough to bring a smile during these times. And the trill of the juncos bounces back and forth from one side of the woodlands to the other. Song sparrows have been around most of the winter but they too are now singing. Other familiar cold weather feeder birds include numerous white-breasted nuthatches, black-capped chickadees, northern cardinals, blue jays, tufted titmice, American goldfinch, house finch, and downy and red-bellied woodpeckers. What is interesting about this time of year is the behavioral changes of these "common" birds. With the slight changes in temperatures and more hours of daylight, a signal seems to go off that puts our feathered friends into territorial displays, full-throated song and chasing potential competitors away - or chasing after potential mates!

Living in the great north woods of Sussex County (only a mere hour from Montclair) brings a few differences in our viewing versus yours "down below" as we say. Many years, the extreme cold keeps Carolina wrens from our winter take out service. This year, however, we were delighted to enjoy one, and sometimes two, wrens pecking



Blue Jay

away at the suet cake and occasionally coming to the seed feeders. The nicest thing, in my opinion, is that Carolina wrens have a tendency to sing year round. Hearing their cheery song in the middle of the Winter always gives me hope that Spring will soon follow.

As many would agree, the sight of an American robin no longer signals Spring since this species is found year-round in New Jersey woodlands - typically hanging out with cedar waxwings in swampy areas that still have a berry food crop. In our yard, the harbinger of Spring is the red-winged blackbird. Specifically, this would be the first male to show up and start his gruff song while sitting on the pole holding the sunflower feeder. This year was the earliest that we've had a red-wing - it was January 23rd! What was equally unusual was that it wasn't a single bird. It was a flock of about 100! The first blackbird to show up and decide this would be his territory, however, arrived the week of February 9th. In comparison, first sightings in past years are as follows: 2/21/19, 2/15/18, 2/24/17, 2/28/16, and 3/20/15.



Fox Sparrow

We have a perennial stream that runs through the back of our 6 1/2-acre property. As of late last year, a beaver family moved into the immediate neighborhood (mom, dad and two kids) and took to doing what beavers do best - that is, taking down trees and building dams to create ponds. Our meandering stream is currently a nice beaver pond and we are missing well over 60 trees of varying diameters. But the beavers - and

ducks - are happy. All Winter we have enjoyed watching numerous mallards and Canada geese hanging out below our kitchen windows. On March 3rd, our wood ducks arrived - two males and a female. Hopefully they remember the wood duck box that sits mid-stream for them. We have been lucky in past seasons to get to see the female flying in and out of the box determining whether it meets with her approval. We haven't seen the young take their initial leap of faith into the stream, but we are happy when we see many ducklings following mom around. This year's woodies are swimming around the box but they haven't flown up to it yet. What will be interesting is that a male and female hooded merganser arrived in town today. In past years, there has been competition between the woodies and the mergs for box rights. No telling who will win. We've had multiple boxes in the past, but a bad storm took out the second box and it has yet to be replaced. More on the duck outcome next time!

Since you never know who, or what, is going to show up at your feeders or in your yard, you can spend lots of time looking and enjoying. That's more important now than ever since viewing nature provides great stress relief. On an average day in our yard, we get to watch numerous downy and red-bellied woodpeckers. Most years, we are visited by hairy woodpeckers and yellow-bellied sapsuckers - they are not as regular, though. Today the first northern flicker darted across the side yard. Although not daily, or even weekly, we do have the pleasure of watching pileated woodpeckers on a somewhat

regular basis hammer away at the trees. About a week ago, Don came running into the room where I was, thrust my camera with the long lens at me and yelled to follow him. I did so and was treated to see a pileated pecking away at the suet cake. Now, I've been feeding birds for over 40 years and this is the first time I've ever had a pileated at a feeder. My digital camera clicked away for the few minutes we were treated to this sight. The next morning, I hurried to the kitchen window hoping for a repeat woodpecker performance. Sure enough, the pileated was calling away and circling the feeding station. Unfortunately, we had had a large furry visitor overnight and the feeders were missing in action and the poles bent into pretzels. First bear of the season! Don fixed the pole and rehung the suet quickly but the pileated has moved on - at least for the time being. We saw the bear two nights lately - decent size at about 225 pounds. He won't be getting any more free night time snacks - feeders come in at dusk now.

In the last two weeks, we've viewed 28 different bird species from our windows. I challenge everyone out there to take some time each day to watch the show. Perhaps you will feel like me - happy and grateful that nature is all around us to enjoy!



Pileated Woodpecker

The MBC Bulletin Bird

Broadwing publication schedule

**The Broadwing is published five times a year:
January, March, May, late summer, and October.**

**Send photos, field notes, or articles to the editor at
oguss.editor@gmail.com or mail to Elizabeth Oguss,
200 Valley Road, Montclair, NJ 07042. Thanks!**

Support the Montclair Bird Club via Amazon Smile

The Montclair Bird Club is registered as a 501(c)(3) with Amazon. If you order from Amazon, but have never chosen a charity, consider the Montclair Bird Club. Place your orders at [smile.Amazon.com](https://smile.amazon.com) (not just amazon.com) and select a charity from the upper-right corner of the home page.

MBC will be credited with .5 percent of each Amazon Smile order.

From the Desk of the Very Temporary Editor:

Please feel free to e-mail me with any items you would like included in future issues of the Broadwing. Please include pictures and any other news that will reduce anxiety and make us smile.

MontclairBirdClub100@gmail.com

Montclair Bird Club Officers for 2019-20

President Sandy Sorkin
Vice President..... Jim McGregor
Treasurer Donna Traylor
Recording Secretary Pat Sanders

Committees:

Field Trips Bill Beren
Programs Donna Traylor
Publicity Wayne Greenstone
Refreshments JoAnn Katzban & Betsy Cohen

