



the MALVERNIAN

a free newspaper serving the people of Malvern Borough, our Green Country Town

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THE BIRDS OF MALVERN, TREASURES TO PROTECT

A Shared Love of our Feathered Neighbors

By Monica McQuail, Communications Specialist at Willistown Conservation Trust
Photos by Blake Goll and Jennifer Mathes



Birds of the Brandywine Valley

Designed, dyed and hooked by Bobbi Tower

20" X 26", made of hand cut 3/8" - 1/2" strips of hand dyed and as-is wool, hooked through a linen backing. Plaid, herringbone, check and solid wools were used.

Throughout this fourth issue of the Malvernian we will feature photos of birds in and around Malvern, as well as a variety of bird-themed articles which include easy ways that you can encourage, protect and defend this beauty in our midst. So much that we do or don't do impacts the lives of these creatures that we might not imagine (note the Audubon Society Open Letter on P. 2 which talks about the proposed pump track). We might note that 500 years ago Shakespeare (like so many before him) understood that the song of birds was interwoven with the song of humankind:

*Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Savior's birth is celebrated,
This bird of dawning singeth all night long...
So hallowed and so gracious is that time. Hamlet, Act 1 Sc 1*
-The Publisher

This past year, a deadly illness ravaged Malvern and beyond, baffling scientists and causing us to take down our birdfeeders and dump out the water in our birdbaths. And no, shockingly, this was not another COVID-19 variant. Our feathered friends were the latest victims to succumb to this local outbreak, with many songbirds mysteriously developing swollen eyes before becoming disoriented and dying. The American Robins, Blue Jays, Common Grackles and European Starlings that used to frequent our backyards disappeared, their chirping replaced with silence.

This loss transcended species, as many humans sought answers in Facebook groups or via Google searches; a strange mystery needed to be solved, and our beloved birds needed to be saved. We were united – maybe not exactly to Tiger King levels, but we were paying attention. Given the political climate, it is a rare thing that brings us together, so why exactly did birds capture our attention during this time, even more so than other animals?

One answer is the recent increase in bird enthusiasts. During lockdown in 2020, businesses selling bird feeders reported an increase of sales by 45-50%; according to Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Global Bird Day yielded a new record in recorded bird sightings; visits to specific bird species on Wikipedia sky rocketed; the number of Audubon Bird App downloads nearly doubled; and Black Birders Week graced our newsfeeds by highlighting the diversity of Black scientists within the birding world. With little else to do, many of us morphed into "armchair birders," perhaps yearning for neighborly companionship or envying a sense of freedom that quite literally flew in stark contrast to our own confinement at the time.

The second part to that answer lies within birds themselves. "With over 10,000 species and representation on every continent, these living dinosaurs captivate us in all sorts of ways; they are the singing harbingers of spring, their beautiful colors inspire a variety of artwork and poetry, and, well, they're



Pileated Woodpecker

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just fun to watch,” says Blake Goll, Education Programs Manager at Willistown Conservation Trust.

Observe a Carolina Chickadee gather moss, fur and other creative insulation to create a blanket that keeps her eggs camouflaged and warm whenever she leaves her nest. Watch a territorial male Northern Cardinal battle its own reflected image in your window. Become mesmerized by a flock of thousands of starlings swirling across the sky in perfect unison, an eerily beautiful behavior called murmuration. Or even scroll through TikTok’s dedicated American Crow footage (dubbed “CrowTok”), where users film themselves developing relationships with crows and ravens that recognize their faces and consistently gift them shiny trinkets. Birds have unique personalities and funny behaviors that we can’t help but find intriguing or relatable.

From an ecological perspective, birds play multiple roles in supporting a healthy ecosystem. They serve as pollinators and seed dispersers, spreading plant species throughout the region. They also act as keystone species, where other animals depend on them for survival. The Pileated Woodpecker, for example, is an expert carpenter that supports 40 other American birds with the holes it drills into trees, creating tiny apartment complexes. Additionally, birds are fantastic at insect and pest control and even lend their skills to carcass removal.

Considering everything that birds have given us – inspiration, entertainment and a healthy planet – we can’t help but feel a need to reciprocate, especially when their little lives are in jeopardy. While scientists still don’t know what this mystery illness is, fortunately, it seems to have now dissipated, and we are officially safe to return to feeding our backyard friends.

But sadly, the reality is that birds’ lives continue to be in danger. We have lost 1/3 of all bird life in the past 50 years, and we now understand that over development and our climate emergency have detrimental effects on birds; bird ranges are shifting north, egg laying is occurring earlier, migration times are shifting, and life cycles are getting out of sync with environmental cues, which all contribute to population loss. So how can we continue to help these special creatures? Blake Goll recommends adding these goals to your New Year’s Resolutions list:

1. **Support conservation in your yard:** It’s time to ditch the outdated, water-guzzling and chemical-requiring, manicured lawn, and replace some of it with your own backyard habitat. Value your yard for its potential ecological function, rather than its aesthetics. You’ll see an increase in birds, and this also means you can mow less, which means less work for you!
2. **Plant native plants:** The best birdfeeder is native plants, which support caterpillars, a primary food source for bird population growth. Avoid cutting these plants back in the winter, so our over-wintering birds can continue to feast when the ground freezes.
3. **Keep your cats indoors:** Housecats are the second biggest killers of songbirds after habitat loss. If you let your cat explore the outdoors, consider buying a colorful, bird safe collar – they’re eye-catching, which give birds a chance to flee when your cat approaches.
4. **Drink shade grown coffee:** Look for the label that says “bird friendly coffee,” which means farms are growing their coffee traditionally, in a healthy forest and under the shade of trees (rather than clear cut forests), which supports bird life.

5. **Support healthy food systems:** Small farms that employ regenerative agriculture grow food in harmony with an ecosystem that supports birds and other species. Unlike conventional farms, they keep soil healthy with no-till practices and crop rotation, increase biodiversity with habitat borders, improve watersheds by eliminating chemical inputs and create a haven for migratory birds.

If you want to learn more about birds, follow Willistown Conservation Trust @ wctrust on social media, head to wctrust.org to find more educational content, or join us for our many bird-focused events!

About Willistown Conservation Trust: Found 20 miles west of Philadelphia, Willistown Conservation Trust focuses on 28,000 acres within the watersheds of Ridley, Crum and Darby Creeks of Chester and Delaware Counties. Since 1996, the Trust has permanently conserved over 7,500 acres, including three nature preserves open to the public: Ashbridge Preserve, Kirkwood Preserve, and Rushton Woods Preserve, which is home to Rushton Conservation Center and Rushton Farm. The Trust offers six nationally renowned programs for public engagement and research: the Bird Conservation, Community Farm, Education and Outreach, Land Protection, Stewardship, and Watershed Protection Programs.

