

THE GLORY BIRDS OF HEMPSTEAD LAKE STATE PARK: GREAT HORNED OWL

Betty Borowsky

If one day you are walking through Hempstead Lake State Park and you hear a great cacophony of screaming jays, then see them dive-bombing a specific spot high in a tree, there's a good chance that their target is a Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*). Even then it might be hard to spot the bird. It is so well camouflaged (literally it looks like a bump on a log) that unless it is pointed out to you (either by the jays or another birder), it is very likely that you will not recognize it as an owl. Frankly, it isn't terribly exciting to see a Great Horned Owl during the day, when we tend to be bird-watching. They're asleep, and they resemble a tree branch. But when they open their eyes, it stops you in your tracks. Their eyes are enormous and bright yellow with black irises, and when they are open they are like great amber search lights. Here's a good photo: www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/great-horned-owl.

Great Horned Owls, like most owls, are adapted for efficient predation. They will eat pretty much any live prey, depending upon how big they are, from grasshoppers and crickets to mice, voles, rabbits, and even cats. They fly toward their prey, then use their muscular feet to grasp them. Those large, thick talons combined with a special pad on their feet permit them to grip their prey and hold on while they fly away. They even have one special talon with serrated edges, which affords them a specially tenacious grip.

Owls are primarily visual predators, but they tend to hunt at night. So those very large eyes enhance their ability to see in dim light. But even more importantly, owls' eyes are located in the front of their heads. This allows them to see an object with both eyes at the same time, with the field of view of one eye overlapping the field of view of the other. The two eyes see the same object from slightly different angles, which gives the bird binocular vision, and this allows it to determine how far away an object is even if the bird has never been in a particular place before. Unless you have eyes in front of your head, the only way you can determine how far away something is is to judge distances by size. For example, we know how big an automobile is; if we see a small one, we know it's far away.



Great Horned Owls also have outstanding hearing. The feathered disc around their faces concentrates sounds and directs them to the birds' ears. Some speculate that the feathered "horns" help in this way also. Furthermore, the two ears are not at the same height on the animal's head, which helps them determine where the sound is coming from.

Naturally, it is important that the owl be silent during the hunt. So, even though this is the largest of our local owls (about 22 inches, although there is considerable variation, with females typically a bit larger than males), and is quite spectacular when it flies, special modifications of its feathers prevent it from making a sound in flight. It's interesting to compare this with Mourning Doves, whose feathers whistle when they fly.

The owls are fairly long-lived. Their average lifespan in the wild is 15 years, but they can live almost twice as long in captivity, where there is plenty of food and the birds are protected against environmental hazards.

Great Horned Owls are the first species to mate each year. They generally do not make their own nests, but move into one built by someone else. The pair exchange courtship calls as early as October, and the female lays two or three eggs in about February. The eggs are incubated for about five weeks, and the hatched chicks are incubated for about another two. About six weeks after hatching, the chicks emerge from the nest to stand on a nearby branch. They start to fly about a week later, but stay with their parents until the fall.

Although they occupy almost all ecosystems and are distributed over pretty much all of North America, Great Horned Owls are not numerous. There are no flocks of Great Horned Owls or communal nests of Great Horned Owls. Each pair needs about one square mile of territory in which to obtain enough food for themselves and their offspring. And nests are set very far apart.

Hempstead Lake seems to be about the right size for one pair, but not for two. People who record their bird lists on eBird typically report no more than two individuals on any given day. And, as the ones they see are typically in the same area, and Great Horned Owls do not migrate, I suspect that this is the same pair, year in and year out. Evidently, there is enough territory in the park to satisfy the needs of one pair, but not enough to house two. I am very concerned that the continued whittling away of park lands for one reason or another will reduce the owls' uninterrupted habitat, and force them to leave the area.

We ask you to support South Shore Audubon's efforts to keep the park intact (see the next page for an update).



I BIRD NY

Back in May, Audubon New York sent chapters an announcement from the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation about the launching of a Web site portal, I Bird NY (www.dec.ny.gov/animals/109900.html). Among the things that you can now find on the expanding site are fact sheets on bird species, information on each of NY's Bird Conservation Areas (59 Important Bird Areas that Audubon designated on state-owned property have, to date, been protected by law as BCAs), upcoming events, videos, a beginner's booklet for children, and links for birders.

HEMPSTEAD LAKE STATE PARK: LEGAL ISSUES

Brien Weiner

In the October *Skimmer*, we described our objections to proposed “improvements” at Hempstead Lake State Park (HLSP) including the loss of wetlands, the removal of 3100 trees, and the creation of 5 miles of new trails. The project continues to be a volatile issue. For those readers new to the issue, the HLSP project is part of the Living with the Bay (LWTB) project, the original purpose of which was to mitigate flooding along the Mill River from HLSP to Bay Park. LWTB is overseen by the Governor’s Office of Storm Recovery (GOSR) and funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development with a grant of \$125 million for Sandy recovery. GOSR has allocated \$34.5 million of that grant to State Parks for HLSP, much of which is designated for increasing recreational use rather than flood mitigation.

Mike Sperling, Jim Brown, and I met with GOSR, State Parks, and their contractors to discuss HLSP at the end of September. We were joined by the Seatuck Environmental Association, which has been contracted by GOSR for bird and fish surveys. We presented our concerns and were told that the environmental impact of the HLSP project had been reduced as a result of input from Seatuck, SSAS, and the Citizen’s Advisory Committee (CAC) for LWTB. GOSR, however, refused to put this reduced impact in writing and continued to deny us access to the design plans for HLSP. Further, at a subsequent CAC meeting, SSAS was informed that this reduced impact would still result in the removal of 2800 trees and a loss of wetlands.

GOSR stated that they expect to issue a “finding of no significant impact” (FONSI) for the HLSP project. This means that they would not have to complete an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), which provides an analysis of impacts, alternatives, and mitigation, in accordance with the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA).

At this point, legal advice became crucial. SSAS had been searching for pro bono environmental lawyers for several months without success. Even finding fee-for-service environmental lawyers who would work on the side of conservation as opposed to development proved to be difficult. Our board authorized the expenditure of \$1000 for legal advice, of which \$750 was spent. We were lucky to find and retain a savvy and dynamic attorney, Carolyn Zenk, who has extensive experience with SEQRA and, in her mission to promote nonprofits, charged us a reduced public interest rate and even gave us some of her time pro bono.

Jim Brown, Joe Landesberg, and I had a productive meeting with Zenk. She explained to us that the design

plans for HLSP, which we had requested under the Freedom of Information Law (FOIL), were denied in violation of that law. The plans were denied for the reason that they were not final, yet final plans had to exist because State Parks did send us a Full Environmental Assessment Form (FEAF), which had to be based on final plans. (When GOSR was asked why they would not release the design plans, they said “we do not want to alarm the public.”) Moreover, Zenk told us that the contents of the FEAF, which described the alteration of 60 acres of HLSP, easily met the threshold of a Type I action, requiring an EIS. She advised us on how to use the criteria of SEQRA to prove that the HLSP project will have a significant environmental impact, and how to present areas of environmental concern for focusing (scoping) an EIS. She also confronted GOSR’s General Counsel on the FOIL and SEQRA issues, and reported that he seemed more receptive to our concerns. The hope is that GOSR will negotiate with us to reduce the environmental impact, since a focused EIS can be completed within the time limit of the federal funding, which is GOSR’s stated reason for avoiding an EIS. Once a FONSI is declared, 30 days are given to challenge it; it seems counterproductive for GOSR to risk a lawsuit that would delay the project even further.

Zenk’s advice was formulated into a letter that we sent to GOSR along with a new FOIL request for design plans. We also sent the letter to other Long Island Audubon Chapters and NYC Audubon to collect signatures in support. The upshot is that HLSP is Nassau’s most important terrestrial bird area and last remnant of continuous open space, and far too precious to risk fragmented woodlands and flooded wetlands for lack of environmental study. If there are improvements to be made, we want them done right. Stay tuned and attend the next CAC meeting in December, details to be announced.



HOLIDAY PARTY AT TACKAPAUSHA!

Marilyn Hametz

Join us at the South Shore Audubon Annual Holiday Party for Children with the Tackapausha Museum on **Saturday, December 9** from 1 to 4 P.M. The party is also fun for adults. It includes wildlife, nature crafts, and refreshments. The wildlife show will have natives and exotics — birds, mammals, and reptiles.

This special event is a great time to visit the museum with your children or grandchildren. Admission is \$5 per person (adults & children).

SSAS will be providing the light refreshments and helping guests make bird feeder nature crafts. If you would like to enjoy the event as a South Shore Audubon volunteer, please contact me at 799-7189 or marilynexpl@yahoo.com.

Tackapausha Museum and Preserve is located at 2255 Washington Avenue (between Merrick Road and Sunrise Highway) in Seaford, telephone 571-7443.

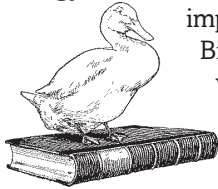


BOOKS FOR BIRDERS

R. U. Abyrdar II with Sy Schiff

This month we will be reviewing a thrilling adventure story! The author will be attempting a global BIG YEAR! Mr. Strycker eventually sees and hears over 6,000 bird species in over 40 countries. This book is about the “places, people, cultures, adventures, and misadventures along the way.” Some of these stories will be as interesting as the birds Noah sees.

The book is *Birding Without Borders* by Noah Strycker. He is an expert birder, and he had to be young and full of energy in order to accomplish all he set out to do! More importantly, he is a very talented writer!



Birds face extreme challenges worldwide and in spite of this he sees hope because more people than ever are working to protect these birds! His goal was simple: “in the next 12 months I hope to see 5,000 species of birds!”

So, let’s begin to see if he can accomplish this “very exhausting and exciting” goal! (Now Sy’s contribution.) “Many serious birders do a Big Day, some do a State Big Year, and a very few do a North American Big Year. But only a few have ever tried a WORLD Big Year. This book chronicles such a feat. The planning and logistics for such an endeavor are covered, and how this plays out in fact make this an interesting read! Mr. Strycker takes us to untrodden and exotic locations where rare and unusual birds are ticked off. So, this is a birding adventure as well as a travelogue.

The idea was not to just see a ton of birds, but to see 5,000 of the world’s 10,365 birds in a single year and break the previous high total of 3,000+ birds. There are two “official” world birding lists, Clement’s (10,365) and International Ornithological Congress (10,612). The former was chosen as it is the one used by eBird, a primary source of data for his adventure, and most North American birders.

Mr. Strycker chose to enlist the best local birders he could find in each location he visited, so as to have the best available help. He enlisted local help rather than use tour leaders who may not have been as familiar with the local treasures. The people, how they were recruited, and the help they provided are enumerated with people’s names and location descriptions.

Seeing 6,042 birds — the number he saw — is a big undertaking and discussing each one as you go along is just boring. He does not do this! A smattering of strange bird names show up in the text, but it all flows from the excellent narrative. A lot of it is because the birds are endemic, rare, or incredibly rare. An appendix lists all the birds in the order ticked off and the country they were seen in. And there are mishaps, accidents, problems and weather. All are described and solved. The 5,000 goal is always in view and how it was approached makes this book read

like a mystery story. You know he gets there and beyond, but how the adventure unfolds makes it both interesting and exciting!

I’m not quite sure who the audience is for this book. I doubt the usual feeder birder would be interested. Birders who travel might like it. However, so much territory is covered (the better part of the world) that very little space is allotted to any one locality. If you like travel, adventure, and especially the excitement of birding, you’ll like (as in enjoy) this book. It has it all!”

R.U.’s contribution: Sy recently celebrated his 90th birthday!! And he is still going strong!!! Read it and ENJOY!!!

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DISPLAY CASE AT ROCKVILLE CENTRE LIBRARY

Thanks to the efforts of SSAS member Alene Scoblete, information about our chapter has been occupying one of the Rockville Centre Public Library’s tall display cases throughout the month of November. Since we didn’t have anything readily available for such a display, we are grateful to Alene not only for inviting us to have a presence at the library, but for doing nearly all of the work and creating some of the things that are in the display.

If your own library has similar space available, please e-mail mssperling@optonline.net.



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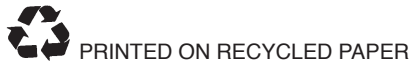
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Option 2. To join NAS and your all-volunteer local chapter, you can help SSAS by joining Audubon through us for the same price that it costs if you join through NAS (we get \$0 from these dues unless you join through us). Mail the form below and your check payable to **National Audubon Society** to SSAS at the address above. The special rate for the first year is \$20 per household.

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Donations to SSAS are always welcome! \$_____

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