

VOLUME 48, NUMBER 4 — SOUTH SHORE AUDUBON SOCIETY

DEC. 2017 & JAN. 2018

NEXT MEETING

Paul Stessel & Bill Belford

DATE:	Tuesday, December 12, 2017
TIME:	7:30 р.м.
PLACE:	Freeport Memorial Library
	144 W. Merrick Rd. (at S. Ocean Ave.)
SPEAKER:	Louise Harrison
TOPIC:	Plum Island: Biological Lynchpin of an
	Archipelago

At our next meeting, come see the new 12-minute documentary film "Conservation on a Precious Island," featuring Academy Award nominee Sam Waterston, followed by a "virtual tour" of Plum Island, and learn the latest news on the Preserve Plum Island Coalition campaign (SSAS is one of the coalition's original members). Learn how you can join the fight to protect federally owned Plum Island from commercial development.

Louise Harrison is Save the Sound's New York natural areas coordinator. She is a conservation biologist who has served on Long Island in federal, New York State, and Suffolk County agencies, as well as in leadership and consulting positions for not-for-profit environmental organizations. She has led and advised open space preservation efforts and cochaired a broad community movement that saved Stony Brook's last forest. She was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service liaison to the Long Island Sound Study, where she concentrated on stewardship of Long Island Sound's ecosystems, habitat restoration projects, and invasive species control. She has extensive field experience working in Long Island's coastal communities and natural ecosystems, from the boroughs of NYC to the tips of the East End, and has received numerous awards for open space preservation efforts. She lives in Southold.

Pre-Meeting Book Discussion. Arrive a half-hour early to participate in a discussion led by R. U. Abyrdar II (aka Paul Stessel) of the book that he and Sy Schiff reviewed in the previous *Skimmer*. This meeting's book is *Birds of Prey* by Pete Dunne with Kevin T. Karlson.

Parking Lots. In addition to the parking lot adjacent to the library, there's a lightly used, well-lit, and fairly close

municipal lot on the east side of S. Ocean Ave., on the near (south) side of the gas station that borders Sunrise Highway.

NEXT MEETING AFTER NEXT MEETING

Paul Stessel & Bill Belford

DATE:	Tuesday, January 9, 2018
TIME:	7:30 р.м.
PLACE:	Freeport Memorial Library
SPEAKERS	: Lynn Arthur; Some of Us
TOPICS:	Energy Efficiency & Rooftop Solar Energy;
	Annual Members' Night
-	

Our annual members' night this winter will feature a nonmember, Lynn Arthur, who will present an approximately 20-minute program (plus questions and answers) on actions we can take to help the environment while lowering our energy costs. Lynn is a volunteer on the Southampton Town Green Sustainability Advisory Committee and the executive director of Peak Power Long Island, a not-for-profit that provides marketing and communications services in the areas of conservation and renewable energy solutions. She designed and together with Town staff launched its Tri-Energy program, which is funded by LI Green Homes, PSEG LI, and the New York State Energy Research & Development Authority (NYSERDA).

Members' night is a chance for you to shine! We have many hobbies and interests that are not focused on birding — cooking, knitting, gardening, quilting, playing an instrument, photography, etc. Whether or not you bring something to share with your fellow members, join us and learn about what some of the people who share your interest in birds and the environment like to do.

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<pre> LIKE US! http://facebook.com/SSAudubon </pre>					

木木 WELCOME NEW MEMBERS 木木

Wendy Murbach

One of the wonderful perks that you get from an Audubon membership is the chance to be a part of your local Audubon chapter, South Shore Audubon Society.

You are automatically a valued member of this active and friendly chapter, so please come out to the next meeting at the Freeport Memorial Library from 7:30–9:30 P.M., on the second Tuesday of the month, to hear what you can do to help preserve your local environment's health and viability, to hear about local issues that you can help to solve, and to see an interesting program.

Whether you are a beginning birder or someone with a large life list, you will enjoy our weekly Sunday bird walks. Check out the special events that are mentioned in this *Skimmer*. Attend them yourself, and bring your family and friends too.

You are warmly invited to be an active participant in this vibrant all-volunteer organization comprised of persons who, like you, care about the earth we live on, about our local environment, and about the creatures that live alongside us.

Our new members since the last Skimmer are:

Hogan
Elmont Fritz Saint Louis
Floral Park Michael Ryan
Hewlett Diane Kubis
Levittown Joseph Cazzallino
Malverne Thomas A. & Ann V. Rozakis
Oceanside Linda Harris
Point Lookout Noreen Fitzpatrick
Rockville Centre Laurie Kaplan, James Whitehead
Seaford Sherrie Papayanopoulos 🛛 🗬
Valley Stream Joy Chacon
Wantagh Janis Reinhart
Woodmere Barry Jacobs

SSAS Mission Statement — The mission of

South Shore Audubon Society is to promote environmental education; conduct research pertaining to local bird populations, wildlife, and habitat; and preserve and restore our environment, through responsible activism, for the benefit of both people and wildlife.

DISCOUNTED AUDUBON CALENDARS FROM SSAS

At our walks and meetings, we're selling Audubon calendars at a bargain price of \$10 apiece (list price \$14.99). The 12-inch by 28-inch (when opened) "Songbirds & Other Backyard Birds" Picture-a-Day Wall Calendar features a photograph and related text at the top, plus smaller images throughout the unusually tall grid. Sample pages are at http://www.pageaday.com/store/audubon.

MIGRATORY BIRD TREATY ACT UNDER ATTACK

Editor's note: The following is taken from an e-mailed Audubon Alert; sign up for them now at **www.audubon. org/takeaction**, especially if your member of Congress has a habit of voting against environmental protection (see http://scorecard.lcv.org).

On November 8, the House Committee on Natural Resources passed an energy bill with an amendment that would gut our nation's strongest bird conservation law, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The Bird-Killer Amendment, introduced by Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY), would give oil and gas companies and other industries a free pass to kill birds with impunity. If Cheney's amendment passes, industries would no longer be held accountable for bird deaths, such as birds killed in oil spills. In other words, if this amendment had existed in 2010, BP would not have been held liable for killing more than one million birds during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill.

Sirp WALKS

All walks start at **9** A.M.; no walk if it rains or snows or temperature is below 25°F. Call me at 467-9498 in case of questionable conditions or for other info. Check www. facebook.com/SSAudubon (you don't need to have a Facebook account) for cancellations, changes, and lists from recent walks. Directions and lists of what we've seen over the years are at ssaudubon.org.

Nov. 26	Point Lookout Town Park, S.E. corner (and
	Lido Preserve afterwards; Jan. 28 too)
Dec. 3	Alley Pond Park (76th Ave. parking lot)
Dec. 10	Hempstead Lake State Park (Southern
	State Parkway Exit 18 south, Field #3)
Dec. 17	Jones Beach West End #2, N.E. corner
Dec. 24 & 31	Happy Holidays! — No Walks
Jan. 7	Hempstead Lake State Park (see above)
Jan. 14	Mill Pond Park (Wantagh/Bellmore, north
	side of Merrick Rd.)
Jan. 21	Pelham Bay Park*
Jan. 28	Point Lookout Town Park, S.E. corner

*For Pelham Bay Park (where we hope to see owls): Wear hiking shoes — it's a hilly forest walk to the bay. Take Throgs Neck Bridge to I-695 north to I-95 north. Take I-95 to exit #9, Hutchinson River Parkway north. Take first exit #5, Orchard Beach Rd., go past traffic circle, and continue on Orchard Beach Rd. to end. Turn left on Park Dr. Go past another traffic circle and enter parking lot through toll gates (free); meet at far left corner of parking lot (northeast corner). See www.mappery.com/Pelham-Bay-Park-NYC-Map or Google's map of "Orchard Beach Parking Lot" for reference.

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

Belty 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/greathorned-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 abil-

ity 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).

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-forservice environmental lawyers who would work on the side of conservation as opposed to development proved to be difficult. Our board authorized the expendi-



ture 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! Marilun 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.



AUDUBON'S LONG ISLAND CLIMATE CONFERENCE

Jim Brown

Audubon New York and the North Fork Audubon Society, with the help of other Long Island Audubon chapters, recently presented a conference on climate change. The day-long conference was held on Saturday, October 28 at the Sisters of St. Joseph in Brentwood and was funded by National Audubon Society. Among the topics discussed during the day were birds and climate change, citizen science in a warming world, suburban habitat gardens to help birds deal with climate change, coastal resilience, local advocacy, renewable energy, and the future of Plum Island. Speakers represented a number of organizations, including National Audubon, Audubon New York, Defend H2O, Four Harbors Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, Long Island Progressive Coalition, Seatuck Environmental Association, and the Southhampton Sustainability Committee.

I spoke as a member of the panel entitled Renewable Energy: Community Solar and Wind Projects. On the panel with me were Professor Marjaneh Issapour of Farmingdale State College and Joseph Schroeder, Energy Specialist for the Suffolk County Legislature. Professor Issapour highlighted Farmingdale's numerous approaches and accomplishments in educating students and the public on renewable energy and climate change. Mr. Schroeder spoke about issues surrounding renewable energy and its relationship to electrical capacity, grid, and peak demand issues.

My talk highlighted the impact of climate change on birds and Audubon's approach to offshore wind development. I recounted Audubon's work on studying global



warming and its effect on bird species, and our own chapter's history of commenting on bird conservation at numerous governmental offshore wind hearings. I stressed the view that we strongly support the development of

offshore wind to combat human-induced global warming while at the same time seeking to ensure that offshore wind facilities are sited so as to minimize any negative impacts on birds and other wildlife. I also discussed South Shore Audubon's opposition to a pair of large solar farms planned for the Shoreham property/Wading River Marsh complex and the Mastic Woods complex. These solar farms, if built, would destroy hundreds of acres of environmentally sensitive forest land, an unnecessary and harmful "green-4-green" swap.

The Long Island Climate Conference was attended by approximately 60 people from many Long Island and New York City communities. It gave a variety of organizations and individuals an important opportunity to present their views on climate change and strategies on how to solve this pressing existential problem that faces not only Long Island but our entire planet.

DRIVE-THROUGH HOLIDAY LIGHTS AT JONES BEACH'S IMPORTANT BIRD AREA

Michael Sperling

In October, Chip Gorman, the Deputy Regional Director of the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, was kind enough to e-mail us with news that he knew wouldn't make SSAS happy: "I want to advise you that Jones Beach State Park will again be hosting the Holiday Light Show (now called Magic of Lights) in the West End area. We have come into an agreement again with Live Nation and they are utilizing a new company, since as you may know the previous company was unable to operate last year. The terms and conditions of the agreement are similar to previous agreements. The vehicles carrying the displays arrived today and they began placing the displays on the shoulders of the roadway. The displays will begin to be erected on Monday, October 23; however, beginning tomorrow [October 14] they are authorized to erect three tunnel type displays."

SSAS has strongly opposed this show throughout its on-again, off-again history, except when it was briefly relocated to the Jones Beach Theater's parking field. If you're puzzled, go to the West End in the daytime after everything's been erected, and look at the 40+ displays along the West End's main road, the diagonal wires that prevent them from toppling over, and the electric cables

that connect them to a few large portable transformers. Try to visualize the impact of motor vehicles inching through the show every night until 10 or 11 P.M. from mid November through New Year's Eve, dripping toxic fluids and polluting the air as they go. If you see broken bulbs on the



ground, other debris, or a dead bird, please send photos. New York should be celebrating the holiday season without commercializing a designated Important Bird Area.

OUR E-LIST http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ssas_list

THE IPSWICH SPARROW PROJECT

Editor's note: SSAS was contacted by a Canadian graduate student who is participating in a project studying the migration of Ipswich Sparrows (a subspecies of the Savannah Sparrow). Marilyn Hametz e-mailed a colorful one-page PDF file about the project to those of you who are in our Yahoo! Group; here's the text from the file.

Ipswich Sparrows breed on Sable Island, Nova Scotia, but migrate through mainland beaches en route to their wintering grounds in the eastern USA. Sable Island is a relatively small target; how many sparrows survive the journey? Students from Acadia and Dalhousie Universities have banded 250 sparrows to help answer this question. We now need your help finding these banded sparrows on the mainland!

When to Look: October to May.

Where to Look: Sandy dune beaches where marram grass grows, from Massachusetts to Georgia.

How to Report: Sparrows have 3 colored bands on the left leg and 1 colored band on the right leg (over an aluminum band). Tell us where you saw the sparrow, its band colors (from top to bottom on each leg), and the date. Please include photos if you have them! Send us an e-mail (ipswichsparrows@gmail.com), post on our Facebook page, or include Ipswich Sparrows on an eBird checklist and describe the colored bands in the comments.

30TH ANNUAL WATERFOWL SURVEY

The dates for our 2017–2018 Waterfowl Survey are as follows, rain or shine: **Saturdays, December 9, January 6, February 3, February 24,** and **March 24**. Members are welcome to participate in the surveys. If you are interested in spending a full or half day visiting up to 28 locations from Valley Stream to Massapequa Park, call SSAS's Bill Belford at 385-1759.

SNOW GEESE AT JAMAICA BAY Brien Weiner

December is nearly upon us and visions of Snow Geese dance in my head; each year I look forward to seeing the large flocks of Snow Geese that stage or winter at Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge. In recent years they have favored East Pond, but in the past they were reliable at the end of the Terrapin Trail (when there was one), West Pond, and North Marsh. The East Pond Snow Geese can be elusive; the flock will also roost somewhere over the tracks for the "A" train, and it often seems that time and tide are no help in discerning a pattern. You know they are coming, however, when you hear what sounds like a pack of dogs barking.

With their shining white feathers, and contrasting black eyes, grin patch, and wing tips, Snow Geese are attrac-

tive birds with perky expressions. Among them there may be "blue geese" with white heads and dark bodies. But what makes Snow Geese spectacular are their numbers. Snow Geese often ex-



ceed 1000 at Jamaica Bay; my highest count was about 3500 several years ago. At known staging areas they can number in the tens of thousands and you can easily find blizzards of them in YouTube videos. They are now the most abundant waterfowl on the North American continent.

Much to my dismay, this abundance comes with a price. As their populations grow, they are damaging their fragile Arctic breeding habitat, which in turn harms the health of the Snow Geese and other birds that depend on tundra habitat. Recently reported incidences of polar bears feeding on Snow Goose eggs and chicks have not affected populations. According to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), growth is attributed to the availability of waste grains on agricultural fields on their wintering grounds, which provide a vast food supply, and restrictive hunting regulations that continued into the 1970s and 1980s. (Snow Goose hunting was stopped in 1916 because of low population.) These two factors resulted in higher reproductive and adult survival rates, and offspring that were in better condition to survive.

The DEC recommends reducing the Atlantic Flyway population from currently over one million geese to 500,000–750,000. The DEC maintains that the only practical way to reduce the population is to increase hunter harvest. In 2008, under a Conservation Order authorized by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the DEC extended the hunting season and removed other restrictions on hunting Snow Geese upstate; the Conservation Order does not apply to Long Island, where there are relatively few Snow Geese in huntable areas. In 2016, an estimated 14,359 of New York's 100,000 Snow Geese were harvested. The DEC-recommended "Snow Goose Cookbook" notwithstanding, I cannot help but wonder and hope there is a more humane way to control population.

The Snow Goose occupies a mythical status in literature. In Paul Gallico's classic novella *The Snow Goose*, it is a symbol of love, constancy, and bravery. His book, in turn, inspired William Fiennes' *The Snow Geese: A Story of Home*, in which the author, a young convalescent, describes his therapeutic journey following the Snow Geese from Texas to the Arctic and the people he meets along the way. The book is a poignant meditation that ultimately asks us, what is the nature of "home?"

My father loved Snow Geese as I do. Every year we made trips to Jamaica Bay to find them. Neither snow nor rain stayed my Dad from his appointed birding rounds, nor, in his final years, his failing legs. He would push himself, leaning heavily on his walking stick. Once Dad was too shaky to walk and I was about to drive him home, when we heard a distant barking and soon hundreds of Snow Geese were flying over the parking lot. Often we dipped. But there was joy in dipping together. (*Editor's interruption:* Brien informed me that "dipping is the term birders commonly use when they fail to find their target bird.")

My father passed in 2015 and his cremains were placed in the columbarium at Long Island National Cemetery. The following winter, when I visited the Cemetery, its roving flock of Canada Geese included a single beautiful Snow Goose. I would like to believe in signs — or that like Gallico's goose, this one was looking for Dad as Dad had looked for the Snow Geese — but they are the most abundant waterfowl on the North American continent.

South Shore Audubon Society P.O. Box 31 Freeport, NY 11520-0031

A CHAPTER OF THE NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY

Americans Committed to Conservation

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