

# The Bi-Annual Bird Census

by Leigh Ashbrook, Environmental Educator



The biannual Bird Census is a long standing tradition at The Schuylkill Center. One census is conducted at the height of nesting season, and the other takes place in December, when the natural world is restoring its vitality for another year of life.

This year's spring census took place on a sparkling Saturday morning, early in June. The sun filtered through the woodland canopy, sprinkling our world with shimmering greens and yellows as our census teams set out to conduct the day's work. Some of the most avid birders that morning amazed me with their ability to tune to the 57 species found on The Center's grounds that day. There were flashes of color and cheerful trills, guttural chortles, whistles, and clicks—all helpful clues to help us determine the inhabitants of one of the largest tracts of privately held lands within city limits. Many of our year-round avian residents were spotted and heard that morning, including a red-tailed hawk, downy and red-bellied woodpeckers, tufted titmice, Carolina chickadees, northern cardinals, song sparrows and American goldfinches. Some of the neotropical migrants—those species that winter in Central and South America but migrate in the spring to breed in North America—included ruby-throated hummingbirds, a yellow-billed cuckoo, wood thrushes, veeries, eastern wood pewees, Acadian and great crested flycatchers, gray catbirds, red-eyed vireos, blue-winged warblers, an ovenbird, a yellow-breasted chat, indigo buntings, Baltimore and orchard orioles, and a respectable number of scarlet tanagers.

Some of the species we saw are nonnative, such as starlings, originally from parts of the Asian continent. Others have been here for centuries, inhabiting the nooks and crannies of our landscape, calling the rolling hills and watersheds of Southeastern Pennsylvania home.

It is interesting to note that some of the species nesting at The Schuylkill Center are included on the Pennsylvania list of *Birds of Conservation Concern* (maintained by the Pennsylvania Game Commission), which also overlaps many of the bird species on the *Audubon WatchList*.

*WatchList* species and *Birds of Conservation Concern* are those that are facing population declines or threats because of habitat loss on their wintering and/or breeding grounds.

According to Partners in Flight ([www.partnersinflight.org](http://www.partnersinflight.org)), Audubon ([www.audubon.org/bird/watchlist/bs-bc-pennsylvania.html](http://www.audubon.org/bird/watchlist/bs-bc-pennsylvania.html)) and the PA Game Commission ([www.pgc.state.pa.us/pgc/cwp/view.asp?a=496&q=162144](http://www.pgc.state.pa.us/pgc/cwp/view.asp?a=496&q=162144)), the major reasons for species numbers decline in general has largely been attributed to reduced areas of contiguous habitat due to human impact on land use and development. While the urban landscape was thankfully originally planned with much foresight, with water and land conservation in mind, the effects of human population pressure remain evident. The Schuylkill Center's large tract of land (365 acres) provides a wonderful retreat for wildlife, offering ideal habitat areas for many species, including some of Pennsylvania's *Species of Concern* and *Watchlist* species.

The Acadian flycatcher, *Empidonax virescens*, is one such species seen during SCEE's nesting census. Migrating north annually from Costa Rica, Venezuela and Ecuador, this 5-6" flycatcher is predominantly olive above, with a pale yellow eye ring, 2 buffy or whitish wing bars and long primary feathers. Their emphatic "peet-sa!" call is heard through the moist, beautiful, shady Ravine Loop far more often than this flycatcher is seen! Acadian flycatchers are considered indicators of high quality riparian forest, and this species may be declining in numbers throughout Pennsylvania because of their close association with the eastern hemlock, our state tree which is severely threatened by diseases and pests. While we have no eastern hemlocks in the SCEE ravine adjacent to Smith's Run, our Acadian flycatchers seem content to nest and forage in our numerous beech, tulip poplars and sycamore trees.

The wood thrush, *Hylocichla mustelina*, also appears on the watch list. This species wings its way here each spring from eastern Mexico, Panama and as far south as Colombia. Pennsylvania's forests provide almost 9% of the North American population's nesting habitat, so SCEE acts as a vital breeding ground for this beautiful chorister of our deciduous woods. The wood thrush is slightly smaller than its relative the American robin, with an earthy cinnamon back, brownish-olive tail, heavily spotted buffy breast and sides and a bold white eye ring. This pleasingly plump bird can often be seen foraging for small invertebrates on the damp forest floor. Many birders consider the ethereal flute-like "ee-o-lay" of the wood thrush one of the loveliest and most memorable of North American bird songs.

A pleasant surprise as a spring nester this year at SCEE was the yellow-breasted chat, *Icteria virens*. This largest of all neotropical warblers, after wintering in Panama, joined us this spring in the thickets and early successional forest of the SCEE property near Hagy's Mill Road. Chats, about 7.5 inches long, have thick bills and long tails for warblers. Heavy white spectacles are a diagnostic field mark, and a white whisker stripe borders the brilliant yellow throat and breast. The male chat sings more like a mockingbird than a warbler, with a loud jumbled mix of notes, and often singing at night.

The final bird from SCEE's nesting census occurring on the WatchList is the scarlet tanager, *Piranga olivacea*. This 7-inch neotropical migrant male is a striking blend of scarlet head and body, offset by contrasting black wings and tail. The female is a subdued olive with a duskier, grayish back. The scarlet tanager tends to spend much of its time in the forest canopy, where the males produce a melodious song which Roger Tory Peterson likened to

that of a “robin with a cold”. Scarlet tanagers are a forest interior species very sensitive to forest fragmentation and edge effects. Pennsylvania’s forests support 17% of the breeding population of this species, so again, SCEE is providing a vital portion of the dwindling nesting habitat for this stunning migrant.

The Schuylkill Center staff is working to preserve habitat, to restore the ecology of the landscape through thoughtful land management and restoration practices, and to educate the public about the relationship between the natural and built environments. The integration of The Center in to the surrounding environment, the multiple uses of the landscape immediately surrounding the borders of The Center, laws, zoning, development, non-point source pollution, public support for conservation, balancing the need for education with the need for conservation and resources allocation and availability all affect the lives of the birds and their forest neighbors, the other plants and animals.

Programs on birding, backyard ecology, container gardening with native plants, ecological landscapes, green building, storm water management, wildlife, Integrated Pest Management and watersheds are some of the many programs offered by The Center that support the special avian friends that call the region home.

Birding at The Schuylkill Center: Come see PA Species of Concern!  
Interested in birds and birding? Contact Leigh Ashbrook (215.482.7300 ext. 124) regarding The Center’s bird-related programs and for information on these upcoming programs:

**Saturday, September 8th: SCEE Bird Club: Cape May Birding on the Skimmer**  
8am  
**\$25/person for boat trip. Additional \$15 if you wish to ride in the SCEE van.**

Join us as Captain Bob Carlough takes The Schuylkill Center Bird Club on a 2 hour exploration through the back bays of Southern New Jersey. We'll get a close look at the avian inhabitants of salt marshes and tidal creeks before they migrate south for the winter.

We will look for shorebirds feeding on the mudflats at lowtide, along with clapper rails at egrets. The Skimmer will leave the Miss Chris Marina in Cape May at 1:30pm (to coincide with low tide), so we will have some time to visit Cape May Point State Park in the morning to look for pelicans, ospreys, piping plovers and even bottle-nosed dolphins feeding off-shore.

You can visit Captain Bob's website at [www.skimmer.com](http://www.skimmer.com) to learn more about The Skimmer. The cost per person for the boat ride is \$25. If you wish to ride in the SCEE van, that fee is \$15. Pack lunch, sunscreen, insect repellent and a sun hat. Meet at SCEE at 8 AM that morning, and plan to return to SCEE by 5-6 PM. Please RSVP to Beatrice Kelly to reserve a seat on the van and to let us know that you are coming at 215-482-7300, X 110.

**Tuesday, September 18th : Citizen Science Program: Avian Migration**  
6:30pm-7pm poster session and refreshments; 7pm-8:30 speaker  
**FREE**

There are millions of birds that fly over our region--learn about their habitat and resource needs. How can we support the many species that call the Delaware Valley home during their migrations? What food sources do they need? How can we preserve their habitat? Come and learn more about this phenomenon and how you can get involved-- in your own yard, neighborhood, through the SCEE Bird Club, and beyond!

### **Friday Morning Bird Walks**

8am-10am

**FREE**

All levels of experience are welcomed during our casual Friday Morning Bird Walks at The Schuylkill Center!

Enjoy the beauty of The Center's grounds while learning from seasoned birders, catching glimpses of some of the region's many beautiful birds, and meeting friends.

Good walking shoes and a water bottle are recommended. We have a limited supply of binoculars.

Backyard Ecology: Create Your Own Ecological Wonderland!

Interested in enhancing the regional habitat through backyard ecology?

Contact Fran Lawn, Director of Land Restoration (215.482.7300, ext. 143) for more information on native plants, landscape consultation, Integrated Pest Management and backyard ecology.

Stormwater Management and regional watersheds:

Interested in incorporating conservation-friendly rain barrels in to your garden or learning more about regional water quality and watersheds? Contact Virginia Ranly, Director of Education: 215-482-7300, ext. 129.