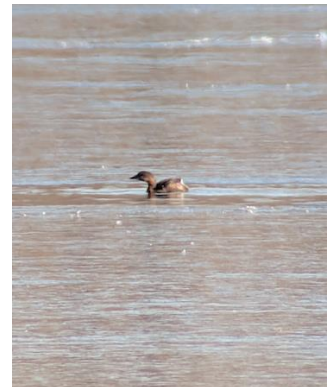


Bucks Birding Blog – Vol 1, Issue 2

Winter of 2020 by Paul Heveran

Hello folks! Welcome to the second installment of the Bucks County Birding Blog. I began birding in Bucks County as a beginner at least as early as the winter of 2012-13. As a homeschooled pre-teen, I relied on my mother (who was instrumental to this budding birder) to drive me around to nearby bird walks. It was at Peace Valley Park that I met my good friend and birding mentor, August Mirabella. We hit it off almost instantly and kept returning to the Saturday morning walks to learn and enjoy birding with the "old-timers". Many a spring Saturday morning was spent at the park, busily sorting through warblers or listening for the next new bird song to puzzle over.

Although another spring is just on our doorstep, I'd like this post to be a reminder of the winter that we all went through in 2021. The date was February 8th, and I wandered over to Nockamixon during lunch break from DeSales University. A bright and sunny day greeted me at the marina, but frigid temperatures and snow cover over a foot deep reminded me that we were still in the grip of winter. The ice cover here was nearly 100%, except for a few tiny holes no bigger than a kitchen countertop. Here a dramatic nature conflict unfolded between an adult Bald Eagle and a Pied-billed Grebe. Every time the grebe surfaced, the eagle would dive down and swipe at it. The grebe would sometimes switch ice holes only for the eagle to follow its every move. This went on for minutes, with the eagle coming reasonably close but never really having a chance to catch the grebe. I've seen footage of eagles doing this before, but never in real life and I was surprised that an adult would try for such a low-percentage meal.



After getting my fill of the grebe and becoming fully chilled myself, I continued on to Tohickon Boat Launch. The entrance road was an impassable mess of packed snow and ice, but I was undeterred and walked the 0.6-mile loop anyway. As I scanned the lake, I saw that it was completely ice-covered save for one small sliver of open water a ways out. This little hotspot was packed with Canada Geese, but also with Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers at first glance. The longer I scanned through, the more ducks I found. Buffleheads, Hooded Mergansers, and Ring-necked Ducks all made their appearances. Two pairs of American Wigeons alternated between ice and water, while one Lesser Scaup quickly turned into three. Halfway into my 2-hour stay, a large flock of Mallards and American Black Ducks dove in from the north. I was simply amazed at the energy and action in this one bit of icy water. Goldeneyes traveled in small packs, males bobbing up and throwing their heads back. Hooded Mergansers chased in and out amongst the geese. A little pod of Buffleheads dove endlessly, and a female Lesser Scaup demanded space whenever she surfaced.

When the action finally settled down a bit, I turned my attention to the few hardy land birds in the nearby trees. Several Northern Flickers shared a small grassy spot without squabbling. A Brown Creeper allowed a marvelously close approach as it fed below eye level on a tree trunk. With nowhere to forage on the ground, Dark-eyed Juncos took to searching tree limbs for bits of food. When a Cooper's Hawk flew right overhead, the birds didn't bother diving for cover, but simply "froze" in place. I discovered that the glove I had put down to dry was now frozen and brittle. My feet were now quite cold, and I knew it was time to head back. A Yellow-rumped Warbler called from roadside cedars as I walked past the same (or another) creeper. I was grateful to have the car handy for a quick thaw to normal temperatures, while thinking once more about the churning group of ducks out on the lake.



Watching those little "backyard" birds brings me to my final anecdote, one that took place in nearby Montgomery County during the cold and snow. Montgomery County is not known as Horned Lark country, but a few birds can be found in the large farm fields at its northern border. When nearly 50 larks congregated at a tiny plowed grass square along a farmer's driveway, something rarer was bound to appear. First came a few Snow Buntings, a joy to watch and a less-than-annual treat in these parts. By the time I was able to pay a visit several days later, it was late afternoon and the sun was directly in my face. Imagine my surprise, though, when one



of the first birds I laid binoculars on was a Lapland Longspur! These Arctic songbirds have been seen in Montgomery County only a couple times in the past 20 years, making this a true rarity in a local sense. I got to share the sighting with a few fellow birders before the sun set and I had to begin another thawing session in the car.

The calendar has flipped to March, and temperatures will be quickly warming. My mind now turns to thoughts of Tree Swallows and Horned Grebes, Eastern Meadowlarks and Common Loons. There is always something new and unexpected in this great birding world we live in. It is my hope that you'll be able to enjoy these new arrivals, whether at your nearest park or even in your backyard.

Until next time, good birding!
Paul Heveran