

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



Owl eyes on you: On winter evenings at dusk, you may get lucky and spot a short-eared owl hunting on a Delaware Bayshore marsh.

Birds of Winter

They join the year-round birds in our bayshore marshes and woodlands. You'll see many at feeders, too.

By Anthony Klock, CU Maurice River

All photos by author.

One thing most of us soon realize about the birds around us is that they seem always to be on the move. South Jersey has long been recognized as a North American birding hotspot and our region can be thought of as a crossroads of bird migration, from the spectacle of shorebirds passing through in

the spring to the gathering of waterfowl during the cold winter months. In addition to these iconic and globally significant phenomena, the long, warm days of spring and summer herald the arrival of neotropical passerines (perching birds) like warblers, flycatchers, and the swallows. Our abundant insect populations provide the protein their nestlings need to develop and fledge.

Come September with its pronounced cold fronts and persistent northwest winds, our summer birds take wing and return to their tropical homes in Central and South America as well as the islands of the Caribbean. Moving in to take their places are the winter birds which breed much farther north. These birds, including passerines, raptors, waterfowl, and shorebirds, find winter refuge in our woodlands, marshes, and even our gardens, joining our year-round resident cardinals, wrens, chickadees, and sparrows at our feeders. They can also be found along our woodland trails.

Among the first wave of songbirds riding cold fronts from the north are countless yellow-rumped warblers. Unlike most warblers these tiny birds do not migrate to the tropics, but winter in our region. Yellow-rumped warblers breed in the northern coniferous forests, often at mid-elevation above 3500 feet. They

are able to switch from relying on insect protein during the spring and summer to feeding on waxy berries of the myrtles and junipers through the depths of winter. On warmer days when some insects fly, you will see yellow-rumps "hawking" bugs from the air. These warblers are easily recognized by their prominent bright yellow rump patches; hence their nickname, butter butt.



The dark-eyed junco is a regular at winter bird feeders in southern New Jersey. Often it blends in so well that all you see is what appears to be the ground moving. They are considered a skulker, often hidden in underbrush and beneath shrubs.

The colder months in southern New Jersey's fields and woods host several species of sparrows; most prominent are the white-

throated sparrows and dark-eyed juncos. These two species are perhaps the two with the shortest migration, as their breeding territories can extend into the northernmost parts of the Garden State. White-throats are, like most sparrows, brown with streaks but have, as their name suggests, a striking white throat patch and vibrant yellow lores on either side of their beaks. Juncos, on the other hand, do not resemble a typical sparrow, sporting slate-gray backs contrasted with a gleaming white breast and belly. When flushed, juncos flash white tail feathers. Both of these species are skulkers, preferring to remain hidden in the underbrush, but they regularly visit feeders particularly in cold weather. White-throated sparrows will often burst into their distinctive "Oh, Canada, Canada..." song throughout the winter. Both of these sparrows silently slip away by the second week of May to return to their breeding territories.



Colder months bring wintering sparrows to our region. The white-throated sparrow earns its common name from the white patch under its bill.

The fox sparrow is a relatively large bird and, as the name suggests, sports a handsome rufous “foxy” plumage with a strongly-streaked breast. Fox sparrows breed widely across Canada and into Alaska and, depending on the subspecies, winter in various regions of the continental US. Snowy weather often brings these forest birds into gardens where they can be observed scratching up the leaf litter in search of fallen berries, seeds, or

invertebrates. Fox sparrows often do not linger for long in one spot.

Brown creepers' and golden-crowned kinglets' high thin "tsee" songs may sound similar, but their habits are quite different. Both species nest in the north country of New England, New York, and into Canada, and winter here in our region. Creepers are superbly camouflaged and are most often observed climbing up the trunks of trees and, upon reaching the top, swooping down to the next tree to begin their climb again. These birds glean insects from the crevasses in tree bark. You may hear the tiny golden-crowned kinglet high up in the tree canopy feeding on the seeds of conifers and other trees. As their name suggests, kinglets possess a bright yellow patch of feathers on the tops of their heads.



The golden-crowned kinglet nests north of our region in New England, New York, and into Canada. When winter comes it can be found in Southern New Jersey.

Hermit thrush is yet another breeder of the great northern forests that overwinters in our woods and gardens. They are fairly drab brown birds, slightly smaller than their cousin, the American robin. Hermits have some light streaking on their breast and have a bit of reddish brown on their rump and tail. These birds are opportunistic feeders, surviving our winters on holly and other berries, but may also be observed scratching the leaf litter for invertebrates and fallen seeds and berries. Unfortunately, their lovely yet haunting song is only heard here for a brief period in early spring, as they move north very early in the season. However, if you do visit the woods in New England during the spring and summer, you can enjoy their flute-like serenades.



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Not all of our winter birds are “LBJs” (little brown jobs); we are visited by several raptor species as well. Often the striking red-shouldered hawk is spotted perched on the edge of wet woods, or heard giving their plaintive whistle call. This buteo, similar in body type to the recognizable red-tailed hawk, has a reddish, almost orange streaked breast, a boldly barred tail, as well as those red shoulder patches. These hawks commonly breed in New England and around the Great Lakes but may actually nest here in South Jersey as well. They feed on mice, snakes, amphibians, and occasionally small birds.

A favorite among South Jersey birders is the short-eared owl. “Shorties” can be observed in marshes hunting rodents in the period right after sunset or before dawn. This habit of hunting in the reduced light earns them the description “crepuscular”. Short-eared owls hunt by sight and sound so they often fly on still evenings, frequently overlapping with the more recognizable northern harriers or “marsh hawks” as they share the same winter habitat.

The best way to familiarize yourself with these and the many other bird species that frequent our region each winter is to get out into nature with some good optics and a field guide. Southern New Jersey has vast areas of habitat that visiting species, as well as our resident birds, need to survive and to flourish. Conservation of and advocacy for these places is a critical challenge that groups like CU Maurice River take up to enhance the quality of life, for both animal and human residents. We hope to see you out in the field or joining us on one of our many programs. For more information, visit **cumauricriver.org** And let us know you learned about CU from *SNJ Today*.

About The Author:
Tony Klock

After 35 years Anthony Klock recently retired from the Voorhees, NJ school system. He was both a fourth grade and Gifted and Talented program teacher. He and his wife Marcia live in Port Norris, New Jersey.

He enjoys leading walks for CU Maurice River and has as his personal mission to bring both young and old to a deeper appreciation of the natural wonders of the "Down Jersey" region. His regular walks are popular with members and guests. An avid gardener, Tony has opened his and Marcia's property to the CU garden tours led by Pat Sutton.

Tony has been a participant in the World Series of Birding as a member of the "CU Fish Hawks". This is the most famous birding competition with international participation.

Tony serves on the Board of both CU Maurice River and the Bayshore Center in Bivalve. Tony is also active with the Bayshore Center at Bivalve (look for him shucking oysters at the raw bar on the docks) and with the Port Norris Fire Company. You can follow him on Instagram at "tkportnorris".