

THE GREAT OUTDOORS



This year's CU Maurice River world series team the Fish Hawks, help raise funds for CU Maurice River's projects. Left to right Tony Klock, Kathy Michel, Mary Watkins, and Jim Blumenstein.

Photo: selfie by Anthony Klock.

World Series – In May

CU Maurice River Competes in the World Series of Birding

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Sometime prior to 1984, famed birder and Down Jersey resident Pete Dunne came up with the idea of a massive birding competition – a spring fling of sorts celebrating the return of many species that

come from southern climes to our region. May is the height of spring migration, as the number of species that either nest here or go onward to places north to breed are added to our year-round residents for a huge birding bonanza.

Mid-April through May is the height of birding season because of migration and the forest canopy. If you are a beginning birder or even a seasoned one, just before the trees leaf out entirely is an excellent time to spy your quarry. Experienced birders can recognize species simply by their calls, and in the spring male birds are especially vocal in their efforts to attract females.

That first birding competition, called the World Series of Birding, was held in 1984, and the winning team was made up of five of our nation's most notable avian observers. Dunne and Roger Tory Peterson were involved, and joining them was David Sibley, who like Peterson has written many acclaimed guides to birds. Rounding out the team were author Bill Boyle and naturalist Pete Bacinski, who directed NJ Audubon's Center at Sandy Hook. They collectively searched New Jersey for as many species as they could identify in a 24-hour period, and topped out at 201 for their historic win, launching a decades-old event.

This year marks the 43rd annual competition, beginning at 12:01 a.m. on Saturday, May 9th and ending at midnight.



April 21, 2026 Three members of the CU Maurice River Fish Hawks search Dix Wildlife Management Area for various species of birds.

Birders simply refer to the World Series of Birding as "The Big Day." In general the rules call for a team to remain together and identify birds as a group either by sighting or hearing the species; they must all be in agreement regarding the identification. They can receive no help the day of the competition and they're on the honor system. Initially everyone competed against teams that could search the entire state, but as interest and participants grew the contest

offered different geographic regions. Before the competition begins scouts can check out the area and tell the team about recent sightings to give them an idea of where specific birds might be found. Doing well on "The Big Day" is a feather in a team's cap, so serious birders tackle the search with gusto but also with close adherence to the rules – it's a gentleman/gentlewoman's sport. It is permitted for participants to lure birds for greater certainty about the species, but they may only utilize their voices; no mechanical or technologic means may be employed.

There are famed tales surrounding this event, one involving people's skill in making bird calls. The Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge was a well-known habitat for barred owls. However, enough people converged there in the evening one year that apparently birders were tallying other birders' calls! It seems that some folks are especially convincing in their imitation of barred owls!

Teams are affiliated with various conservation organizations, and competitors and the organizations they represent use the event to raise dollars for their individual causes/missions. Often there are 90 some teams and 500 participants. Some top-notch organizations like Cornell's Lab of

Ornithology send scouts to look for hard-to-find species prior to The Big Day. Many environmental non-profits annually realize \$5,000-15,000 from their diligent fundraising efforts. Last year, in 2025, New Jersey Audubon raised over \$250,000.

Because these groups cover two to three counties they can't compete with the single-county teams, so their species count is judged against groups that cover the entire state.

With many kinds of territories and combinations of possibilities, one of my favorite categories is the "Big Stay." These teams don't move; they must confine their seeing and hearing to a 17-foot diameter circle – so that choosing a super birding location is vital to winning. The "Big Stay" winner in 2025 was the Springwatch Swifts. Using the Springwatch platform south of Cape May State Park and off Coral Avenue, they tallied 103 species. There are also senior challenges and youth groups and lots more. The largest number of species observed was by Mega with a total of 196, in the Statewide Group. Our organization, CU Maurice River, competed in that group but confined their search to our region and tallied 139 species (their goal was 150)! A full report and mapping of their prowess can

be found at
<https://ebird.org/tripreport/354235>.

New Jersey Audubon always attracts many wonderful teams supporting their organizations. Conservation groups from around New Jersey, and other states too, will pay entrance fees to NJAS, which orchestrates this massive undertaking. CU Maurice River first competed in 2007 and we have had a team every year since 2012. The dollars we raise go toward our conservation programs, including bluebird boxes, osprey platforms, wood duck houses, purple martin gourds, and wetland restoration. Funds also support our mission of raising awareness in the general public about the national and international importance of our Down Jersey region.

All of the members of our team have a teaching background. This year's captain is Mary Watkins, who is a naturalist for both CU and NJ Audubon. An opera singer and music instructor, Mary has an amazing ear for bird calls and makes a serious avocation out of studying these fascinating creatures.

Tony Klock, retired from his teaching position at Kresson Elementary School, enriched his students' studies with outdoor curriculum and nature study. Today he still substitute-teaches in Bayshore communities. A CU

naturalist who enjoys gardening, plant study, butterflies, dragonflies, and observing nature, you can follow him and his amazing photographic journeys with nature on Instagram @tkportnorris.

Kathy Michele, D.V.M., is Associate Dean of Education Emeritus at Penn Vet. and a professor of Veterinary Science. Her love of nature, birds, and conservation spurs her on as one of our area's most enthusiastic birders. She and Tony often lead birding sails on the AJ Meerwald and they also conduct our annual Hansey Creek Road walk, the weekend after the World Series.

Completing the team is naturalist Jim Blumenstein, a social studies teacher at Sterling HS in Somerdale. He loves connecting his students to history and nature through outdoor activities that facilitate a deeper understanding and appreciation of one's connection to the past and present. Over the years he has brought students to "Down Jersey" as part of their annual curriculum. He is clearly a fan of the Bayshore.

I would like to encourage you to support our team, the Fish Hawks, and our mission by making a donation to the nonprofit CU Maurice River's World Series of Birding effort. If you have been a regular reader of

our column you have some insight into the kind of information and activities we provide in our community. We'd love to have you onboard! ■

CU Maurice River welcomes new members to CU Maurice River. Some people enjoy getting involved in activities such as:

- attending presentations,
- cleaning up natural areas,
- building osprey platforms,
- going on field trips,
- engaging in citizen science activities,
- paddling rivers and streams,
- conducting nature surveys,
- saving horseshoe crabs,
- educating children,
- joining interpretative nature hikes,
- installing rain gardens,
- cooking meals for the International Shorebird Recovery Team,
- and lots more.

In fact, their members collectively devote over 10,000 hours each year to the organization. Other people never participate in any of the activities but decide to support our mission financially. In whichever way

people interact with CU, it all makes a difference for our region. If you visit www.CUMauriceRiver.org and select join/renew/donate and choose World Series Birding Fundraiser you can support the team and even join their ranks. Whatever you do, they hope someday to "CU on the River!"

The CU Mission: CU Maurice River is dedicated to protecting the watershed of the Maurice River and the region known as Down Jersey, thereby enabling current and future generations to enjoy the environmental, recreational, cultural, and scenic resources of this Wild & Scenic global treasure. CU invites participation and fosters responsible stewardship. CU supports education, awareness, and informed decision-making utilizing field work, research, and advocacy.

Please scroll down to see photos of a small sampling of CU activities.



CU Maurice River Volunteers affix a predator guard to a recently erected osprey platform on the Maurice River. CU manages over 45 osprey platforms. Photo: Anthony Klock



CU Volunteer and teacher Kathy Geiger examines the structure of a flower with the Elevate enrichment program.

As they discuss the importance of pollinators. Photo: Anthony Klock.



CU Maurice River volunteer and teacher Peter Manzelman explains habitat types to fourth grade students at CU's Annual Wild About Cumberland field trip. CU Maurice River takes 600 students on an explorative trek over three days time. CU File Photo.



Bayshore field trips such as this trek at Cohansey Meadows Farm allow people an up-close look at salt hay farming techniques. Children and adult education about the natural and cultural history of our region are CU Maurice River's hallmark. Photo: J. Morton Galetto



CU Volunteer Dottie Dayton leads a children's make and take activity at the Annual Cumberland County Eagle Festival. Photo: CU File Photo