

South Shore

Skimmer



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A Paean to Pigeons

by Betty Borowsky

Generally we call birds that are so numerous that we don't pay much attention to them "trash birds." But there are trash birds and then there are trash birds.

Probably the most maligned trash bird in New York City, and increasingly in the suburbs, is the common pigeon, or rock dove, *Columbia livia*. These birds love people, especially their food. If you go to a city park and take out your sandwich, you will have company in a very few minutes, whether you like it or not.

And, of course, they poop. A lot. On everything. Their feces are not only offensive, but their acidity can corrode marble and even iron. It has caused serious damage to statues and the very infrastructure of the city, especially bridges. In addition, there are some diseases associated with pigeon droppings, such as *Cryptococcosis*, *Histoplasmosis*, and *Psittacosis*. But the risk of pigeon-related diseases is pretty low. The pathogens are rare, and generally it is people with compromised immune systems who are at risk from these diseases.¹

On the other hand, this bird has so many good things going for it! There's so many interesting things about pigeons that there's actually a Pigeon Museum in Oklahoma City.²

Pigeons are extremely intelligent (they are easily trained), loyal (they mate for life), they really bond with specific humans, and they're cute. They even make that nice cozy cooing sound.

And it's really not their fault that they're so numerous. They've become so common not because they have adapted to our habitat, but really because we have expanded theirs. We used to live in caves; now we live in homes and steep-sided buildings. Pigeons' preferred nest sites have always been niches in steep cliffs. Well, to them, our buildings offer endless nest sites.

Of course, we have bred the heck out of them. The link in footnote 2 brings you to a gallery of photos of many varieties, and some of them are just bizarre.³

But the most interesting variety has got to be the "carrier" or "homing" pigeon, which has been bred for its ability to return to its nest no matter how far away it might be.

Photo by Jay Koolpix



You can transport a trained pigeon as far away from its nest as 1,100 miles, to a place it has never been before, release it, and it will find its way back home in a few days. It can fly as many as 700 miles a day, but it does need to rest after a few hours.

How in the world do they do this? We know how they do it in general, but the physiological details are still not understood. What we do know is that pigeons' homing ability starts with their innate, deep attachment to their natal nest site. They always return to their nests if it's at all possible. Pigeons want to go home.

The pigeons locate their nests in two stages. First, they use the earth's magnetic field to fly in the general direction of their nest sites. Then when they get close enough, they use visual cues to find their exact nest.

You have undoubtedly seen flocks of pigeons just flying around in circles. They've memorized the visual features of the surrounding terrain during their exercise flights.

How do they detect the earth's magnetic field? This is still not fully established. Researchers have shown that magnetite (a mineral that behaves like a tiny magnet) is present in pigeons' beaks. (Maybe in the cere?)

(Continued on page 3)

SSAS Nominating Committee

Help lead SSAS!

Any member in good standing may suggest candidates for officers and directors for the 2024–2025 term, which starts in June 2024.

If you are interested in helping to lead SSAS, please contact Nominating Committee members Will Laffey at Feathered.Will.10@gmail.com, Jim and Gail Brown at (516) 608-1446, or Janice Basilicata at (516) 546-0275.

Scholarships

For High School Students

SSAS awards four \$250 scholarships to graduating high school seniors who plan to pursue college studies related to the environment.

Candidates must reside on the South Shore of Nassau County to be eligible.

Applications available through your guidance counselor.

Scholarship winners are announced in June.

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SSAS
 A Chapter of the National Audubon Society
SSAudubon.org

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

Bird Walks

by Joe Landesberg

Join us on our Bird Walks! **To register, text me your name and contact information at 516-467-9498.** Bird Walks are free of charge and start at 9 AM. No walk if it rains or snows. Text me regarding questionable conditions.

April Sundays

- 4/7: Jones Beach Coast Guard Station (Meet in parking area)
- 4/14: Point Lookout/Lido Preserve
- 4/21: Hempstead Lake State Park (Meet in parking lot #3)
- 4/28: Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge, Queens

May

- 5/5: No Walk | Happy Easter!
- 5/12: Mill Pond Park (Bellmore/Wantagh | Meet at gazebo) | Happy Mother's Day!
- 5/25: (Saturday) Oceanside Marine Nature Study Area
- 5/26: Jones Beach Coast Guard Station (Meet in parking area)

June Sundays

- 6/2: Massapequa Park (followed by SSAS Annual Picnic at Brady Park)
- 6/9: Hempstead Lake State Park (Meet in parking lot #3)

Summer Break until Mid-August

For future Bird Walks, check our website & Facebook page:

SSAudubon.org/bird-walks • [Facebook.com/SSAudubon](https://www.facebook.com/SSAudubon)

Directions: SSAudubon.org/directions.asp



WILDLIFE CENTER OF LONG ISLAND

(formerly known as Volunteers for Wildlife) has been dedicated to the preservation of Long Island's wildlife and natural habitats since 1982

Wildlife Hotline: (516) 674-0982
<https://wildlifecenterli.org/>



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(Continued from page 1)

It makes sense that magnetite might be the magnetoreceptor in animals; it behaves like a magnet in the environment. But other scientists have proposed that the magnetoreceptor is a chemical pigment in the eye. At this point, we don't know whether it is one or the other or perhaps both of these. Or maybe it's something else entirely.

And how is the magnetic stimulus transduced into signals that can be analyzed by the brain? To my knowledge, nobody knows the answer to this either.

Pigeons have been used by humans to carry messages over long distances for thousands of years. They were essential in World War I, before wireless communications other than the radio were available. The military used a cute trick—when pigeons were used to carry messages back and forth between two specific locations, their nests were kept at one location, and their food at the other!

Other birds and other animals—even plants—can detect magnetic fields, but to our knowledge the pigeon is hands down the most adept at using it for precision geolocation. It's amazing that after so much research we still don't know how they do it, and the answer is going to be very, very interesting when we find out.

¹<https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/health/health-topics/pigeon.page>

²<https://www.theamericanpigeonmuseum.org/>

³Look at these! <https://www.theamericanpigeonmuseum.org/pigeon-breed-gallery>

Two Scholarships Open to College Juniors, Seniors or Graduate Students

by Betty Borowsky

We are very happy to offer two \$1,000 college scholarships this year: one funded by Evelyn Bishop and her family, and one funded by Jay Koolpix. Each will be awarded to a different college junior, senior, or graduate student who is taking courses to prepare for a degree in an area of biological or environmental science. This includes wildlife management, forestry, animal behavior, ecology, marine biology, oceanography, mammalogy, ornithology, or the field of sustainable and renewable energy.

To be eligible for the scholarships, applicants must be residents of one of the areas listed at www.ssaudubon.org/areas-we-serve.asp and/or attend a college in Nassau or Suffolk County.

Previous winners have used their scholarships to help purchase books, to pay for travel expenses to field sites, for specialized equipment, or other educational needs.

Applications are available at our website, www.ssaudubon.org, and are due by April 30, 2024. They should be emailed to either Betsy Gulotta, betsy.gulotta@ncc.edu, or Betty Borowsky, bborow@optonline.net, or sent by regular mail to Betsy Gulotta, 2 Anding Avenue, Merrick, NY 11566.

For more information and for assistance with application forms, do not hesitate to contact Betsy Gulotta or Betty Borowsky at the email addresses above.

Come Join Us in the Tackapausha Garden

by Louise DeCesare

As spring approaches, a new season begins at the Tackapausha Museum native plant garden in Seaford. **We welcome all gardeners (beginners to seasoned) and look forward to seeing many of the dedicated SSAS volunteers who have helped improve and maintain the garden in past seasons.** Please join us in this effort to help build bird friendly communities.

If you would like to participate or would like additional information, please contact Louise at Lmdecesare128@gmail.com or 917-548-6974, or check our Facebook page for the latest updates at <https://www.facebook.com/SSAudubon>. For information on plants indigenous to your local area and the birds they benefit, visit the National Audubon Native Plants Database at <https://www.audubon.org/native-plants>.



Photo by Louise DeCesare

Third Annual SSAS Picnic

by Marilyn Hametz

Sunday, June 2 will be the Third Annual SSAS Picnic!

The picnic will be in Brady Park, at Lakeshore Drive and Front Street in Massapequa Park, at about 11:30 AM (after the SSAS bird walk in Massapequa Preserve). Brady Park adjoins the preserve's paved trail at mile marker 0.5.

Bring your children, grandchildren, and friends, and a cold lunch. SSAS will provide beverages, snacks, and prizes for the children's scavenger hunt. Individually wrapped desserts and additional snacks are always appreciated.

Everyone enjoys the raffle, so please consider donating what you can. Bird-related items; unused household or handmade items; house or garden plants; gift baskets and gift certificates are among the popular raffle items.

Please note there are no electrical outlets, there will not be grilling facilities, and alcoholic beverages are prohibited in the park.

There is a small parking lot and street parking on Lakeshore Drive. Our reserved section is partially roofed, so there is no need for a rain date.

Please contact Marilyn, mwhametz@optonline.net, 516-799-7189 or Betty, bborow@optonline.net, 516-764-3596 to RSVP so we know how many people will be coming or if you have questions.

Coming Attractions

**Monarch Migration & Conservation with Robyn & Paul, A Couple without Borders
Tuesday, March 12 @ 7:30 PM at the Freeport Memorial Library**

Monarch butterflies are a beloved and mind-blowingly interesting species—and one that is in an uphill battle for survival. We'll be presenting not only what makes these insects so special along with their incredible migration, but also local conservation efforts. You'll learn about hands-on volunteer opportunities and many other ways you can help monarchs—and are guaranteed to learn things you didn't know about them!

Robyn & Paul are a local conservation-driven birding couple who explore the world and share it with their over 25K followers on Instagram. Robyn was a former zookeeper for the Wildlife Conservation Society at the Bronx Zoo. They are both involved with many community science and volunteer projects including spending each July to September on monarch conservation in NYC and on Long Island, which was featured in the New York Times: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/14/nyregion/to-save-monarch-butterflies-they-had-to-silence-the-lawn-mowers.html>

**Happy Warblers of Spring with Joe Giunta
Tuesday, April 9 @ 7:30 PM at the Freeport Memorial Library**

Joe will give a slide-enhanced presentation about the 35 warbler species that are regularly seen in the NYC area. He will give us tips on ID, information about migration, and what makes warbler watching such a great activity.

Joe Giunta, a native New Yorker, has been birding the NYC region for over 30 years. He is the birding instructor for the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and has led bird walks for the Nature Conservancy, NYC Audubon, Linnean Society, Brooklyn Bird Club, and South Fork Natural History Society. He is a captain in the Brooklyn and Southern Nassau Christmas Bird Counts and has participated in NYS breeding bird surveys. An enthusiastic traveler, he has birded extensively in Central and South America. Joe is the owner of Happy Warblers LLC, a birding and educational travel company.

**Baby Birds of Southern Nassau County with Jay Koolpix
Tuesday, May 14 @ 7:30 PM at the Freeport Memorial Library**

Jay will show birds mating and sitting on eggs, chicks hatching and snuggling with parents, and their amazing cuteness and antics. "I retired 11 years ago and am now heading out into nature almost every day, pursuing the challenge of finding and photographing birds. I attempt to capture the birds doing their usual behavior or unusual behavior. I appreciate the honor of SSAS allowing me to share my results. This will be a multimedia presentation."

Photo by Jay Koolpix



More Great Programs Coming Your Way!

Find program updates & links on: SSAudubon.org • facebook.com/SSAudubon

Reduce Packaging and Toxins

by Guy Jacob

One thing environmentalists and industry agree on: bottled water is merely one packaging product in an ever-expanding ambition to package food and beverage products in plastic containers. **More than half of all the plastics ever produced have been made since 2000.**¹

Common sense tells us that this is neither needed, nor sustainable, nor healthy. And all we need to do is look around us to know that we cannot recycle our way out of this problem.

The New York Packaging Reduction and Recycling Infrastructure Act² is the visionary legislation we must pass to get a handle on our inexorable, toxic waste.

It will reduce plastic packaging by 50% gradually over twelve years. The bill prohibits certain toxic chemicals commonly found in packaging: PFAS, lead, mercury, formaldehyde, bisphenols, and toluene. And it will save taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars because companies will be required to pay for the management and recycling of their packaging waste.

Various publications, including *Newsday*³ have recently featured articles that discuss the latest research about the sobering health hazards our overreliance on plastics is causing. Because industry is focused solely on their profits and is fighting hard to defeat this bill, we need the same bipartisan, informed moral courage our Long Island legislators demonstrated when they stood tall to protect our families and our future by passing the Birds & Bees Protection Act.

¹<https://www.plasticsoupfoundation.org/en/plastic-facts-and-figures/>

²<https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2023/S4246/amendment/A>

³Lisa L. Colangelo, "Tiny 'nanoplastic' pieces are in bottled water. What that means for your health," *Newsday*, 12 January 2024, <https://www.newsday.com/news/health/nanoplastics-barrier-water-bottles-oz4f1rhl>

Photo by Jay Koolpix



Michael Sperling Bird Sanctuary

by Guy Jacob

In fond memory of and as a tribute to our late President, Michael Sperling, a devoted advocate for wildlife, the SSAS Board of Directors established the Michael Sperling Bird Sanctuary.

SSAS is in a contractual agreement with the Nassau County Department of Public Works through their Adopt-a-Sump program. Our sanctuary is located within a storm water basin, which is located on North Pine Street at the intersection of Wood Avenue in North Massapequa.

In addition to a core group of SSAS Board members, we'd like to thank the following groups whose members have collaborated with us in the sanctuary. Their comradery is unparalleled, and they've made a world of difference for pollinators:

Massapequa Boy Scout Troops 339 & 590
Plainedge High School Science Honor Society
Cornell Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners
Long Island Sierra Club
Hofstra University Department of Geology,
Environment & Sustainability
ReWild LI South Nassau Chapter
Valley Stream Beautification Club
Nassau Hiking & Outdoor Club
Town of Hempstead Department of Conservation & Waterways

We could greatly benefit from more help, and we're looking a few volunteers who love to garden or are simply happy to lend a hand. Help us rewild our sanctuary by removing invasive species including mugwort, English ivy, garlic mustard, and oriental bittersweet. Removing introduced species helps us make more room for native flora that support pollinators.

To get involved: email Conservation Co-Chair, Guy Jacob: guyjacob24@gmail.com

Wishlist: we seek donations of old cinder blocks and Belgium stones to construct beds and borders.

(Continued on page 6) Photo by Jay Koolpix



Fighting Climate Change: Support the Climate Change Superfund Act

by Jim Brown

Numerous articles that have appeared here in the Skimmer—and in countless other publications—point to the critical need to fight climate change strongly and persistently, mitigating the emission of greenhouse gases, and smartly adapting to, and remedying the negative impacts from the climate chaos we are currently experiencing, and will unfortunately continue to confront for years to come. **As New Yorkers, we can have a positive impact by taking action in support of an important climate bill currently before the State Senate and Assembly, the Climate Change Superfund Act, S.2129A/A.3351A.**

The Climate Change Superfund Act holds fossil fuel companies—“Big Oil”—responsible for damages resulting from the greenhouse gas pollution caused by their products over the years. The bill requires the largest companies (those that have emitted over one billion tons of GHGs during the years 2000–2018) pay, based on the proportional share of emissions that each company is responsible for, a portion of a total \$3 billion payable to the people of New York. The funds would be dedicated to climate change adaptation and remediation. These necessary projects would no longer be borne entirely by other taxpayers.

This legislation is based, like earlier Superfund legislation at state and federal levels, on the well-established principle of “polluter pays.” These companies have not only polluted the atmosphere for many years, they have known the truth about their activities’ impact on global heating, have hidden facts discovered by their own research scientists explaining the impact, and then have engaged in campaigns of climate change denial. All this was done to maximize profits for their companies and industry. Big Oil is indeed responsible for numerous damages to people, wildlife and the environment stemming from greenhouse gas emissions. The Climate Change Superfund Act addresses that important fact.

This groundbreaking bill is supported by many environmental and social justice organizations, including NYPIRG, Food and Water Watch, Sierra Club Atlantic Chapter, New York Communities for Change, and several other New York Audubon chapters as well.

SSAS members and friends can take immediate action in support of S.2129A/A.3351A. Please urge the Governor and your State Representatives to include this bill in the budget for the current fiscal year. This can be done at:

<https://secure.foodandwaterwatch.org/act/make-polluters-pay-pass-climate-change-superfund-act>

For additional information, see the following links to the bill, and to a letter signed by various organizations to Governor Hochul in support of the bill:

<https://nyassembly.gov/leg/?term=2023&bn=A03351>

https://www.nypirg.org/pubs/202312/Governor_Climate_Superfund_Letter_240_Groups_10_6_2023.pdf

(Continued from page 5)

About the sanctuary: <https://www.ssaudubon.org/michael-sperling-bird-sanctuary>

Why it matters:

Insects pollinate 87.5% of all plants and 90% of all flowering plants. (Ollerton, et al. 2011)

Invertebrate abundance has reduced more than 45% since 1974. (Dirzo, et al. 2014)

If pollinators were to disappear, 87% to 90% of the plants on planet Earth would also disappear. Not only would such a loss be a fatal blow to humans, it would also take most other multicellular species with it as well. (Doug Tallamy, *Nature's Best Hope*)

Pollinators in Peril: https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/campaigns/native_pollinators/pdfs/Pollinators_in_Peril.pdf

Thank you, Donors!

Sharon Bogart

Kathryn A. & Vincent G. Heintz

Bruce A. Kopit

Richard G. Kopsco

Brian Ohst



First Birds Back

by Russ Comeau

You've seen the first subtle signs of spring are here, and it has you wondering, "When will spring migrants return to the Long Island area?"

By mid-February, continuing through March, waves of the first birds back have already started migrating across Nassau County! First spring arrivals are our short distance migrants that winter in North America. Species that start moving up from south of us, into and past Long Island in increasing numbers by mid-February include Common Grackle, Red-winged Blackbird, American Robin, Killdeer, Brown-headed Cowbird, European Starling, Rusty Blackbird, American Woodcock, Wilson's Snipe, and Song Sparrow, to name a number.

By early March, bonded pairs of boldly patterned American Oystercatchers are first to start returning to south shore beaches in increasing numbers!

These short-distance migrants are our first birds back because they're often close by, many in mid-Atlantic and southeastern US states. Although some may stay the summer on LI, the majority are just passing through here on their way north for spring, summer, and fall.

Winter landbirds leaving now. Long-eared, Short-eared, and Saw-whet Owls. Red-shouldered and Rough-legged Hawks. Northern Harrier, Sharp-shinned and Cooper's Hawks, and eventually Merlin numbers will drop considerably as many head north now until sometime in autumn. This includes wintering species like Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Yellow-rumped and Orange-crowned Warblers, Dark-eyed Junco, American Tree and Fox Sparrows, Winter Wren, American Pipit, Lapland Longspur, Snow Bunting, Rusty Blackbird, and Northern Shrike.

Early arrivals by April. Look for waves of these fresh arrivals in their appropriate habitat: Eastern Phoebe, Hermit Thrush, Golden-crowned and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Brown Creeper, and White-crowned Sparrow. Again, many will be passing through LI in waves on their way to more northerly nesting grounds.

Bright, colorful neotropicals. Few, if any migrating neotropicals (warblers, vireos, and others that winter in Central or South America) reach Long Island before April. They need more time to get here because they're traveling from long distances. But then, wave after wave of vividly colored neotropical migrants will be mostly passing through on their way to northern breeding grounds starting in early April and building up to the mid-April through late May peak, then tailing off sharply.

The Cassowary Kid: Life with Living Dinosaurs

by Todd Green

How do you protect an animal that few know exists?

Cassowaries are huge, flightless birds native to Australia and New Guinea. These charismatic and fascinating birds possess brightly colored heads and necks, crown-like structures jutting out of their heads, and dagger-shaped claws. Despite their aggressive nature, **these vegetarian birds are critically important to the delicate ecosystems that they inhabit** by feeding on native fruits and dispersing the seeds—literally planting the rainforest. In addition, cassowaries are used as modern analogs by paleontologists to help untangle the mysterious behaviors and lives of long-extinct dinosaurs.

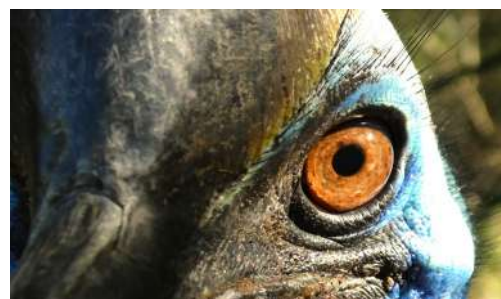
One of the few modern cassowary researchers in the world is a member of the South Shore Audubon Society. Despite growing up in the snowy mountains of Colorado, **Dr. Todd Green** first became passionate about these tropical birds as a child. Dr. Green is currently an Assistant Professor at New York Institute of Technology College of Osteopathic Medicine at Arkansas State University and has dedicated his research career to understanding the biology, behavior, and evolution of cassowaries. To allow these endangered animals to be more accessible to the general public and promote their conservation, Dr. Green and 1527 Productions are teaming up to develop a unique documentary:

A lethal, living dinosaur inspired a five-year-old boy to become one of their leading experts. Now, Dr. Todd Green aims to assist in protecting these endangered animals by illuminating their elusive lives and igniting a global outreach effort. This documentary provides an inside look at Dr. Green's groundbreaking research as he shares his pursuits with prospective child scientists—and kindred spirits.

Find out how you can support this film and ongoing cassowary research here:

<https://lifewithlivingdinosaurs.com/>

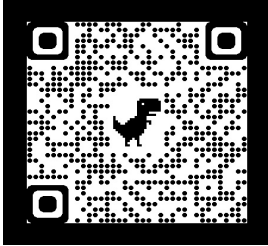
Follow Dr. Green on Twitter and Instagram @TheCassowaryKid



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Join us on our Bird Walks!

Join South Shore Audubon Society!

Become a member of our local chapter for **only \$20 per year!** Receive our newsletter, *South Shore Skimmer*, which includes listings for our local outings and programs as well as the latest on environmental issues and initiatives.

To **join or renew** your membership, make your check payable to **South Shore Audubon Society** and send the form and check to: **PO Box 31, Freeport, NY 11520-0031.**

→ **All memberships expire in September.** ←

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Circle One: JOIN or RENEW

Donations are tax-deductible!