

Oakland Owlets Winter Birding at Kensington Metropark

A hardy group of Oakland Owlets' friends gathered at Kensington Metropark on Saturday, January 18th. Early morning precipitation left a thin coating of ice crystals on the



roadways and trails; however, this snowy glaze did not detour our dedicated birders. Kathleen Hansen, the President of the Huron Valley Audubon Club, joined the group. The Huron Valley Audubon Club regularly conducts birding surveys at Kensington and supports a Motus Tower at the park. Kathleen shared some information about Huron Valley Audubon along with some tips about hand feeding birds. She provided everyone with a small bag of raw peanuts and walnuts explaining this mixture is the best for the birds.

Black-capped Chickadees, Downy Woodpeckers and many other birds watched us as we walked on the trail, knowing soon, they would be the beneficiaries of some nutritious treats. Kensington Metropark has a reputation as a place where you can handfeed songbirds. The morning weather may have dampened park visitors. We were the biggest group on the trail. The park is usually bustling with people year-round, however, the cloudy skies and cold temperatures limited competition to see the birds in hand. Right away, birds were actively taking handouts.

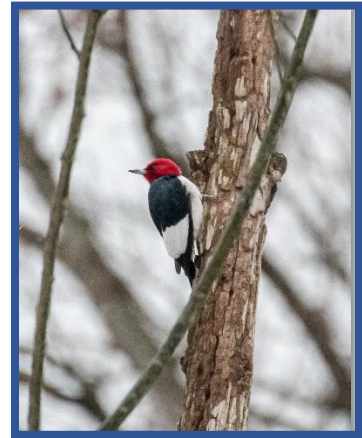


Just outside of the Nature Center, we could hear and see woodpeckers on the bare trees nearby. A Red-tailed hawk perched on a bare tree near the building. Like a statue the Red tail hawk was scanning the area for a meal. An **Eastern Bluebird** was dining nearby on a Nannyberry bush just outside of the nature Center.



Along the trail beyond the Nature Center, the group heard the gurgling call of the Red-bellied Woodpecker. This beautiful colored bird kept its distance, but its woodpecker behavior was easy to spot. Downy Woodpeckers were not shy and landed on several outstretch palms for peanuts. For many Owlet friends this was their first experience with this type of activity. Everyone was patient and calm while at the same time excited with the thrill of seeing these birds so closely along with the sensation of the birds landing on their hands.

We slowly moved down the trail and stopped along the way looking for new birds. Eventually we reached a wetland bridge on the path where we began to see and hear another woodpecker - **the Red-headed Woodpecker**. This striking patterned woodpecker is not commonly seen in the area. Red-headed Woodpeckers have specific habitat requirements. The open swampy wetland along the trail proved to be a good place to see this bird. Several dead or dying trees in this area provide vital nesting cavities and bug meals to Red-headed woodpeckers. Red-headed woodpecker populations have declined by 54% since 1966, which makes seeing this bird even more rewarding. At least three birds were present along the path including an immature bird which is drab and not as colorful as the flying checkerboard adults.



Further along the trail the group walked into a deciduous hardwood forest. Forest songbirds like Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmice and **Downy Woodpecker** tagged along with the group. Everyone continued to stop and offer peanuts to feathered friends. We eventually returned to the Nature Center which opened at 10 am. Just before entering the warm building, we heard the call of Sandhill Cranes which overwinter at Kensington plus saw a new woodpecker – the Northern Flicker.



Everyone thanked Kathleen Hansen for sharing her time and expertise along with the treats enjoyed by the birds. Everyone spent some time inside the Nature Center before heading home. Nature center staff were not available to speak to the group, but there was a chance explore the educational exhibits. The group ended up with an eBird Checklist of 19 species. Although our eBird Checklist was lower than expected, It was a wonderful experience to hold the birds in the palm of your hands. One of the biggest birds landing on Uday's hand was Mourning Dove. Something to always remember.

Although the weather was chilly and dreary, everyone left with a smile for a morning spent in the woods along the trail immersed in nature. The birds helped relieve some of the stresses of modern-day life.

Photo credits – Kathleen Dougherty & Mary Zednik. A special thank you to Mary for sharing her photos.

