

Birds in the Preserve

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The varied habitats of Greenbelt and its surroundings make it inevitable that the Forest Preserve will be well represented in the array of birds to be found, not just those peculiar to forest but also those that work its edges; that inhabit open country, wetlands and lakes; and that are common to urban and suburban neighborhoods. Indeed, it is to impoverish any account to restrict it to the Preserve, which as its name implies is restricted mainly to woods; many of the species not found in forests specifically can be seen and heard within the Preserve on their way to and from feeding areas and nighttime roosts. A brief sketch of what can be expected at each season throughout Greenbelt follows. Emphasis will be placed where appropriate on birds most likely to be seen within the Preserve.

Winter

Included with this writeup is the summary of the Greenbelt Christmas Bird Count, conducted on January 1, 2016. This year's count represents the winter bird population of the greater Greenbelt area fairly well. Other than seasonal raptors, juncos, Winter Wren, Brown Creeper, the White-Throated, Fox, and American Tree Sparrows, and several waterfowl species, most of Greenbelt's winter residents are here year-round. These include the owls (Long-eared and Short-eared potential exceptions; when seen here it is in winter) and woodpeckers (the Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker the winter-only exception). With most all-year species, the actual individuals found in winter will usually be different from those in the area in spring and summer; bird populations generally undergo north-south population shifts within the year-round occupied range. Cardinals, Northern Mockingbirds, Song Sparrows, Carolina Wrens and Robins are among the frequently-seen residents of yards and gardens, with Dark-eyed Junco circulating among them on trees and the ground. Mourning Doves can be seen roosting in trees or on wires and feeding on the ground, the melancholy call that gave them their name most often heard from high-roosting birds. The unusual tree-crawling behavior of the Brown Creeper and White-breasted Nuthatch requires careful study of trunks to locate (the call and brighter hues of the latter making it easier to see). Two species of crow live here all year, the

Fish Crow being easily distinguished from the American Crow only by its weak 'cah' as compared to what Roger Tory Peterson called the "honest-to-goodness caw" of the American. These birds have massive nightly roosts, to which large numbers can be seen repairing in late afternoon. Lucky observers - including a few at the 2016 Christmas count - may see the occasional Northern Raven, ordinarily a bird of the mountains to the west. (It's twice as big as the crows.) Icterids are well represented by the Common Grackle and the Red-winged Blackbird. Flocks of these can be signal events, a roving carpet on air, ground and nearby trees sweeping past, never settling long, to a cacophony of avian conversation. The introduced European Starling, another year-round species, can form substantial flocks as well. The Tufted Titmouse and Carolina Chickadee are frequently seen and heard at feeders and in trees, as is the American Goldfinch in its drab winter plumage.

The Bald Eagle, a notable winter resident, breeds in February; an easily visible nest, which has been occupied by the same pair for years, can be found at the bridge over Beaverdam Creek on Research Road in the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC). They're usually gone by late spring. When not on the nest they tend to be seen near water; the Christmas count found one at Buddy Attick Lake, where they share habitat with numerous waterfowl, a number of them seasonal (American Wigeon, Ring-necked Duck, Lesser Scaup, Ruddy Duck, Hooded Merganser). The Canada Goose became a year-round Greenbelt resident not long ago, part of a growing phenomenon of "non-migratory Canadas," although the southernmost edge of the species' "true" year-round range appears to have encompassed Greenbelt. Many gulls frequent the lake and nearby areas in winter; with few if any exceptions, these are Ring-billed Gulls.

In the Forest Preserve proper, Cardinals, Rufous-sided Towhees, and Hermit Thrushes may be seen. The Brown Creeper, primarily a forest bird, is more likely to be seen in the Preserve than elsewhere. The Red-shouldered Hawk haunts streams, feeding on small mammals. The White-throated Sparrow can be found in groups at woods edge, with Chickadees farther in. Rarely seen in the forest, Crows frequently fly overhead on the way to day feeding areas or night roosts. The Pileated Woodpecker, North America's largest, is more likely to be seen inside than outside the Preserve. The Wild Turkey has recently taken up residence in Greenbelt; although it is mainly seen in or at the edges of open areas, the writer, turning a corner on a trail run, once surprised one well within the Preserve. The Red Crossbill, a winter resident and specialist feeder on conifer seeds pried from cones with its unique bill, may be best seen in pine stands within the Preserve.

Spring/Summer

The Forest Preserve activity picks up when the warblers arrive with the spring migration. These birds tend to prefer high-canopy forest, and can occupy all levels within such forests. Numerous species can be seen, many resident, many passing through on their way to breeding territories. (One should note that the impressive number of large deciduous trees in Greenbelt proper, and the forest patches of GHI woodlands, can yield good warbler hunting.) Although Juncos and wintering Sparrows have departed, the Song Sparrow remains, singing its distinctive song from tree bush and

wire. The Brown Creeper has gone for cooler higher climes, but the White-breasted Nuthatch remains to crawl up and down tree trunks. Robins, Mockingbirds and Cardinals remain, although new individuals may have replaced those that were here in winter. The Northern Catbird arrives, as easy to see in yards and gardens as around Buddy Attick Lake or in the woods. The House Wren returns with one of the most melodious summer bird songs, joining that of the year-round Carolina Wren. Careful spotters can make out Baltimore Orioles or Scarlet Tanagers high in large deciduous trees.

In other Greenbelt habitats, the Lake sees the return of the Wood Duck (whose drake may be the most beautiful North American bird, and is now in its gaudy breeding plumage) to join the year-round Pied-Billed Grebe and Mallard. Ospreys have been appearing at the Lake more often in recent summers. The winter species noted above for the lake have departed. Woodland edges may infrequently yield Wild Turkey. Red-tailed Hawks are common in open areas, and Red-shouldered Hawks near wooded streams. As at all times of year, the American Kestrel, our smallest falcon, can be seen on wires near open areas.

Autumn

The fall migration can bring many hawks of various species down the Atlantic Flyway toward winter homes in Central and South America. The Rough-legged Hawk arrives for winter; Red-tailed, Red-shouldered (near its northern limit as a winter resident), Coopers and Sharp-shinned Hawks remain. A notable migrant is the Tundra Swan; although not staying in Greenbelt, it can be heard, and if one is fortunate, seen, flying high overhead on its way to the Eastern Shore and points south, often at night. Vulture populations shift, but both the Turkey and Black Vultures can be seen here all year.