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## January Meeting

### January 3—Phenology—Gail Bishop

Gail has worked with National Parks in education and restoration for many years. She will share the work she is doing on phenology (the study of cyclic and seasonal phenomena in relation to climate and plant and animal life) and the Nature's Notebook website/app that is used by the National Phenology Network.

## January Field Trips & Events

January 2 (Wed.)—Jackson County Christmas Bird Count

January 12 (Sat.)—Monthly Lagoon Survey (meet at new lagoon gate near Duncan Lake at 8am).

January 26 (Sat.)—Sparrow trip to Pearl River county. Meet at Mid-Town Market (behind Ed's Burgers).

Meetings are held on the first Thursday of the month (September through May) in the Education Building at the Hattiesburg Zoo. Refreshments at 6:30 pm. Meetings begin at 7:00 pm and are open to the public.

These, as well as other events, can also be seen (and downloaded) at the [PWAS website](#).

Pine Woods Audubon Society  
is a chapter of National  
Audubon Society, Inc.



## President's Corner

By the time you read this, the Christmas Bird Count season will be almost over. The last official date for a Christmas Bird Count is January 5. I expect to have a tentative summary of our Hattiesburg Christmas Bird Count to share with you at our January meeting.

The winter counting season is not quite over yet, however. February 15-18 is the scheduled time for the Great Backyard Bird Count. This is a much less strenuous event that doesn't require going any further than your own backyard. You can visit the GBBC website for this event to get all the nitty gritty details. The executive summary is—submit as many stationary bird counts as you wish during the period. Multiple counts per day are welcomed (but there is a suggested minimum time for a count). Being a group never to miss the opportunity for a social event, PWAS plans a gathering at a member's house for the Saturday morning during the event (this year Saturday, February 16) which we call a Window Watch. While it has been discussed some already, I don't think that I have a host formally committed yet. If you would like to host this event, please contact me (if someone has already told me that they were going to host, forgive me for my poor {and getting poorer} memory and remind me). After the Window Watch count, we will also do our monthly survey at the Hattiesburg Sewage Lagoons (tentatively starting at 1pm).

I hope everyone has had a wonderful holiday season. See you on January 3rd.

Larry Basden

## Q & A from Bird Watcher's Digest (March/April 2011)

**Q:** Why do so many birds have red eyes? I've noticed common loon, western grebe, Cooper's hawk, and spotted towhees all have red eyes. I know of no mammal or reptile with red eyes. What is the evolutionary advantage of red eyes in birds?

**A:** Color qualifies as one component in the realm of biological information known as "nonverbal communication": the exchange of information between two or more individuals but without the use of sound. Size, scent, and motion are just three examples of many modes of communicating without sound.

An opossum can curl its lips to show big teeth that says, "Leave me alone!" A plant can release fragrance that says, "I want you to pollinate me!" A dog can wag its tail to say, "I am so glad to see you!"

Likewise, colors make announcements and advertise intentions.

A good read about this color business is Niko Tinbergen's 1958 book, *Curious Naturalists*. Two points—time frame and experimentation—make the book worth reading.

Much of what Tinbergen describes about learning specific attributes of insect and bird behavior occurred during the 1930's into the 1950's. This means we are but two generations out from understanding how color influences behavior, making our knowledge incredibly recent.

Tinbergen also explains that making an assumption about behavior and then expressing it as fact is not acceptable as science. Only through carefully planned and executed experimentation can alternative explanations be eliminated to identify the one factual explanation.

A researcher can document the behavior of male red-winged blackbirds, then obscure the red shoulder patches and document the same behaviors on the same individual birds. The comparison provides direct cause-and-effect evidence for how a bright color influences success of specific behaviors. But how does one experimentally alter the color of a bird's eyes without blinding or otherwise disabling it?

This problem greatly complicates direct experimentation. Still, research has identified at least four ways eye color serves birds as nonverbal communication.

- Species recognition, which allows individuals to find within a group or at a distance other birds of their own kind for flocking and social interactions;
- Sex recognition, which allows individuals assess other birds as either potential mates or potential competitors for mates;

(continued on next page)

- Age recognition, which allows individuals to distinguish other birds as either adult competitors or nonadults that are not competitors because they lack experience;
- Health recognition, which allows individuals to gauge fitness of a potential mate.

These things we know because eye color changes with age and may change when certain chemical pollutants accumulate through diet and thereby indicate health.

Birds' eyes and corresponding brain areas are exquisitely adapted to recognize color. Mammals, by contrast, are very limited in their ability to discern colors. Ergo, birds are colored various greens, yellows, blues, reds, and oranges whereas mammals are limited to black, white, gray, and various hues of brown.

Primates—humans included—see colors very well; and not coincidentally, a few monkeys have brightly colored eyes. Reptiles' eyes vary: Some crocodiles have golden eyes; some geckos and a few snakes have bright red, orange, or even green eyes.

From all of this, understand that eye color confers information that birds subsequently use to govern their behaviors, and that we are not yet done learning about this topic.

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**Q:** Putting out black oil sunflower, millet, Nyjer, suet, and a nut mix in six feeders designed for smaller birds, I get hundreds of house sparrows that crowd out the occasional cardinal, woodpecker, titmouse, and goldfinch. Even the blue jays seem intimidated. I think I have a good location outside my office window in a grassy alleyway between two houses protected by dense hedge, but I'm at a loss as to how to limit the sparrows. At my home, less than a mile away, I have no such problem.

**A:** A quick answer to your question has two parts. First, watch which foods the house sparrows eat, and eliminate their favorites. Secondly, move your feeders closer to your windows and scare the house sparrows away when they visit, but let other birds feed without disturbance.

On a more philosophical level, I suspect if we waved a Harry Potter wand and made all the house sparrows disappear, rather than having more birds of kinds you desire, you would have almost no birds at all. To explain this, let's start on a large scale—global—and work our way smaller—your lot.

You wouldn't go to Alaska to find penguins, to Iowa to find albatrosses, or to the Sargasso Sea to find burrowing owls. You must be in the right geographic place to find a particular bird. Place, however, is not enough.

White-tailed ptarmigan live in Colorado. Every geographic landscape has its own characteristic lifescape blended of grasslands, shrublands, or treelands. To find white-tailed ptarmigan in summer you must visit the tundra, to find them in winter, you must visit the willow carrs.

To find the bird, find the right lifescape within the right geographic place.

I suspect that yours is not a sparrow problem but a place problem.

Birds need more than food; they need cover, and the kind of cover needed may change with the seasons. Cover includes site-specific "nooks" where birds can roost to preen and to rest in safety, where they can escape predators and harsh weather.

You have house sparrows because they will use buildings and other human-made structures as cover that cardinals, titmice, goldfinches, and jays cannot and will not use. The hedge and the grass may seem adequate bird cover to you, but the birds are telling you otherwise.

I have been watching house sparrows for 50 years, and what I have learned is straightforward. When all vital habitat elements are in place, house finches, blue jays, various woodpeckers, chickadees, and other birds will tussle with even thuggish house sparrows and hold their own. But eliminate something important and those other birds will be the first to go elsewhere; the house sparrows will linger because they are so much more adaptable to human-made cover.

We're on the Web!

[www.pinewoodsaudubon.com](http://www.pinewoodsaudubon.com)

## The Pine Warbler

Pine Woods Audubon Society  
134 Sweet Bay Trail  
Petal, MS 39465

Address Service Requested

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## Bird Sightings & Field Trips



The winter visitor season is in full swing. Our monthly lagoon surveys are reflecting the arrival of many species of ducks (and in large numbers). We are also seeing reports of the typical winter backyard visitors—Chipping Sparrow, American Goldfinch, Dark-eyed Junco, and others. We also are seeing Red-breasted Nuthatches remaining in the area.

As you saw in the field trips list, we are again planning to visit the MS State/USDA station in Pearl River county again. This trip has always been the source of sparrow species we don't often see in our immediate area. And, as a bonus, we might see a Barn Owl or two around the abandoned silos on the property.

If you see any “out of the ordinary” sightings, send an email to [newsletter@basdenfamily.com](mailto:newsletter@basdenfamily.com) or use the contact form on our website [www.pinewoodsaudubon.com](http://www.pinewoodsaudubon.com) to let us know so we can include them in this section of the newsletter.