

RIVERTOWN NATURALIST

May 2020 Vol. 49, No 5



Hudson River Audubon Society of Westchester, Inc is a non-profit chapter of National Audubon.

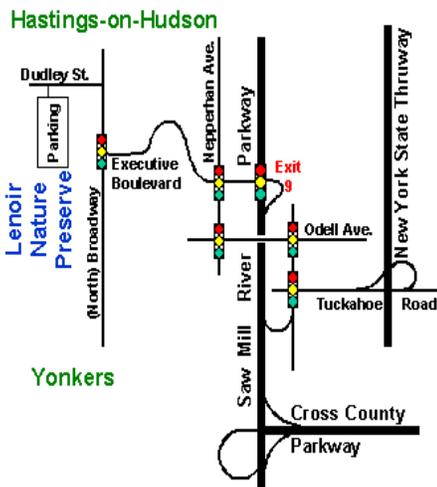
Our mission is to foster protection and appreciation of birds, other wildlife and habitats, and to be an advocate for a cleaner, and healthier environment.
www.hras.org

DIRECTIONS TO LENOIR NATURE PRESERVE

Hudson River Audubon Society of Westchester, Inc. holds its meetings at Lenoir Preserve a Westchester County Nature Preserve at 19 Dudley Street in Yonkers,

by car:
Take Saw Mill River Parkway to Exit 9, Executive Blvd. Take Executive Blvd. to its end at North Broadway and turn Right.

Go ¼ mile on North Broadway and turn Left onto Dudley Street. Parking lot is on the left



All Programs Cancelled - Social Distancing

Covid-19 is making many changes. For example, the US Post Office may no longer accept bulk mail, such as this newsletter, for delivery. But you can always read a copy on our website: www.hras.org

Note: To comply with the current need to maintain proper social distances, we have cancelled all our scheduled programs and activities through the summer. That includes all monthly programs, field trips and other activities that might make it difficult to maintain proper distances. If and when conditions change, visit our web site (www.hras.org) for the latest updates on chapter activities. As discussed below there is one exception to the cancellation of planned activities

Annual Bird-a-Thon Saturday, May 16, 2020

The one exception is our annual Bird-a-Thon. It is such an extremely popular activity that it will continue as scheduled on Saturday, May 16th, but with a slightly different format. In a normal year, we form small groups or teams that visit nature areas looking to find as many different bird species as possible. Spring is the peak season for finding birds. Typically, our teams find 110-125 different species. This year will still try to find as many different species as possible. However, we won't be doing it in groups.

We will be looking for birds, as individuals, not in groups. A short visit to a local nature area is restorative after hours trapped indoors. You can even count the birds in your backyard or neighborhood. And, since, the Bird-a-Thon is a fund raiser for the chapter, you can also pledge a donation based on the number of species we find. Pledge today.

Pledges can be a flat amount such as \$25.00, or you can pledge a given amount per species such as 25 cents per species. Then, if we see 120 species, your pledge will come to \$30.00.

Thanks for your generous support! Remember, even if you're not participating, please pledge to the Bird-a-thon to make our efforts worth it and support Hudson River Audubon.

Contact Michael Bochnik if you would like to help count birds

Indoor Activities

Throughout this newsletter, you will find many suggestions for other ways you can continue to connect with nature while maintaining proper social distances. Don't climb the wall. Relax with nature and birds

ScienceWatch – Lending a Helping Wing

“We found that African grey parrots voluntarily and spontaneously help familiar parrots to achieve a goal, without obvious immediate benefit to themselves.”

– D. Brucks



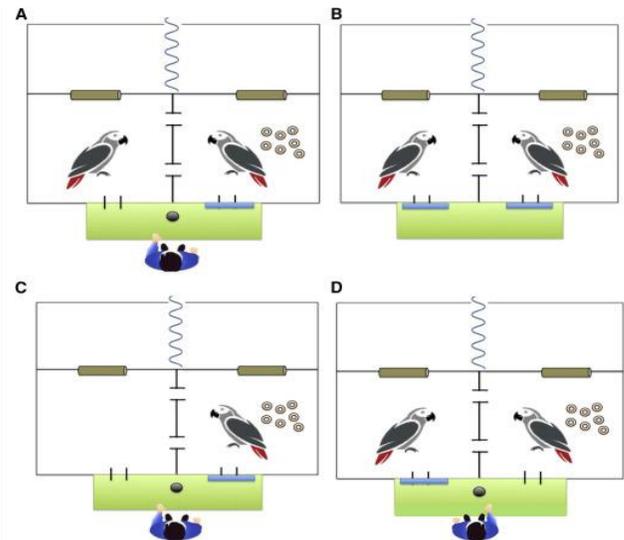
Altruistic behavior is unusual in nature, and it goes against the idea that all organisms are competing with each other to

survive and pass on their genes. In fact, seemingly selfless acts by animals generally are viewed not as altruistic by biologists, but a consequence of “kin selection.” For example, social insects like ants and honeybees sacrifice themselves to preserve a colony consisting of their close relatives and so are really passing on their genes. A true altruist helps strangers as well as relatives.

We humans are both a cooperative and altruistic species. We think nothing of providing a helping hand to others. Certain great apes, orangutans and bonobos, also proactively help others under experimental conditions. Now a study published in the January 9, 2020 issue of *Current Biology* shows that this behavior extends to birds.

Désirée Brucks and August von Bayern, Max Planck Institute for Ornithology, Seewiesen, Germany, looked for altruistic behavior in unrelated African grey parrots (*Psittacus erithacus*) and compared that with what they saw in blue-headed macaws (*Primolius couloni*). Both parrot species would eagerly exchange a token with a human experimenter for a walnut treat. Would they be willing to give the token to a neighboring parrot, allowing it to obtain the treat instead of themselves?

Brucks and von Bayern tested 14 African grey parrots using four experimental conditions (see Figure). A pair of parrots was placed in neighboring plastic compartments. In condition “A” the “helper,” with tokens, could not exchange them for food because the exchange portal where the experimenter sat with food was blocked. However, it could pass the tokens through a side transfer portal to its partner, who could



then give them to the experimenter in exchange for food. In “B” both exchange portals were blocked so neither bird could make the exchange. In “C” no partner was present, and in “D” only the helper could exchange tokens for food. Each pair was scored for helper behavior in one setup and their roles reversed before being tested in the next one.

The researchers found that the helper parrots readily transferred tokens to their partners under the test condition (A), but did so much less frequently under any of the control conditions (B, C and D) where helping was irrelevant.

During their first session almost all parrots in the test condition gave tokens to their partner who had none. “It surprised us that seven out of eight African grey parrots provided their partner with tokens spontaneously—in their very first trial—without having experienced the social setting of the task before and without knowing that they would be tested in the other role later on. Therefore, the parrots provided help without gaining any immediate benefits and seemingly without expecting reciprocation in return,” said von Bayern.

By contrast, initial tests showed that blue-headed macaws transferred few tokens under any condition and the authors stopped studying them.

The best explanation for these results is that African grey parrots have an intrinsic motivation to help others. They were not engaged in some form of social play, but rather they deliberately helped when they knew the transfer of tokens could provide food for their partner. Stopping short of labelling it altruism, the researchers call this unusual intrinsic desire to help “proactive helping behavior.”

They point out that these highly intelligent and social birds live in a society that is fluid. Group compositions are constantly changing so any particular bird will have varying partners over time. A bird that is a good helper will gain a reputation as a good partner in future coalitions and will likely receive help when needed. By contrast, group composition remains constant for blue-headed macaws so individuals have little need to gain favor with others.

Are African grey parrots acting altruistically? Maybe they are, maybe they aren't.

Maybe they just want to be the most popular bird in the flock.

- *Saul Scheinbach*

While the public and the press are totally absorbed in the pandemic, the Trump administration quietly continues its assault on the environment by reversing requirements for further reductions in auto emission standards.

Yet it is interesting to note that as a result of greatly reduced auto traffic during the pandemic, air quality levels have reached new highs in many cities. It should be obvious what impacts the quality of the air we breathe.

- *Hank Weber*

HRAS BIRD-A-THON PLEDGE CARD

__ I am happy to pledge \$ _____ per species in support of your bird-a-thon. __
I prefer to pledge the enclosed gift of \$ _____
I will give you an additional \$ _____. If you spot more than __ species.

Your Name : _____
Address: _____ City _____
State ____ Zip _____
Telephone: _____
e-Mail _____

Send to:
Hudson River Audubon Society
PO BOX 616 Yonkers,
New York , NY 10703

Make Your Donation Payable to
HUDSON RIVER AUDUBON SOCIETY

Scientifically, a raven has 17 primary wing feathers, the big ones at the end of the wing. They are called pinion feathers. A crow has 16. So, the difference between a crow and a raven is only a matter of a pinion.



President's Message

On Birding Alone



As we go to press in late April for this issue, we've been social distancing since mid-March. I do it on my own occasionally, but these past months it's been mandated by the NYS Department of Health. I much prefer that I could have made my own choice

than to have it state imposed, but the coronavirus pandemic hasn't given any of us the option.

I've used the time to discover my inner Thoreau, that nature loving essayist who cherished self-reliance but returned to the family home several times a week for dinner and didn't refuse his mother's help with laundry.

Our American hero of solitude had his limits, and I've got mine. I'm lucky not to live alone, so while my social distancing has involved more than my comfort level with isolation, I'm not lonely. I'm lucky to be a birder and to live in a county with a lot of public land and a strong Audubon Society presence (us and four other chapters).

I couldn't have learned one sixteenth of what I know if I hadn't taken walks with experts. But there is a level of awareness I have when I'm on my own, a receptivity to my non-human surroundings that I don't when I'm with others. We humans are deeply social creatures; even as I walk around Marshlands Conservancy with only three Great Egrets and two Ospreys in sight, I know how much was done by others to give me a pleasurable feeling of being alone in nature. Trails are maintained; the land is accessible; there's a parking lot. The ospreys are easily seen, thanks to the platforms erected for their nests.

On my own, I listen to cheeps, chirps, clucks and song more intently. I know the sources of some; not others; sometimes I find the bird making the sound, and it stays in my memory the way it wouldn't if I was told: that's a willet. I see, I hear it: I have the pleasure of putting two pieces of a puzzle together. I'm alert, I'm concentrated. I'm the intruder in a bird's world, but more tolerated than a group of noisy humans. If I hold still for ten minutes, better even if I'm sitting down, I seem, from a bird's point of view, to melt into the

background. Birds that flushed when I first entered their territory may return. The bold human-tolerant species like Black-capped Chickadees and Gray Catbirds may even approach within five feet of me. They know what I am, but for the moment, it's peaceful co-existence.

We don't know when social distancing rules will be lifted or, if they are, if they might be re-imposed by a resurgence of Covid-19 infections. Our programs will be suspended whenever social distancing is mandated, except for our annual Bird-A-Thon fundraiser. You can participate on your own, you can contribute,

To find out when other programs will start, visit www.hras.org. If you haven't already, subscribe to our email notification list there (hras.org).

What else to do? You can walk the trails in all county and state parks; their playgrounds are closed. On-line, Audubon New York, www.ny.audubon.org, is great - you can sign up for webinars, follow conservation news and more. The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has great web cams of nesting birds. (<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/cams/all-cams/>).

- *Frances Greenberg*

Bird Therapy

During these unsettled times, connecting with the natural world feels vital. Studies have consistently shown that being outdoors can reduce stress. But for many, the options are now limited. Springtime birding trips are canceled and visits to local parks can feel risky.

To bring balance into our lives, try Bird Therapy, letting the birds come to us. Focus on watching from porches, yards, or even through windows. Take photos or notes of what you're seeing and you can share with the birding community. Don't rush, sit quietly and patiently. With less plane and car travel and the sounds of construction, it is easier to listen to birds.

- *Debbi Dolan*

Birding on the Internet

Checkout the National Audubon website that provides a host of bird related video, photos, instructions, tips and other great diversions

www.audubon.org/joy-of-birds

The Palm Beaches TV, a television service from West Palm Beach, Florida, offers on-demand commercial-free programs, including three seasons of *Birding Adventures*, a fun and engaging series hosted by wildlife enthusiast James Currie.

<https://www.thepalmbeaches.tv/birding-adventures/>

Or go to <http://explore.org/livecams>

A good reason for a birder to visit You Tube is to watch Jason Ward's excellent series *Birds of North America*. Ward is young, avid black birder who grew up in the Bronx. In this series, he travels around the U.S. meeting lots of great birders, finding cool birds and reflecting on the experiences of minority birders. Most recently, Ward was a guest on *NPR's Science Friday* where he and Nature Conservancy land steward Kari Hagenow discussed the best ways to get started as a new birder under quarantine.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpcZG5yPY1c&list=PLZVnnAt5_5lbqaQNNg-LEPwdrbj_nf5hU

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology's website offers dozens of wonderful indoor bird activities. Once you try some of them, you will be happy that you are forced to spend enjoyable hours indoors. The activities are good for the entire family, especially children. Close-up web cameras focus on nests of many species where you watch the building of the nest, egg laying and hatching, as well as the feeding of the young. Other web-cams focus on bird feeders around the globe where you can watch

the birds without having to fill the feeder. There are videos of amazing nature areas as well as instructions on learning to identify birds.

<https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/how-to-make-these-next-few-weeks-a-little-easier-courtesy-of-birds>

Of course, you can also get lost on YouTube watching videos of all kinds of birds. For example, here's a five-minute clip of Sandhill Cranes over the Platte River in Nebraska.

<https://youtu.be/TDOAv4sRK2Y>

Notes from Debbi Dolan

Nature's Corona Virus Message

The UN's environment chief, Inger Andersen, says Nature is sending us a message with the coronavirus pandemic and the ongoing climate crisis. He said humanity was placing too many pressures on the natural world with damaging consequences, and warned that failing to take care of the planet meant not taking care of ourselves.

Leading scientists agree that the Covid-19 outbreak was a "clear warning shot", given that far more deadly diseases existed in wildlife, and that today's civilisation was "playing with fire". They said it was almost always human behaviour that caused diseases to spill over into humans. "Never before have so many opportunities existed for pathogens to pass from wild and domestic animals to people." She explained that 75% of all emerging infectious diseases come from wildlife. "Our continued erosion of wild spaces has brought us uncomfortably close to animals and plants that harbour diseases that can jump to humans." She also noted other environmental impacts, such as the Australian bushfires, broken heat records and the worst locust invasion in Kenya for 70 years.

To prevent further outbreaks, the experts said, both global heating and the destruction of the natural world have to end, as both drive wildlife into contact with people. They also urged authorities to put an end to live animal markets – which they called an "ideal mixing bowl" for disease – and the illegal global animal trade.

"There are too many pressures at the same time on our natural systems and something has to give," she added. "We are intimately interconnected with nature, whether we like it or not. If we don't take care of nature, we can't take care of ourselves. And as we hurtle towards a population of 10 billion people on this planet, we need to go into this future armed with nature as our strongest ally."
- *The Guardian*

Wild Animals 'Count'— it helps them adapt and survive

The ability to grasp quantity can help solve a range of problems, such as finding a mate, foraging, navigating and avoiding predators. Neurobiologist Andreas Nieder, at the University of Tuebingen in Germany, explored the current literature on how different animal species comprehend numbers. After perusing nearly 150 scientific articles on the subject, he concluded that "numerical competence is present on almost every branch on the animal tree of life."

This scientist has brought together all the research on the subject and found that, from bees to birds to wolves, many animals have an ability to process and represent numbers— arguably a form of counting.

Honeybees have been shown to remember the number of landmarks as they travel from their hives to a field of flowers, so that they can find their way back home. Other species, such as gray wolves, need to know the right number of animals in their pack to hunt specific prey. Six to eight wolves are necessary when hunting elk and moose, for example, while a bison hunt requires a pack of nine to 13. Elk disperse in smaller herds to avoid encountering wolves, or gather in large herds to reduce their chances of becoming the victim, a tactic described in biology as "safety in numbers." Many species need to assess the strength and relative number of opponents before engaging in a fight for territory or for a mate, such as prides of female African lions, which are known to listen closely to the roars of other nearby prides before choosing whether to battle.

National Geographic

A major highlight of Governor Andrew Cuomo's 2020 State of the State speech was his proposal for a \$3 Billion Restore Mother Nature Bond Act that will support a variety of pressing environmental and climate change challenges across New York. It will

need to be approved by the state's voters in November, but if passed this would be the biggest environmental bond act in New York's history. The Restore Mother Nature Bond Act marks the Governor's intention to make major investments in the protection of natural resources across the Adirondacks and New York and provide support for a variety of climate change mitigation efforts.

In the Restore Mother Nature Bond Act, the Governor proposes funding to "reduce flood risk and revitalize critical fish and wildlife habitats by connecting streams and waterways, right-sizing culverts and dams, restoring freshwater and tidal wetlands, reclaiming natural floodplains, restocking shellfish populations and upgrading fish hatcheries, preserving open space, conserving more forest areas, replanting more trees, reducing contamination from agricultural and storm water runoff, and expanding renewable energy."

Observing Earth Day

The first Earth Day (called May Day at the time) was held in 1970 in the US and it's often considered the start of the modern environmental movement. Since that initial march against environmental destruction, Earth Day has evolved into a globally celebrated event, with festivities occurring in more than 200 countries, educating and mobilizing more than a billion people. It's a day for people to appreciate Earth in all its splendor, and for many people Earth Day holds the potential to ignite broad environmental action. While activities such as marches, clean ups, and citizen science activities may be sharply curtailed this year due to the corona virus, there are many ways to celebrate Earth Day during this anomalous year:

Recycle - Recycling helps to reduce the pollution caused by waste, and reduces the need for raw materials so that the rainforests can be preserved.

Compost - Composting biodegradable food and materials is a great way to feed soil, organisms in the soil and plant life while reducing waste.

Conserve water - Get and use a recyclable water bottle. The US alone consumes 50 billion plastic water bottles annually. Most of these bottles are not recycled and end up in landfills, in oceans and elsewhere, which harms organisms and the environment. Just creating these bottles uses 17 million barrels of gasoline, which would be enough to power 1.3 million cars for a year. Even more energy is then spent transporting water bottles and then recycling them.
Fix leaky faucets.

Plant a tree - in memory or in honor

Start a garden - you can start small with window boxes, plant swaps, share cuttings, start from seed, or save seeds

Vote for environmental progress - hold politicians accountable

"Adopt" a creature at a wildlife preserve

Enjoy nature!

Hudson River Audubon Society Board Members

President	Frances Greenberg	greenberg.fran@gmail.com	914-478-2402
Vice President	Saul Scheinbach	judisaul@aol.com	718-884-4740
Treasurer	Michael Bochnik	BochnikM@cs.com	914-237-9331
Secretary	Judi Veder	judisaul@aol.com	718-884-4740
Programs	Eleanor McGee	emcg9597@aol.com	914-968-6321
Butterfly Garden	Mary Harrington	TCTallon@aol.com	914-589-3293
Hospitality	Ruth DeFord Kotecha	rdeford@post.harvard.edu	914-478-3695
Newsletter	Hank Weber	hnweber@aol.com	914-631-0706
Lenoir	Sara Cavanaugh	sacf@westchestergov.com	914-968-5851
Feeder Watch	Carol Lange	carollange@aol.com	914-668-5101
Circulation	Bill Van Wart		914-376-2401
Publicity	Kathy Guida	Kbguida19@gmail.com	917-991-5770
Conservation	Debbi Dolan	turlan@optonline.net	718-601-2957

At Large

Kelli Bochnik, Gerry McGee, Allegra Dengler, Cathy Mazella, Mark Testa, Lynn Shaw, Sandra Wright, Joe Rothstein,