

A History of the Baltimore Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society— the First 70 Years!

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2015 is an historic year for celebrating major anniversary milestones for many of Baltimore's institutions. It marks the 85th anniversary of The Natural History Society of Maryland (NHSM), the 60th anniversary of the Cylburn Arboretum Association (CAA), and most important of all, the 70th anniversary of the Baltimore Bird Club! Ironically, our histories are linked and we all still work together introducing people to the wonders of the natural world.

Thank you Karen Morley for your Chip Notes article in Fall 2010 from which I have unashamedly plagiarized many pieces. Other credits go to the 25- and 50- year histories of MOS written by Florence Burner, Chan Robbins and Don Messersmith. These histories concentrated on MOS, not BBC, but since our early histories are the same they are very useful. And many facts were gleaned from seven decades of information preserved in Chip Notes (and its predecessor Newsletter), program booklets, board meeting minutes, Maryland Birdlife and other documents preserved in our Cylburn office. So here's our story...

In the late 1800s a group of scientists and amateurs revived the Maryland Academy of Sciences which today runs the Maryland Science Center. In 1929, the Natural History Society of Maryland (NHSM) spun off from the Academy. In July 1944 the NHSM put out an "APPEAL TO BIRD LOVERS", wanting to form a separate club dedicated to bird-watching.

Founders/Early History/Headquarters

Prior to 1945 there was little organized bird activity in Baltimore and none elsewhere in the state. The old Maryland Audubon Society had expired with the death of its members. The NHSM maintained an ornithological department that did fine research and educational work, but there was no attempt to maintain a general bird club. The Ornithological Society was organized in February 1945 by a group of 35 people, many of whom were members of NHSM. Close association with that society is still preserved today. The Ornithological Society is also affiliated with the National Audubon Society.

1. On February 23, 1945 the **first gathering** was held at NHSM in Bolton Hill. Forty people attended - the Charter members that would eventually become the Baltimore Bird Club and MOS. The club called itself the Maryland Ornithological Society (MOS) but initially consisted of Baltimore-area residents.
2. **Accomplishments first year** included: place to meet, officers, dues structure, bylaws and constitution, field trips, lectures, counts, *Maryland Birdlife*.
3. By 1948 there were so many widespread members that the **Frederick Chapter was formed**, followed by Harford in 1949 and Anne Arundel in 1950. Today MOS has 16 Chapters around the state.
4. **Irving Hampe was the first President** (1945-46) followed by Orville Crowder (1946-1949).

5. It was in the fall of 1949 that it was determined that a statewide organization needed to be founded and that Baltimore members be formally organized as a **“local unit.”** Subsequently the formal name of the unit became “Maryland Ornithological Society, Baltimore Chapter.” I will refer to us as BBC henceforth. Our then president, Orville Crowder, became the first MOS president in 1949 and William Triplett became the next BBC president from 1949-1950. FYI, Orville returned as BBC president again in 1952-1955.
6. To date BBC has had **23 different presidents** (counting the first two when BBC/MOS were inseparable) serving from less than one to eight years and averaging about three years apiece. See Appendix A for a full list.
7. **BBC first met** at the NHSM building, then in Bolton Hill. Future meetings were held at the Pratt Library but in 1959 we moved to the Cylburn Arboretum, which had opened in 1954. Mr. Gerard Moudry, Chief City Horticulturalist at that time, graciously let MOS use the upstairs room at the mansion for offices and eventually other rooms for the nature museum and other collections. Cylburn remains the official headquarters for both the MOS and BBC. While this address is basically a mail drop for MOS, BBC actively uses Cylburn as our headquarters and for field trips, lectures, meetings, and other birding activities offered free to the public. The new Vollmer Center is available for larger affairs
8. Our founders adopted a **statement of goals**: “The object of this Club shall be to record the observations of bird life in Maryland; to disseminate in a popular manner the results of such observations; to collate the scientific data furnished by bird students throughout the state, and to supply such available information to other groups as requested; and to promote the cultivation of public sentiment in the preservation of our native bird life.”
9. In the first year, they wrote a **constitution and bylaws** that, although modified, remains much the same. In addition, some of the core components of the club were established, including the first field trips, lectures, bird counts, conservation efforts, youth programs, routine publications, and an annual meeting.
10. As a matter of fact, the **first Christmas Bird Count** took place in 1945 and the first field trip was made to Lake Roland on March 11, 1945, less than two weeks after founding!
11. Although MOS and BBC officially split in 1949, **MOS was not formally incorporated until 1956** as a non-profit organization to promote the study and enjoyment of birds. Since the split, on a statewide level, MOS supports educational and research activities; provides scholarships to teachers and wildlife managers for ornithological and natural resource training, owns and operates wildlife sanctuaries on 2000 acres of land from the eastern shore to Garrett County, and is very active in Maryland conservation activities. As a chapter, BBC is responsible for scheduling field trips and lectures for members, conducting workshops as needed, oversight of the collections, Nature Museum and Trail Tracker, taking part in bird counts in our area, offering a youth program and scholarships to area residents, and taking part in conservation activities both jointly with MOS and on our own.
12. In 1979, BBC received a legacy of \$30,000 that was promptly invested and referred to as the **Dorothy Blake Martin Trust Fund**. There were no specific instructions left by the legator, so in 1981 the Board adopted guidelines for the use of the principal and/or interest earned. The Board determined that the Fund would be used for five specific purposes that would benefit the Club or ornithological research. To date this

Fund has contributed to 21 different projects with awards from \$1,000 to \$10,000. Although \$74,171 has been awarded over the years, due to careful investment we still maintain a \$32,000 balance.

13. In 1983 the local chapter changed its name to the **Baltimore Bird Club (BBC)** to provide better recognition for the chapter serving Baltimore City and Baltimore County. This is sometimes confusing historically because up until the early 1980s MOS was the name of both the state and the local Baltimore organization. However, the activities that took place at Cylburn were the work of what is now known as BBC, while the MOS retained statewide functions.
14. We are pleased to be able to use **Cylburn as our headquarters** and for field trips, lectures, meetings, and other birding activities offered free to the public. The Vollmer Center has been a good addition to our outreach efforts with the eBird Trail Tracker that BBC sponsors. The Carriage House Nature Museum is a "hidden treasure". Our goal is to be seen as an important contributing partner at Cylburn, our home for so many years.

Publications and Lectures

Maryland Birdlife. The first bi-monthly *Maryland Ornithological Society Bulletin* appeared within a month of founding (Vol. I, No.1, March-April 1945) and began as a mimeographed sheet dated March and April 1945. By Vol. I, No.2 the name had changed to *Maryland Birdlife* and continues with this name today. The second publication also contained the constitution and bylaws. This bulletin serves as a medium for publication of bird observations as well as some technical and popular articles. One department—"The Season," by Chandler S. Robbins—constitutes a continuous history of birdlife in Maryland, and includes many interesting and valuable bird reports. By 1947 *Maryland Birdlife* became primarily a scientific journal and once BBC/MOS separated, the full responsibility of MOS. At the beginning it contained only hand-drawn illustrations. In the 1950's black and white photographs were introduced, in 2014 colored photographs.

Newsletter. Starting in 1961 a monthly *Newsletter* was provided to members of BBC that listed events of the past month and an agenda for the upcoming month. It was a 2-6 page bulletin that basically listed facts.

Chip Notes. The *Newsletter* was changed to *Chip Notes* in December 1989 and continues under that moniker today. More stories and items of interest were added. By the way, it was Debbie Terry who suggested the name *Chip Notes*.

Programs

Field Trips: From the get-go sponsored field trips were part of the BBC agenda. The first sponsored bird walk took place at Lake Roland on March 11, 1945 led by Irving Hampe. Seven people attended traveling by streetcar (it was still war time) and 15 species of birds were reported. By 1978 BBC reported sponsoring 65 field trips, and in 2014, we sponsored 112 field trips.

Counts. The first Christmas Bird Count was recorded in 1945 and has continued since. Currently BBC participates in 4 counts—winter, May, fall and Christmas.

Lectures. Early in the Club's history, each year BBC presented two or three paid-admission lectures at the Baltimore Museum of Art. These paid lectures were initially their source of income. The foremost naturalists of the country, such as Roger Tory Peterson, appeared on these programs. We continue to provide a series of six lecture series each year at Cylburn, although now they are free.

Collections and Museum

Collections. The specimens now in the Nature Museum are only part of the total collections held by BBC and MOS, and housed at Cylburn and MOS sanctuaries. We have many natural history objects, including 382 mounted birds, 3 bird egg collections with 3109 eggs, bird nests, mammal skulls, butterfly and turtle specimens, rocks and fossils, shells, and tree cones. In addition, there is the book and manuscript collection that includes 6 archival field journals, several rare books, and a sizeable bird and natural history library. MOS also maintains the journals of many national ornithological organizations, some of which are quite rare. BBC is undertaking a detailed computerized inventory of our collections. These collections are a valuable education tool and a research and scientific asset.

Six antique bird dioramas, part of the Garrett Collection, are on permanent loan from the Evergreen Mansion Library, part of Johns Hopkins museum system. We also have a mounted Carolina Parakeet also on loan from the Evergreen Collection. Now extinct, this native American parakeet was found east of the Mississippi and south of Iowa. The last captive died in 1914. These specimens significantly contribute to educational programs at Cylburn.

Museum. In 1961 the BBC began to slowly develop a nature museum on the 3rd floor of the Cylburn Mansion. This initial endeavor was largely the work of Dr. Lois Odell and Martha Schaefer. In 1984 it underwent a substantial renovation under the direction of Patsy Perlman. Even Mayor Schaeffer lent a hand! The current Nature Museum in the Carriage House opened in 2005 after Robert Dwight read a story in the Baltimore Sun about the Birds of Maryland Museum at Cylburn. The museum had been closed in 2004 for lack of handicapped access to the upper floors of the mansion. Mr. Dwight donated over \$36,000 to BBC for the relocation of the bird museum and the nature collection to a refurbished carriage house. BBC asked the Cylburn Arboretum Association (CAA) to administer the fund, and CAA raised additional money for the renovation. The City Naturalist, CAA and BBC use the museum for educational programs for city school children and the general public.

Conservation

Conservation has been a major thrust of BBC since the beginning. Early members promoted an effective program of wildlife conservation through education and sensible legislation. One of the first efforts in 1946 was asking for state protection of the Bald Eagle and Fox Squirrel.

Conservation efforts by the MOS/BBC grew slowly, until about 1959 when BBC held a series of seminars to stimulate interest in local and national conservation issues. The issues addressed are still germane: population growth, habitat loss and fragmentation, cutting away at our open spaces (parks and monuments) for commercial uses, pesticides, communication towers and high tension wires.

There has been a succession of good leaders in this effort, in particular Anneke Davis, BBC's longtime conservation voice in Annapolis. From about 2000, Anneke began to mentor a group of other conservation-minded members organized by Carol Schreter, who leads our conservation efforts today. This group, numbering 4-6, has added several new issues of conservation concern including: glass strikes, feral cats, wind turbines, and global warming. BBC stays abreast of national conservation issues, but concentrates on regional issues affecting Baltimore City and Baltimore County. Our goal is to alert members to problems and advocate for remedial actions.

Lights Out Baltimore (LOB). BBC members have been active participants since 2008 in this international effort to make the public aware of the devastation to birds caused by striking glass windows and to help our city find solutions to this problem. LOB was founded by Wendy Olsson and leadership continues under Lindsay Jacks. To date volunteers have found over 3,000 dead and several hundred injured birds from glass strikes in downtown Baltimore. Our efforts are garnering more press about the subject and getting city officials and major property owners involved in solutions.

Youth Programs

Junior Nature Club. In the early days BBC did a lot of work with the City Department of Recreation and Parks (City) and the forerunner of the Cylburn Arboretum Association (CAA) providing nature education for city and county children. BBC started the Junior Nature Club in 1959 under the leadership of Martha Schaefer. At its height more than 3,000 children utilized its services annually. Working with the City Naturalist, BBC provided volunteers to meet these educational needs and funded buses to bring children to the Arboretum. Our members also went into city schools to teach natural history. For three decades, part of the Junior Nature Club included a Junior Nature Camp held for three days each summer to give young people an opportunity to learn about nature and conservation in the field under expert leaders.

The club and camp disbanded in the 1980s but beginning in 1979 BBC continued nature education activities for school children under the leadership of Patsy Perlman. Joy Wheeler started working with her in 1983. This function was turned over to the City and CAA around 2000. The Nature Camp led to part of the nature collection we have today. Children and adults brought items and specimens to the museum and some were collected during nature camps held around the state.

Youth Program. Today we have a more casual youth program in which we provide a series of walks and weekend trips to our nature sanctuaries to provide youth and their parents an opportunity to share nature and birds together.

Interesting Factoids

- **Snowy owls** were first mentioned in *Maryland Birding* during the winter of 1945-46, referred to as a "snowy owl winter." At that time, a Baltimore taxidermist recorded that five "snowies" had been brought into him for mounting...
- **Chimney Swifts** were first reported in 1946 when "hundreds" were seen over Druid Lake. Over the years, they were reported "funneling" down chimneys in numbers as high as 5,000 during migration. And like today, they kept switching chimneys from season to season, to the perplexity of our members trying to schedule watches!

- At the 1947 session of the State Legislature, the **Baltimore Oriole** officially became the state bird of Maryland.
- In 1958 BBC held its first January **covered dish dinner**.
- MOS/BBC held its **first statewide meeting** at Catoctin from May 14-16, 1948 in which 114 people attended. It was held there from 1948-1954, and again in 1958.
- The first Maryland sighting of the **House Finch** was reported in April 1958, next in September 1963.
- In 1971 the **Sommer egg collection** (750 eggs), collected between 1896-1944, was given to BBC. These were recorded on nest record cards and sent to Cornell's Laboratory of Ornithology for their North American Nest Record Card Program.
- In 1972, BBC had **873 members**, 112 of them junior. That was the largest enrollment to date.
- 1977 brought the **Birdbath at Television Hill**. The collections now in the Nature Museum and BBC office were donated to us over the years. You may not realize that many of the mounted birds came when the towers were built on Television Hill in 1966, the lights attracting migrating birds. Reminiscent of LOB today, our birders collected the carcasses of 1032 birds (37 species) and worked with WBAL to improve the situation.
- Until 1982, the **Baltimore Newsletter** always referred to members as Mr., Mrs., or Miss plus first and last name—for example, Miss Violet Steele, Mr. Thomas Anthony, Mrs. Harriet Coleman. Even worse, married women were often referred to by their husband's first name, like Mrs. John Smith. There must have been an enlightenment in 1982 because this practice abruptly stopped and people were only referred to by first and last names!
- In 1985, BBC received the body of a young **peregrine falcon**, thanks to the United States Fidelity and Guaranty Company and the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. This was an eyase from the pair nesting at the USF&G building since 1979. Beauregard was the father, and a 2nd mate (Scarlett had died the previous year) was the mother. This bird is the one on display in the Nature Museum.
- In 1995 the **BBC website** was created by Terry Ross, who has maintained it since then.
- In 1998 the BBC published **A Birder's Guide to Baltimore and Baltimore County, Maryland** under the editorship of Elliot Kirschbaum.
- In 2010, using funds donated by Harriet Felscher, BBC purchased the **eBird Trail Tracker** for use at Cylburn Arboretum. We still maintain it and pay the yearly fees. The City of Baltimore provides the display space and electronic and digital systems required for its operations. The Trail Tracker was developed for use on site at nature centers so that visitors can enter their bird sightings while visiting, or explore the sightings that others entered for that sight. All this information goes directly to the international eBird database at Cornell. It also provides information about the birds that can be seen in this area, including photographs and sound recordings.
- In May, 2011 about 300 people attended **Cylburn 4 Birds**, a day-long affair sponsored by BBC on the Cylburn Arboretum grounds. The event included a dedication to the eBird Trail Tracker, a symposium on birding in the digital age with an accompanying bird walk, a visit by the Orioles baseball team's mascot "The Bird," several youth-targeted events, live raptors, tours of the Nature Museum, and plenty of food
- In June 2012 the **BBC Facebook page** was started.
- In 2015, BBC celebrates its **70th anniversary!**

The Future

After seven decades, the BBC remains a viable and healthy club dedicated to bird watching, bird science, and bird conservation. Our core values and activities have remained the same and our dedicated corps of volunteers continues to replenish itself. But there has been a fundamental change in birding since 1945—the introduction of electronics! The next few decades promise to introduce some significant changes in how we bird and what we know about birds.

- Perhaps most fundamental is **digital photography** that not only allows for better pictures, but for some people it changes the way they bird. Their lens is a camera, not binoculars, and they identify and catalogue from their photographs.
- We used to band birds on their legs to track their travel. But banding has an inherent flaw in that unless the bird is recovered we don't know where it went. On larger birds we can now put transmitters and **track their movements through geolocators** that allow us track not only their destinations, but their routes and timing. These geolocators are getting smaller and smaller and will soon be available for the smaller passerines. We are also learning about nesting behaviors from web cams spying on nestlings and their parents.
- And then there is the iPhone and email. In the field birders can **instantly communicate** rare sightings so others can join them in the quest, request ID on a species seen, or just chat about their enthusiasm in the chase. The ultimate irony are photos taken of a digital camera screen by an iPhone showing a bird of interest, that is then sent out from the iPhone immediately to interested parties. No need to go home first and download the camera to get the photo out to the public!
- **Bird song** is now available as an app to carry in the field. It can be used to verify a song that was heard, or to call in a bird. Work is currently being done on a program that will identify a species from its song or call when held up to the bird or when recording of the song is played into the program.
- Plus with **GPS coordinates**, birds can be located down to the tree where it is perched. When the GPS coordinate is shared with others, it eases the burden of trying to describe exactly where the bird can be found.
- And think of what all these data are contributing to our knowledge of birds. The **cumulative scientific information** from counts, individual reports and scientific observation are available free to all in eBird from Cornell University's School of Ornithology. You can even keep your own records there.

We are learning more and more about birds, for the good and bad—mostly good. Old-fashioned bird watching styles may go by the wayside, but probably not the enjoyment and fascination of observing birds. It seems the more one knows, the more one wants to know, the more interesting the species is, and the more there is yet to learn.

When we were founded seventy years ago, we had already exterminated the Passenger Pigeon and Carolina Parakeet. It is probably a good thing that we are recording all the information we can for the future because it is unclear to what extent overpopulation and global warming (in all their ramifications) will decimate avian populations in the future.

At the rate we are going it is hard to imagine where we will be 70 years from now in 2085!

Appendix A
BBC Presidents

1945-46	Irving Hampe
1946-49	Orville Crowder
1949-50	William Triplett
1950-52	Seth Low
1952-55	Orville Crowder
1955-59	Elmer Worthley
1959-62	Seth Low
1962-67	Cecil Ryan
1967-71	Mrs. Joshua Rowe
1971-75	Gordon MacGregor
1975-80	John Cullom
1980-83	Joy Wheeler
1983-86	Robert Ringler
1986-87	Hank Kaestner
1987-91	William Newman
1991-93	Earl Palmer
1993-94	Robert Rineer
1994-98	Sukon Kanchanaraksa
1998-00	Terry Ross
2000-02	Helene Gardel
2002-10	Pete Webb
2010-11	Karen Morley
2011-	Joan Cwi