

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 1 No. 6

June 1995

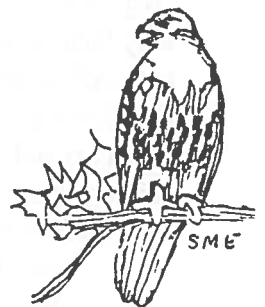
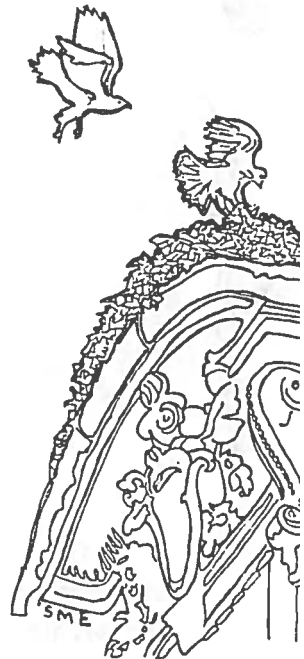
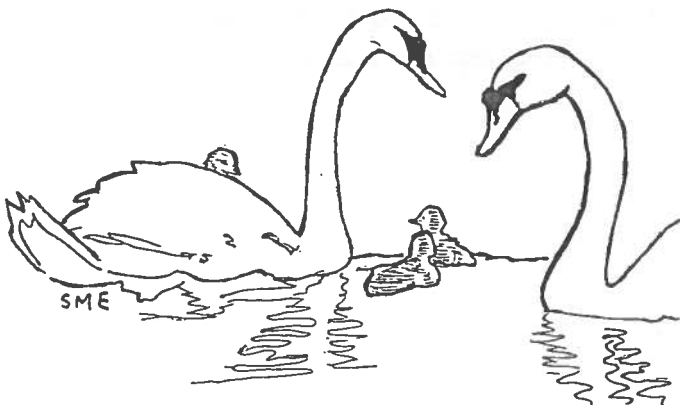
Hawks Aloft, Swans Afloat

The vigil is over. The first young red-tailed hawk cleared the nest just before 6 A.M. on June 4. It landed safely on a nearby building. On June 6 shortly after 6 A.M. bird 2 took off. It did not achieve enough height to reach a roof or ledge, but ricocheted off walls before crossing Fifth Ave. to land in a tree. No sooner settled, the surprised bird was attacked by a posse of blue jays. Presently it moved to a less contentious area in an adjacent tree. Bird 3 left the nest about noon on June 7. It flew across Fifth and landed, passing through trees until it came to rest in a sickly plane tree northwest of the Alice in Wonderland statue in the blue spruce field. When I saw this bird in mid-afternoon, it was still panting with the bill open. Maiden voyages must be hot and tiring work.

For Marie Winn, the most surprising discovery about the young red-tails was the orange feathers--on their chests, but not in the literature. The chest and brow looked apricot in the sun. Many observers were delighted to see parents teach the young to soar. Charles Kennedy watched a parent pass back and forth in front of bird 1. Next time that bird flew, said Charles, it was gliding like a hawk, not flapping like a crow. For Patricia Miller, Marcia Lowe, Beth Bergman and Howie Moskowitz rat capture was memorable. Patricia and Marcia saw the bird at the nest look, stoop, and conquer behind the Hans Christian Anderson statue. It flew back to the nest with dinner almost before they understood what they had seen. Beth and Howie got to see a prolonged attack at the Band Shell because the rat put up a good fight. As soon as the young were out of the nest, said several observers, the parents dropped off whole food. The young were expected to tear it apart for themselves. Patricia watched the mother bird tuck food under the foot of bird 2. Bird 3 had great difficulty holding the food and keeping its grip on the branch. Eventually it was fed on a flat rooftop where balance was less crucial. That bird has an injured or malformed left foot and cannot spread the toes and claws.

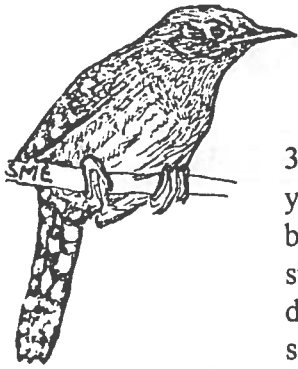
The red-tail family seem remarkably unconcerned by the hundreds of humans who come to watch them through a slice of their lives. They fly over the roof tops between 72 and 79 Streets and into park trees. My thanks to Merle Higgins and Anne Shanahan for their many photos to help the drawings on this page.

While the hawks soar, the swans glide. They also have 3 young, which looked like gray fluffballs at first. We were alarmed to see the adults visit a swan-feeder, but they kept the cygnets at bay. The young climbed up on mama's back to rest, look out, and nap. Now they are whiter, almost mallard-size, and seem safe from danger. Be glad there are only 3.



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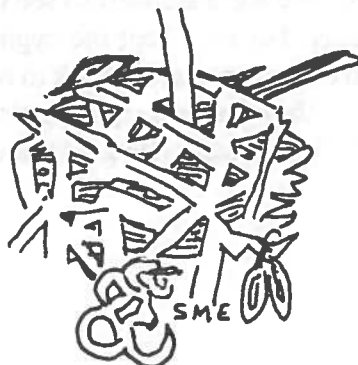
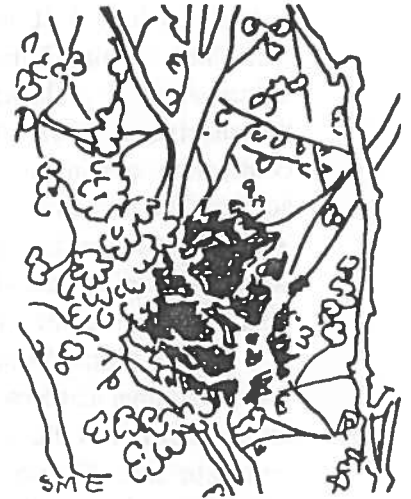
The Nests of Spring and Summer



Three seems to be a magic number this year. We have 3 house wren nests and 6 adults working on families. Some years we get one nest but usually there are none so this is a bonanza. The first nest was built in April, judging by male singing that went on for weeks. The birds used an abandoned downy hole in a small tree at the beginning of the Point. The second singing male led us to a scraggy tree west of the weather station and south of the Castle. Again it was last year's downy nest for this year's wrens. The female downy in a new nest and the female wren in the hand-me-down shared the food territory in feisty togetherness. Deborah Allen, who took the photo used for this sketch, says mama wren was collecting insects and little spiders to feed her young. The third nest is in a bird house supplied by Bari Stevens Greene, Banquet Director for the Boathouse. As party guests disport themselves to loud music, mother wren slips in and out with food for the young. Usually her mate is up the hill singing his head off in meadow and woods, but when I sketched the bird house he was right there to keep an eye on things. By the time you read this, all the young should have fledged.

One year wrens built a nest in a lamppost overlooking 79th St. transverse and fed young from Shakespeare Garden. Most city house sparrows also favor lampposts and build nests in the crossbars. But they are weaver finches and every spring a few of them revert. If you see a lump of twigs without leaves high in a tree, it is a house sparrow nest. Occasionally they build low enough so that you can see the twigs and straw woven into a ball with a hole in the side. This sketch comes from 2 photos taken by Nate Burkins at my request. The male does the building. Then he stands beside his mansion and sings for a mate. Soon you will see her going in and out with toilet paper or other soft nest lining. If the nest is not blown away in a rainstorm, the parents bring forth young.

Some birds make traditional nests but add man-made material to it. Blue jays make a cup nest of twigs. But they have a fondness for unlikely hang-down decorations. One year a jay found plastic circles from a six pack and placed them all around her nest like a wreath. The next year I put a piece of six-pack plastic on a limb and it was snatched for a nearby jay nest. This year a jay nested right beside a walk west of the Azalea Pond. I walked over and waved plastic up and down to get her attention. I hung it from limbs, left and returned an hour later. Sure enough she had tucked all the plastic under her nest.

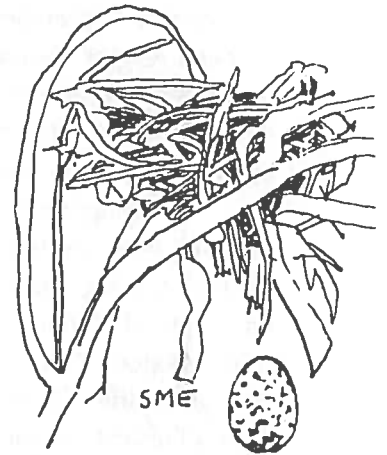
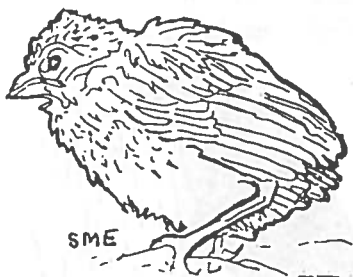




Baltimore orioles are probably our most beautiful park nesters. Back in the old days they used horsehair and wove bag nests with slender necks. Now they build with plastic fish line. The bags are shorter, wider and last through hard winters. Orioles seem to like adding a touch of color and will accept our ribbons of blue, green and red. They also like tinsel, which glitters in the sun. Many park birds accept fuzz from your drying machine and use it to line their nests. One year I whistled to a male oriole near his nest. When I had his attention I put fuzz on the barberry bushes and told him to show her. He certainly did. Later when I saw her land on the nest she bounced in the air as if she were on a feather bed. I believe the young survived so she may have pulled out some of the stuffing as they got bigger. Orioles make a new nest every year. One year when fish line was scarce, they pulled apart old nests and recycled. The nests looked tangled, lumpy and graceless. They worked fine. This nest is decorated with an oriole from a photo by Howie Moskowitz.

Our next most colorful nesters are cardinals.

Unlike orioles they nest twice over. That's a good thing because the first nest has few leaves to hide it and the eggs and young are often taken by rats. The second nest is usually successful. This one was very exposed and I found it in August with an abandoned egg. Birders told me the parents had successfully raised young. This sketch of a young tailless cardinal comes from a photo by Nate Burkins. There is no space for tails in a crowded nest and they are not so vital as wings. The tail will grow rapidly. As you can see from the bump on the head, the bird is already growing a crest. New-hatched cardinals without down or feathers have pink skin where the feathers will be.



If cardinals like streamers hanging from their nests, thrushes adore them. In 1988 a pair of wood thrush built a nest six feet off the ground at the top of an arrowwood or *Viburnum dentatum*. Elise Boeger took dozens of pictures of the birds and their nest, the source for this sketch. When they completed their first family, birders looked into the nest and found one egg. Joe Richner took it and accidentally dropped it. He said the egg stank. No sooner was the egg removed than the parents returned. At the end of July, birders saw her reline the nest with muddy wet leaves and begin a second brood. By the time the young fledged, lots of streamers had been added to the nest. The longest was 2 feet, a strip of plastic. One of the shortest was the paper envelope for a drinking straw. At that time we thought a recycled wood thrush nest was unique. But apparently many thrushes do it, probably when materials are scarce or time is short. Wood thrushes are safer from humans if they nest higher. This year a pair have a nest in the woods just north of the Oven, perhaps 20 feet off the ground.





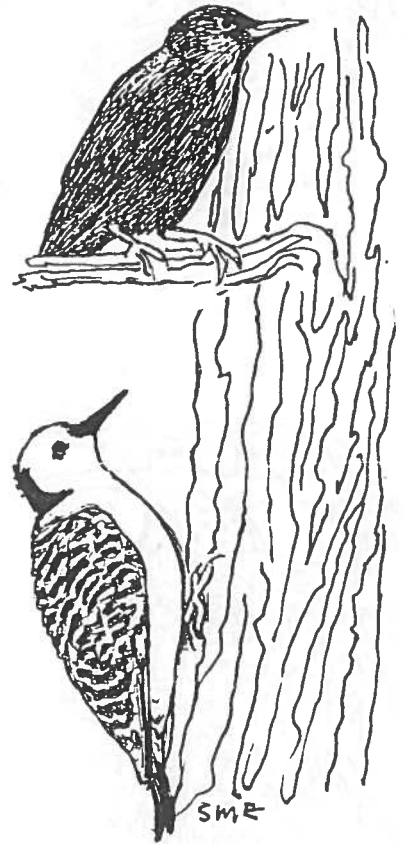
Many catbirds nest in Central Park, near the ground. Like song sparrows and brown thrashers they like the protection of thick bushes. The barberry bushes just south of Bow Bridge are a popular nesting spot with all three birds. One year Howie Moskowitz took a picture of this catbird in the knotweed, just south of the Summer House. Vegetation was scarce and the birds were pestered by voyeurs. But catbirds are fearless. That was the year Beth Bergman taught me they will eat peanuts if you break them up into small pieces. We dropped peanut crumbs, first at a distance and then at our feet.

Soon the birds were beside us, looking up for more. When we obliged they took bits over to the nest. They returned until their noisy babies were stuffed into silence. This year there are catbirds in the same place. The male sings a song of the red-eyed vireo while the female meows from the thicket. I think they have plenty to eat, unlike the ravenous peanut-eaters of yore.

It seems odd to talk about thrushes without mentioning the American robin. Robins are wildly successful and build hundreds of nests in the park. They begin nesting in mid-April and continue doing so until mid-September. Robins feed worms to their young in the nest. They all eat black cherries in July and August. As the berries ferment the birds get drunk and seem unconcerned about you. I feel sure robins produce three nests in a season. But the following year the number of returning robins is about the same. That means the kill of first-year birds is enormous. Some birders find them boring but I always enjoy watching them. I don't feel the same about starlings.

Starlings were imported and put into Central Park a century ago by persons who wanted to see all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare. Many died but starlings have pushed their way to success. From Central Park they have spread from coast to coast, north into Canada and Alaska, and south into Mexico. They prefer to nest in holes but their bills are not strong enough to drill. So they wait for woodpeckers to do it for them. When the hole is finished and the woodpecker family is well along, the starlings attack. They smash eggs, kill young, strike adults and drive them off. Then they take over the nest. In the south, red-headed woodpeckers fight back fiercely and are killed. Red-bellied woodpeckers are more timid and the adults escape with their lives, but no young. Flickers are in decline all over North America. If we could discourage starlings we would have many more woodpeckers on our continent and in the park. Only the downys are safe because they make entrance holes too small for starlings to shoulder their way into. The few larger woodpeckers that manage to raise young here do so because they delay their families until all the starlings are busy with nesting and before they start a second starling brood.

I considered redressing the starling problem with a slingshot, but have been told it's against New York State law. A birder from Britain says that the starling population is dropping rapidly there. He doesn't know what is wrong but thinks it's a virus that's wiping them out. Now if we could import some sickly starlings for a reunion with their American cousins.....



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Vol.5 No.6

November-December, 1999

One Hundred and Still Counting

Never have so many people come to count the birds in Central Park. And never have so many species of Christmas birds been there to be counted. It was a perfect equation for success. The day was cold but not bitter and nothing fell from the skies, which were bright at 8 and sunny by 10. Birders entering from Fifth Ave. were greeted by Ranger Dan Kane, who pointed the way to the Reservoir. When we arrived at the South Pumping Station of the Reservoir, David Krauss had already counted all the gulls before they woke up and flew away.

As more and more bird watchers appeared, so did Ralph Ginzburg. He was carrying a step ladder, a megaphone and a camera. He led us down to the bridal path, climbed on his ladder, and using the megaphone, told us to press together for the centenary group shot. He had me come forward to stand next to Parks Commissioner Henry J. Stern. We were instructed to raise our binoculars to our eyes and look at the light in the lamppost behind him. As Ralph arranged people in the crowd, I watched late-comers arrive, search for birders, then flutter down the steps to join the flock. There was plenty of time to enjoy Ralph's instructions.

"The gentleman at the back," said Ralph, "please step closer to your neighbor or step away. You are half in and half out of the picture. Madame, do you have binoculars with you? Then will you please step aside." After Ralph had arranged birders of various shapes and sizes to fill the space, and we again raised our binoculars to the lamppost, its light had just gone out. Ralph took many shots, then moved his ladder a foot or two for a better angle. Next, he took a picture of the 5 specially invited children. Then he rushed away, kindly loaning me his megaphone.

When everyone had swarmed back to the pumping station, I passed out name/address cards: pink for adults, green for children. Soon the adults used up all pinks, then the leftover greens. That's when I knew we had one mighty crowd. The adults handed in their cards with \$5. The children came in free, thanks to National Audubon, but I asked them to give their ages--9 to 14. Two adults making do with green cards put down 43 and 65 yrs.. When all the cards were gone, birders put their names on scraps of paper. One woman, lacking a paper scrap, autographed her five dollar bill. Luckily, she thought to mention it a day later!

Eventually, with many repeats on the megaphone, the birders handed in their cards and scraps of paper with their money to heroic Ellen Kornhauser and Sandra Reynolds. These two birders have done this chore **expertly** for three years and are the only reason the names of counters equal the amount of money taken in. Both names and money are sent to National Audubon.

I passed out a stack of blue sheets marked "Rules and Tips." They were to count all perched and ground birds including pigeons, starlings and house sparrows. They should count the big birds in the air as well, noting their number, the time, and the direction they were flying. Big birds can and do soar with the greatest of ease over several park sections and we try not to overcount them. Birders were urged to check evergreens, berry trees and in the leaves along all the park walls. They should plan to stop by noon to get to the Arsenal by 12:30. If they were tired or pressed for time, they should get out on the East or West Drives and Park Rangers in vans would pick them up and

give them a ride south to the Zoo.

I passed out yellow tally sheets with names of birds and spaces to mark their numbers. We picked leaders for each of the seven sections of the park and I passed out green section maps to each group. They whooped and trooped off to scour the park.

When most of the crowd had departed, I joined the children with mothers and Peter Mott, who teaches at Fieldstone School. We were joined by John Bianchi, who handles public relations for National Audubon and proved to be a quiet but very good birder. Also with us was Angelique Bell, John's charming and beautiful assistant who came in from Connecticut. We went down the East Drive to the Ramble and turned in at Maintenance Meadow. Peter pointed out a white-throated sparrow in a bush and told the children to look for the yellow spots near the bill. Next we walked to the winter feeding station at Azalea Pond. I pulled out a bag of peanuts and we held out shelled nuts to any confiding birds. A titmouse came to me and was about to land when a child's swinging arm scared it off. Eventually it went to Laurelle Hammonds. She wasn't sure the bird had taken anything until she saw only half a peanut in her palm. She complained that the bird hurt her, but gave her secret smile when I protested. Little birds have claws sharp enough to feel when they clasp your finger but the grip isn't hard enough to break the skin. No other birds came to our hands, so the children fed peanuts to very tubby squirrels.

We looked up at the feeders and the hanging bags of thistle seed. We tabulated winter-drab goldfinches, a male and female downy coming to the suet, several chickadees, more tufted titmice, 2 white-breasted nuthatches and even a red-breasted nuthatch. On the ground we saw a handsome fox sparrow, more white-throats, a junco and on a tree by the stream my count favorite, a brown creeper. With help from the group, Emmanuel Saldana (age 11), wrote everything down on our yellow tally sheet. He took the job seriously and did it well.

At Willow Rock a flotilla of mallards streamed toward us for a handout. "Should I toss them a peanut?" asked one of the children. "No, it will sink." Peter Mott focused the children's attention on the mallard tails. He explained that mallards are the only ducks in the world with curly tail feathers, and only the males have them.

We went to the Point and saw a hermit thrush. Doug Wells, from National Audubon and upstate New York, confirmed it was a hermit because he saw the bird cock and drop its rust-red tail. When Doug started to describe the color and structure of the birds's wing feathers, I said, "These guys from Ithaca, they don't fool around!" Everyone laughed.

Since our group was "floating free," I suggested we go to Cedar Hill and look for the owl. We stood on the flat viewing rock, looked at the cluster of pines and studied the one on the right. No owl. Luckily, I walked downhill a few steps and there, well out on a limb surrounded by space, was the long-eared owl. Everyone could see the ears clearly. It was a first-ever owl for all of the children and some of the adults.

At Turtle Pond Peter asked, "Which one of those ducks is the black duck?" Silence. He explained that only one duck before us had no white in the tail and they followed the clue to the bird. When we reached the Castle, two mystery ducks on the far shore awoke, came near and turned into female hooded mergansers. Near the slatted birder's blind we saw a female wood duck.

Back on the East Drive we flagged a van and Ranger Duncan Blair gave most of us a ride to the Zoo. Our route was uptown to the Reservoir, across the bridal path to the west side, and down the West Drive. It's a regal experience, riding in a park van. The pace is smooth and stately and you get to see the park from a completely different perspective. Rangers do not slam on their breaks or honk at strollers, skaters and runners. They wait patiently to be noticed, then just glide by. Soon we

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were at the Zoo. I greeted lots of cheerful birders, especially the ones who had seen rare birds and were keeping the news for later.

Rangers greeted us at the Arsenal and suggested we take our coats with us because all the coat racks were bulging. When we walked into the conference room on the third floor the place was packed. Joyful birders were eating soup in a sandwich and drinking cocoa or cider. I managed to get 2 or 3 bites before being called forward.

Commissioner Henry J. Stern stepped to the podium, adjusted the microphone slightly and began a gracious speech honoring the bird watchers assembled and the history of the count. The speech, set in headline sized type, was prepared by Lauren Dwyer. But the commissioner is a pro. He departed from and returned to the text easily and frequently, crafting it to his own use. He introduced his dog, Boomer, a gentle golden retriever. As Boomer passed through the crowd we were encouraged to pet the dog. Patting Boomer was the highlight of a thrilling day for one young member of our group. As I stood next to the Commissioner, I couldn't help noticing his handsome three-quarter profile and how easily he worked his way through the event. Near the end of his remarks he rang a large bell and praised me for my 25 years of participating in the count, 15 years of organizing and compiling it. Malcolm Pinckney took pictures of us and of birders in the room.

It was delightful to step to the microphone and speak without having to SHOUT. I thanked the Commissioner and Alex Brash, Head of all the Rangers, and I gave heartfelt thanks to Jill Mainelli for all she had done to organize me, along with the event. It was she who called an early meeting in November to meet people and sort out tasks. I was told the meeting room in the Arsenal would cost us \$1500. Because Henry Stern and Alex Brash jointly sponsored our 100 year celebration, we got the room as a gift. I tell you this so that YOU can WRITE or CALL in your THANKS to each of these men. Central Park birders are famous for their complaints, so your pleasant remarks will come as a welcome surprise. I am grateful that Alex Brash looked at my invitation and glanced through my mailing list to over 100 people who have participated in former counts. He scooped my papers up and took them away to his office, where they sent out the mailing in plenty of time for RSVPs.

It was Jill Mainelli's smart idea at a second meeting to take away all my sheets and print each of them in a different color. She captured the last of the orange-red paper and gave it to Terry Jackson, who took it to the Ranger office. They printed my park-wide count sheet on this gorgeous color and decorated it with the Christmas bird plus the logos of the 5 participating organizations, including the Linnaean Society. Jill took my enlarged Christmas bird on dark green sheets to Pui Yu, who laminated them for park signs. Rangers put them up near the Reservoir and the Arsenal to help birders find the beginning and end of the count. It was Jill's idea to use my bird logo for cookies. Terry Jackson took the logo to a baker friend and the result pleased everyone. The Rangers, Duncan Blair, Elizabeth Carrozza, Mary Giannusa, Dan. Kane, E.J.McAdams, Linda Rurak and Matt Symons were specially picked from all five burroughs. They were gracious and helpful to us all the morning and at the party, they stood against the wall watching with pleasure. When I told the crowd that the board of New York City Audubon had put up the money for the food they were eating, a great cheer went up. Later I learned that NYCAS paid almost half the \$1000 tab. Parks Dept. paid for the rest. Another reason for us to **THANK** them all. About 50 people said they were coming but 3 times that many showed up. Meredith Caccese, Terry Jackson and Jill Mainelli worked like troopers to see that everyone had food, drink., a place to sit and an orange tally sheet to mark.

After my thanks to only some of people who helped to make this event a success, it was time to start the numbers. I had asked for one person from each section to announce each bird total in a

clear, loud and distinct voice. It worked. Only a few numbers had to be repeated in that very crowded room.

This year, Alex Brash suggested, we could flash the **birds** and their **numbers** on a **big screen**. (Wow.) Unfortunately, the screen wasn't high enough for everyone to see but Brian Carlson, the man at the computer attached to the screen, could give us instant park totals for any bird when I asked for them. We hit a snag with the red-tailed hawks. They were seen in every section of the park in varying numbers traveling in all directions and at differing times. Unraveling all the sightings seemed so daunting, I asked what we should do to arrive at a fair number. Peter Post said to take the total and divide by 3. The crowd went along with that. Brian Carlson gave us the total for seven sections and the fraction of it. The crowd wrote down 9 red tails on their tally sheets.

American crows were also a problem. Why? Because the Dept. of Health wanted crow numbers from all the groups in the Lower Hudson Count. Crows were seen everywhere in our park. When I wondered aloud about the '98 crow total, someone supplied it immediately. In 1998 we had a high of 272 crows. In 1999, the number was reduced to 104. We counted them all. Crow counts were down all over Manhattan, but huge in Staten Island, where they are counted when they come in to roost for the night.

We were very pleased with our downy, hairy, flicker, red-bellied and yellow-bellied sapsucker counts. The room was silent when we got to red-headed woodpecker. After all seven sections reported "zero" a sad "awww" went up from the crowd. The high counts of tufted titmice, chickadees, white-breasted nuthatches and even red-breasted nuthatches were a delight. Perhaps because of the summer drought, these birds are wintering farther south in greater numbers than they have for about a decade. We are honored to be the only area in Manhattan to be graced by brown creepers. Thank you, brown creepers. When Niger thistle feeder-bags were added to the Azalea Pond feeding station a few years ago, we began to see several winter goldfinches. This year their numbers jumped to 49.

Experienced counters marked their sheets as we worked our way through the list of expected winter birds. But when we got to the blank section marked "Other", everyone sat up and listened carefully to each section report. There were 2 pied-billed grebes, 25 American coots, a double-crested cormorant, gadwall, green-winged teal, ruby-crowned kinglets, a winter wren, Carolina wrens, a white-crowned sparrow, a peregrine falcon, a woodcock and a Cape May warbler. "Who saw the warbler?" asked someone in the crowd. Gretta Lee leapt to her feet, flung out her arms and shouted, "I did!" The room exploded in cheers and applause.

Gretta is a new birder. She was with Joe DiCostanzo in the northwest section of the park. The birders split into 2 groups and walked south from 110 to 97 St. It was slim pickings for the counters near the wall but much better for those nearest the Loch. When all the counters arrived at 97 St., Ranger Linda Rurak offered to walk back to 110 St., get her van and pick them up. No, said Joe, we will all go with you. A good move. Suddenly, Gretta saw a "yellow bird" and Sean Sime said it was a "warbler." They chased it from tree to tree until it landed on a fence where everyone could study it. As Joe said when he wrote up the report, the bird had fairly bright yellow underparts, heavily streaked with black, and white under the tail. The "upperparts" were gray-green except for the yellow rump. There were prominent white wing bars and the face was yellow with a yellow eyeline. The sides of the neck were yellowish, slightly outlining a somewhat darker cheek. The legs were black. We believe this is the first Cape May warbler ever seen on our Christmas count.

The group moved north. As they approached the Block House they saw a woodcock, which may be another first for our Christmas Count. (Recently, a woodcock, perhaps this one, has been

seen in the Oven where it might spend the winter as one did in the 1980's.) When the northwest counters reached the van, they noticed a crow dive-bombing something. They raised their binoculars and discovered a perched Cooper's hawk at Central Park West and 110 St. How nice all these birds appeared in time to be counted before the counters left the area.

Down in the southeast section birders were looking across 59th St. to Essex House. Merrill Higgins had seen hawk activity there the day before and for the Christmas Count he returned with his scope on a monopod for a detailed look. Ben Cacase called a peregrine falcon as they gathered at the north side of Wollman Rink. They watched it dive-bombing an immature red-tailed hawk perched on the first E of the Essex House sign. They could see the red-tail through the scope, but catching its attacker in flight proved more difficult. The falcon climbed the sky, circling over 59th St. and the park. High above, it would fold its wings and stoop. Aiming straight for the red-tail it swooped down, missing its victim by inches. The falcon rose and plummeted again, repeating this threat more than 10 times, says Merrill. But the young red-tail would not be driven off.

Thirty years ago peregrines had disappeared from the East due to poisonous spraying. In the 1970's they were brought back from extinction via a breeding program begun at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY. Young birds were released and some of them survived and nested on buildings and bridges. New York City hosts the most peregrine nesters but none of the falcons were put on the Christmas Count until '98. That bird was seen just before it disappeared into the blackness of a building, says Merrill. As they watched the '99 display, the group saw the falcon above the park.

The white-crowned sparrow may be a Christmas Count first. They are not common here and certainly not in winter. How nice the bird feeder at the Zoo keeps a white-crown snaffling up the spilled seeds under it. You will be able to see this sparrow through the fence at the East Drive. And look up. You could see the peregrine circling over our park.

On the night of the count, I was getting ready for a long winter's nap when Tom Fiore called. He and Mike Freeman were out watching birds while we were in the Arsenal and saw a red-shouldered hawk to add to the day's list. My thanks to Pat Pollock, who called to report many birds for this count. She saw the Cape May warbler at the end of the count day, and again on New Year's Eve in the Wildflower Meadow. Brad Klein saw it there on New Year's day. Why was it still here and what was it eating? Birders saw it travelling with a yellow-bellied sapsucker. Perhaps, after the woodpecker drilled a hole in a pine and sucked sap, the warbler went to the hole for the leftovers.

Within the count period other birds were seen and reported. An indigo bunting at the feeders, a catbird seen in Shakespeare Garden before and just after the count, a canvasback seen on the Reservoir by Pat Pollock, a chipping sparrow seen in the Pinetum Dec.16 by Tom Fiore, 2 pine siskins seen by Jack Meyer and Brian McPhillips at a thistle feeder Dec.18 and a screech owl discovered by Bob DeCandido's owl prowling group on the night before the count. Since 1999 was a year of superlatives for the Christmas Count, here is another. This year we broke the record of bird species for **the day AND the count period**. And we celebrated our 100th year with a new beginning. As we filled our count sheets in pen and pencil, the birds were being tabulated by not one but two computers. I received Brian Carlson's printout, "Prepared by El Exigente", before I even left the Arsenal! Ben Cacase put his report on the internet for eBird.NYC and Norman Stotz had it at the NYCAS office the next day. Both compilations showed the same totals for the birds they listed. That makes preparing my list MUCH EASIER. But the final count was larger because so many birds were reported later. Thanks to all the people who came to participate in this count and all the BIRDS who allowed themselves to be counted.

Why is this newsletter so late? Let me count the ways. Several people are trying to help with

photographs, some are floppy disks, some black and white prints, and some as slides that have not come back from the shop. I have spent many hours on this saga, trying to verify the names of birds and people. The birds seem to be complete, but some of the people may be missing. I began working on this Christmas Count last summer and I YEARN to complete it. There is one other hinderance. I got up to see the full moon at the Solstice. Dec. 23. I hit my foot on a planter and broke my toe. These days I hobble, but not far. So fact-checking must be done by phone. I wish for YOU a year of mobility and a lack of tedium.

My thanks to all of you who did NOT write checks to subscribe to The Elliott Newsletter for 2000. I have thought long and hard, and finally decided I will try to put out the news for one more year. If you have not sent your check, please delay it until the end of January when I can struggle to a bank. If you have already sent a check, I promise to process it. If you wish to send **cash**, wrap a twenty in paper with your **name, address, zip** and write "**paid cash in full.**" I hope you enjoy this last issue of 1999.

The Central Park Christmas Bird Count~1999

pied-billed grebe 2	rock dove (pigeon) 1157	white-throated sparrow 199
double-crested cormorant 1	mourning dove 21	white-crowned sparrow 1
great blue heron 5	long-eared owl 1	dark-eyed junco 73
mute swan 4	northern flicker 7	red-winged blackbird 40
Canada goose 170	red-bellied woodpecker 46	common grackle 68
mallard 656	yellow-bellied sapsucker 18	house finch 150
American black duck 57	hairy woodpecker 4	American goldfinch 49
gadwall 4	downy woodpecker 59	house sparrow 1013
green-winged teal 1	blue jay 148	
northern shoveler 73	American crow 104	Total species 62
wood duck 3	black-capped chickadee 169	Total individuals 6,462
lesser scaup 3	tufted titmouse 155	
bufflehead 17	white-breasted nuthatch 49	Birds seen in Count
ruddy duck 209	red-breasted nuthatch 8	period:
hooded merganser 2	brown creeper 3	canvasback 12/16/99
red-breasted merganser 1	winter wren 1	indigo bunting 12/16/99
American coot 25	Carolina wren 3	chipping sparrow 12/16/99
American woodcock 1	ruby-crowned kinglet 3	catbird 12/17&20/99
ring-billed gull 774	hermit thrush 2	(Shakespeare garden)
herring gull 319	American robin 70	2 pine siskins 12/18/99
great black-backed gull 40	northern mockingbird 6	screech owl (introduced)
sharp-shinned hawk 2	European starling 370	12/18/99
Cooper's hawk 2	Cape May warbler 1	6 species and 7 birds
red-tailed hawk 9	northern cardinal 42	
red-shouldered hawk 1	fox sparrow 10	GRAND TOTAL
American kestrel 3	song sparrow 26	68 species,
peregrine falcon 1	swamp sparrow 1	6469 individuals

THE ELLIOTT NEWSLETTER

Nature Notes from Central Park

Vol. 10, No. 6

November~December 2004

Late Fall Delights in Strawberry Field

On Dec. 6, I went to the park to see all the exciting birds at Strawberry Field. I joined a group at the north end and saw nothing. But at the south end, beside the transverse, Jeff Kimball suddenly said, "I see it!" High up in a pine tree was a saw-whet owl staring back at us. We could see its face, eyes open, and belly with rust stripes on the sides but not the front. As we walked along the east edge something flew out of the bushes and landed under a holly tree. It was a yellow-breasted chat, a bird I had been missing all year. This bird was intent on berries and so we had a long look. There were 2 rusty lines across the chat's throat. I have never seen any color other than yellow on the throat and breast of a chat so this bird was surprising. It would be helpful if someone took its picture while it was in the park. Perhaps we could see if the bird was injured, has mutant feathers or was marked as part of a study group.

While others revisited the owl or searched for the wood thrush, Joe DiCostanzo and I stood watching the fence at the north end of Strawberry Field. I had been with Tom Fiore a week before when he called a hummingbird. I saw a small up-and-down blur of a hummingbird, but not its markings. Not a ruby-throat, I was told. Maybe Allen's or rufous. During the week birders snapped pictures and internettetted them to people out West. Back came the verdict: rufous.

Suddenly the hummingbird came out of the bush and sat on the fence. The bird bent forward and the dark head seemed to be thrust through the center of a light-tan doughnut. The bird straightened up and the head looked lighter gray, the bill dark, with like most hummers, a white spot behind the eye. The feathers on the back were scalloped and emerald-green. On the throat was a dark spot which turned into a perfect triangle when the bird faced us. Joe called it a gorget and said that some birders had discovered a few red feathers in photos of it. The flanks were rosy-tan and the leading edge of the wing was very black. There was red behind the black, which I thought was on the wing but Joe thought was on the tail. There were white dots on the tip of the tail. Having said all these field marks out loud, I could remember them when I got home. I made sketches of what I remembered and then looked it up in Sibley. My notes led to a female rufous hummingbird.

We all admired a red-bellied woodpecker going in and out of its winter hole. I received a stunning picture of the bird from Beth Bergman via her new digital camera. She never understood the bird's name until she looked at her picture and saw all the rosy-pink on chest and belly. I have seen pink belly-wash above the male's legs in spring, but never the amount of color Beth captured. I put her pictures of the woodpecker, a red-tailed hawk and an owl up on the wall beside my computer, where I can enjoy them all winter. Thank you, Beth!

That day I saw a dark bird which others called a wood thrush. I returned and finally saw a thrush that did not cock a rust-red tail like a hermit, but had no rust-red head like a wood. The bird kept its back to me. I could see spots beside the wings but got no belly view. I believe this was the wood thrush. Was it too young for a red head? Had it come from a wood thrush nest in the park? It was wonderful to see all these birds in late fall and even better that some of them stayed around for the Christmas Count.

Ellie

A Blow Felt Round the World

For hawk watchers, Dec. 7 was "a day that will live in infamy." That morning, I received a phone call from Noreen O'Rourke telling me that workers at 927 Fifth Ave. were taking down Pale Male and Lola's nest. Who should she call? I said E.J. McAdams at New York City Audubon. I urged her to tell the volunteers she had to speak to E.J. in person and at once about an emergency.

I called Regina Alvarez of the Central Park Conservancy and gave her Noreen's report. Regina said she would tell Neil Calvanese and go right over to Fifth. She called back to say she and Neil had found the nest down and E.J. there. E.J. said when he got Noreen's call, he jumped into a cab bound for 74th St. and Fifth Ave. On the way he called Fish and Wildlife because he was sure this was a violation of the law. By the time he arrived he'd learned the act was not illegal and he felt lost. He saw that the nest and workmen were gone, the building entrance tidied up for Chanukah. Two people were standing on the street: photographer Lincoln Karim and Richard Pyle, a reporter for the Associated Press.

E.J. was sure that the people to witness this debacle and make it known were the press. He called the city Audubon office and urged Emily FitzGerald and Geoffrey Cobb Ryan to alert all their press contacts. News of the destruction of Pale Male and Lola's nest was on Ch 4 and Ch 7 that first night. By next day this story had taken on a life of its own. It was covered coast to coast in the U.S. and eventually in a dozen countries, including India and Saudi Arabia.

E.J. also called Adrian Benepe, Commissioner of Parks, and told him the nest had been destroyed. Adrian spent the first 24 hours determining that no environmental laws had been broken, something he and E.J. felt the co-op board had thoroughly researched before they struck.

On Wednesday, Dec. 8, E.J. wrote and sent letters to all city, state and federal elected officials. Adrian phoned Mayor Bloomberg's office and was charged to try and be an "honest broker" and use his "good offices" to work with 5 agencies: his own, the Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Department of Buildings, the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation and the NYC Department of Environmental Protection.

On Thursday, E.J. wrote the lawyer for the building and asked for a meeting with the co-op board. On Friday, he received a call from Richard Cohen, chairman of the co-op board. Cohen told him what they had done and why, with, he said, the interest of the birds in mind. He argued that when hawk parents fed their young the food was only partially eaten. Left-overs represented a health hazard. Also, the large nest on the front of the building had become too heavy for the structure and was a safety hazard. It could fall, striking people below. He asked E.J. to help them solve these health and safety concerns and they could begin working together, but not until Monday. Meanwhile, he urged E.J. to call off the vigils and protests in front of the building. E.J. said no.

The protests started with 40 people and grew rapidly. Over the weekend 300 people came and stayed and a thousand who passed through the protest area signed petitions. Ten thousand people signed an on-line petition on National Audubon's website.

E.J. worked with Adrian; John Flicker, President of National Audubon; Marcia Fowle, President of NYC Audubon; Barbara Loucks of NY State Dept. of Conservation; and Chris Nadareski, for the State Dept. of Environmental Protection. These concerned people joined Adrian and E.J. at the Arsenal early Monday morning. E.J. had called Richard Cohen and was granted a meeting at 10. At 8:30 the Arsenal gathering planned strategy for that meeting. Then E.J. went to 927 Fifth Ave. with John Flicker, Adrian, Marcia, Fowle and others. They were taken to the basement of the building and ushered into a tool room, where they waited. And waited. Richard

Cohen arrived half an hour late and quickly became aware he'd insulted a number of important people. By the end of the meeting John Flicker led the negotiations. The building members were willing to put back the 3" anti-pigeon spikes which were still in the basement. But they wanted structural changes to strengthen the building. They had selected Dan Ionescu as their architect.

The group met with him next day. Ionescu showed them a sketch of the nest plan. He listened to their suggestions and incorporated them. E.J. said, "The design is a perfect balance of the hawks' needs and the building's concerns." It was fabricated by Champion Metal and Glass. They enclosed the anti-pigeon spikes in a mesh screen. The wall behind the nest area was strengthened to hold the weight. Then large, stainless steel spikes with blunt ends were installed. These spikes circle the nest edge. They lean outward at a 45 degree angle and are painted to match the color of the building ledge. The mesh and leaning spikes are placed to hold food and twigs in the nest.

The nest frame was installed on a humid, windy, rainy day. Despite the weather, the men worked with great cheer. E.J. was given a black garbage bag of twigs, none of them more than 15" long. Some of the twigs were collected by the Central Park Conservancy. Some of them were collected from Pale Male's first nest and kept by Charles Kennedy during his life. E.J. climbed down with the bag to dedicate the new nest. He'd been advised by Chris Nadeski to place the twigs in a thin layer at the center-top of the curve. Chris has experience working with peregrine falcons and their nests and E.J. placed the twigs as directed.

Looking out, he was thrilled by the view and their success. He says it was the good will of so many New Yorkers and people around the world that made their victory happen. Scaffolding stayed over the nest until the structure was determined to be sound. Then down came the rigging, just in time to celebrate the new year. Pale Male and Lola visit the structure and may begin work on a new nest in January or early February when red-tailed courtship begins again. My thanks to E.J. McAdams, Adrian Benepe and Lee Stinchcomb for their help with this story.

Birds Count and So Do Counters

On Sunday, Dec. 19, people gathered at 8 AM at the Reservoir's South Pumping Station to begin our 105th Christmas Bird Count in Central Park. About 80 people filled out name/address cards and handed in their \$5 to National Audubon. I was delighted to see six children ages 7, 8 and 10. As our crowd of counters ages, we need to invite more young people to join us.

We passed out colored sheets for tips & rules, and section tally sheets for every counter. We divided into groups to cover each of the park's 7 sections, and, to avoid omissions or duplications, each section leader was given maps for their area.

Because this year is my 20th and last as Compiler of this Central Park Count, I decided to celebrate by counting in the Northeast Section of the park. I was joined by lots of old friends including Bob Brophy, Ed Fagan, Chuck McAlexander, Anne and James McCollough, Jeff Nulle, Bill Valentine and Robin Villa.

We saw and delighted in cardinals, blue jays, red-bellied woodpeckers and a yellow-bellied sapsucker. James McCollough and his young friend Mattori Birnbaum counted pigeons, starlings and house sparrows, while Anne McCollough marked them down on her tally sheet. In the birdless places James gathered leaves and acorns and we named the oak trees they came from.

At Conservatory Garden some of the group saw a winter wren and most of us saw 2 mocking birds. But none of us saw the Wilson's warbler, although it had been seen early that morning. At the

Meer we saw lots of Canada geese, mallards, shovelers, ruddy ducks, buffleheads and a pair of gadwalls. At the northwest corner of the Meer, almost out on 110 St., we saw a red-tailed hawk in a tree. It looked us over and then returned to scanning the ground for bird breakfast.

On the return south, one of the Rangers told me I was wanted at the Arsenal for a press interview. They would get one of the vans to give me a ride. After a while a van appeared and everyone hopped into it. Sure enough, at the Arsenal 2 people wanted to know if I was Sarah Elliott. They were from the Daily News. As one of them asked me to pose watching a bird, Chuck McAlexander said, "Sarah, look up! A sharpie." I watched the hawk disappear and got Chuck to tell the reporters why it was a sharp-shinned and not a Cooper's hawk. The photographer left and I went inside to eat and get ready for the park-wide count. As I swallowed lentil soup the reporter asked about birds. I tried to answer but people kept interrupting to say hi or ask questions.

The reporter got a few sentences and I had half my soup when Adrian Benepe began to speak at the podium. He welcomed all the birders and said a few words about the history of our Christmas Count. Then he gave some of my background and said nice things about me while I slurped soup. He called me to the podium for sustained applause. Then he stepped down and took up a large plaque. At the top it said "Birds Count!" Under this vital message was my bird logo and a gold rectangle celebrating me for 20 years as Central Park Compiler, the month and year, and the names of Mayor Bloomberg and Adrian Benepe. He handed me the plaque, which is very heavy.

I felt cheery and rattled as I looked around at all the smiling faces. Then I saw a birder expressing his "no" vote. He sat looking at his hands on the table. His attitude made me notice his altitude. It was then I realized I was receiving a standing ovation, the first and last of my life. I thanked everyone from my heart and told them how glad I was to give up a job that requires bookkeeping and other skills I don't possess. And now, I was almost free at last.

We began the full bird count. We went through the birds, one by one, with people in the room shouting out each number for their section. A person at a computer entered the section numbers and the park total for each bird as we went. The numbers flashed up on a big screen for all to see, except me. We went through a list of probable birds, then possible birds and finally rare to never-seen-before birds. I told them that rare birds might require a sheet of description to be filed in 24 hours for Dick Gershon, compiler for the Lower Hudson Count. When we got to broad-winged hawk I was urged to pass out a sheet. Three people filled it out before they left the count. Tom Fiore got 2 sheets for the Wilson's warbler at Conservatory Garden and the orange-crowned warbler at the Zoo. Other birders saw these birds before or after but not on the day of the count.

When the count was over and people drifted over the park, Joan Weiss wrapped my very heavy plaque and gave me a ride home. I began to get phone calls. John Day called about the saw-whet owl found by James Demes and the counters of the Southwest Group. John Day said that when birders gathered at the Tavern on the Green some of them said this owl was too big to be a saw-whet. Discussion and argument ensued. Birders who lived nearby rushed home and returned with guides and scopes. They pointed to spots on the forehead and black markings that connected the eye and the eyebrow. Eventually they agreed that this was a boreal owl, never seen before in Central Park or New York City. So, for most of us, it is a **life bird** discovered because of the count.

I called E.J. and got the name and cell phone number of the reporter for the Daily News. I called, thanked her and urged her to include the boreal owl. She had just finished her article and was not pleased with a last-minute change. Next day the story appeared with the headline "Crowds rally for bird tally." Unfortunately I'd not spelled the name of the owl which came out "Boyle."

Here are the totals for the Central Park Bird Count of Dec. 19, 2004. Other birds seen in

the 3 days before or the 3 days after that Sunday are listed in the count period.

Pied-billed Grebe 1	Northern Saw-whet Owl 1	Orange-crowned Warbler 1
Double-crested Cormorant 1	Boreal Owl 1	Wilson's Warbler 1
Mute Swan 1	Red-bellied Woodpecker 25	Northern Cardinal 66
Canada Goose 129	Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 16	Fox Sparrow 3
American Black Duck 4	Downy Woodpecker 39	Song Sparrow 21
Mallard 471	Hairy Woodpecker 4	White-throated Sparrow 146
hybrid Mallard 4	Northern Flicker 3	Dark-eyed Junco 14
Northern Shoveler 129	Blue Jay 114	Red-winged Blackbird 1
Gadwall 6	American Crow 17	Common Grackle 22
Bufflehead 24	Black-capped Chickadee 81	House Finch 9
Hooded Merganser 1	Tufted Titmouse 155	American Goldfinch 25
Ruddy Duck 121	Red-breasted Nuthatch 1	House Sparrow 758
Sharp-shinned Hawk 2	White-breasted Nuthatch 91	
Cooper's Hawk 4	Brown Creeper 2	Total Species for count: 57 + hybrid
Broad-winged Hawk 1	Winter Wren 2	Total Individuals counted: 5597
Red-tailed Hawk 9	Ruby-crowned Kinglet 1	Birds in Count Period: 7
Peregrine Falcon 1	Hermit Thrush 7	12/16 Kingfisher 1, Field Sparrow 1
American Coot 3	Wood Thrush 1	Yellow-breasted Chat 1
Ring-billed Gull 957	American Robin 262	12/20 Snow Goose 170 overhead
Herring Gull 447	Gray Catbird 2	12/21 Long-eared Owl 1, Red-
Great Black-backed Gull 82	Northern Mockingbird 4	shouldered Hawk 1
Rock Pigeon 662	Cedar Waxwing 9	12/22 Great Blue Heron. 1 overhead
Mourning Dove 66	European Starling 565	

The boreal owl stayed around Tavern on the Green for several weeks. Every day crowds gathered with binoculars, cameras and scopes. The owl looked unfazed, even by men hauling delivery boxes right under its tree. It hunted at night and returned to different trees with winter cover, such as pines and holly. The bird has not been found lately but could still be in the park. Sibley's behavior guide says that the considerably larger females are apt to migrate or wander. The smaller males are more sedentary, will accept nest boxes and stay on territory throughout adulthood. Rebeckah Creshkoff gathered 7 pellets under a pine tree where the bird was first seen, which means the owl was there a week before the count. Would it have been discovered eventually? Maybe not. The Christmas Count insures a thorough search of all the unlikely areas of the park.

On Dec. 22, I got an excellent view of the owl, thanks to Art Lemoine's telescope, and made a sketch of it. That day we also saw 2 saw-whets and a long-eared owl. A great story of the boreal owl appeared in the Daily News with a rhyming headline: "Big howl for rare owl." There was a photo of birders looking up and an insert of the owl from Lloyd Spitalnik. There's a quote from Dick Gershon and a good list of facts about the owl: it's about 10" tall with a 24" wingspan; females are larger and nest in tree cavities; males call in February and March. It's called Tengmalm's owl in Europe and Lars Jonsson's guide says the male's territory call is a series of fast, hollow, barking hoots that go "po po po po po" -- always at night. What a gift this owl was for my last count!



Dear Friends and Readers,

It seemed as if 2004 would never end and here am I dragging along the last piece of business for that year. This newsletter is long because there was so much news, some of it complicated and difficult to write, especially about Pale Male and Lola. As E.J. said, that story took on a life of its own. It reminded me of the public reaction after the death of Princess Di. Aside from mounds of dead flowers all over London, that event brought money to some of the causes Diana supported. It would be nice if some hawk lovers show their thanks to City and National Audubon by sending them checks. Beside the memo space in the lower left corner, you could write "Pale Male and Lola."

To: E.J. McAdams, New York City Audubon Society, 71 West 23 St., NY, NY 10010

To: John Flicker, National Audubon Society, 700 Broadway, NY, NY 10003

I thank those of you who sent news clippings, photos and 2005 subscription checks for yourselves and for friends. Jeff Nulle suggested that if I've given up the Christmas Count after 20 years, maybe, to have time to write "the Central Park nature book", I should give up the newsletter after 10. I've told him I can't. I need the income. Jeff has corrected my copy all of the past 10 years. He's delighted this will be his last issue. I can't blame him. But the thought of doing this newsletter without him makes me glum. I will miss his business-like remarks about the punctuation and his witty asides. He tells me that if I have trouble finding a new proof reader, he'll help out in a pinch. I hope not to pinch him, as he's earned a rest and then some.

This year I have been approached by a young woman who makes her living in computer services and thinks my newsletter should be on the internet. She could set up a website and believes the number of subscribers would increase dramatically, especially among young readers. Do you know young readers who would read this news? Many of you use the internet and would scan or download the news. But many of you would prefer getting it in the mail and reading it a bit at a time.

The computer programmer knows how to make payment for subscriptions secure, but I don't and that fills me with dismay. Also the thought of putting out 2 versions of the bimonthly newsletter, one with sketches and one without, could make me crazy. We have not discussed the cost for her services nor how that would affect the cost of your subscription. I am in great need of your opinions and advice. I will not rush to make changes so in the meantime, please renew the newsletter in the usual way with a check for:

\$20 to Sarah Elliott, 333 E. 34 St. # 17D, NYC 10016..

Many Thanks! This long-eared owl is expressing his opinion of 2004, and the weather to begin 2005. Best wishes to you all,



Sarah Elliott