

## **A History of the Delaware Bird–A–Thon**

Sally O’Byrne

1107 Franklin St., Wilmington, DE 19806

2011 was the fifth year of the Delaware Bird–A–Thon (DBAT), and it is time to review its history and success. Begun in 2007, the DBAT has raised over \$170,000 and has helped purchase over 69 acres of shorebird habitat along the Delaware Bay (assuming that another purchase will be complete by press time and that we are well over \$160,000 after 2011 efforts). This has been accomplished with individual and corporate donations and through a variety of strategies to get those donations. As a five year project of DOS the DBAT, under the leadership of Conservation Chair Bill Stewart, has been a success financially, as a public relations tool for this Society, and as a conservation initiative.

Bill Stewart was named Conservation Chair of DOS in 2006, and he wanted to tackle a project that would be significant both locally and globally. At the November Conservation Committee meeting, he presented the initial concept of raising funds to help the Red Knot. By the middle of the decade, the press had carried stories about the imminent extinction of the Red Knot, and Bill had personally noticed a notable decline over the years. Other ideas such as underwriting a hawk watch intern for a Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA) linked hawk watch at Ashland Nature Center had also been suggested by Joe Sebastiani. A Bird–A–Thon was discussed, and the current members of the Conservation Committee (Bob Rufe, Keith Hall, John Janowski, and Bruce Lantz) backed the idea of going to DOS Council for start-up funding.

At the January 2007 DOS Council meeting, Bill presented the idea of a Bird–A–Thon and asked for \$2,500 for the design and distribution of brochures. Council was hesitant to take on the risk. DOS had never committed itself to such a project before and fundraising by the Conservation Committee in the past had been limited to book sales and auctions that had raised significantly less than \$1,000. Furthermore, Council members wanted to know how the monies raised would aid the Red Knot. With a hint of sarcasm, one council member asked, “So, what do we do with the money? Walk up to a Red Knot and hand him a check?”

After further discussion on the merits and risks of the idea, Council approved the \$2,500 on 8 January. A Bird–A–Thon committee including Derek Stoner, Judy Montgomery, Alan Dages, Bob Rufe, and Sally O’Byrne was created, and it immediately went to work. A month later Bill presented a mock-up of the first brochure that he developed with the help of Jay Gundel and Associates, and we had our first monetary sponsorships from Richardson’s Garden Center, Garden Valley Nursery, Birds and Barrel, and Wild Birds Inc. of Hockessin

Bill searched for environmentally oriented groups that might have an interest in this project, and he discovered The Conservation Fund ([www.conservationfund.org](http://www.conservationfund.org)). This is a national organization with a local chapter and their mission is to purchase land for preservation. It had recently purchased acreage at Mispillion Harbor which was then donated to the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife. This property was the ‘epicenter’ of shorebird activity in Delaware and crucial to the birds’ short term success. Blaine Phillips, the local contact, told Bill that the Conservation Fund was currently negotiating for a property along the Delaware Bay and funds from DOS would be greatly appreciated. The DOS Conservation Committee committed \$15,000 to the Conservation Fund to go towards this property on Fowler Beach. DOS was now really committed.

Blaine Phillips passed along a contact for the DuPont company’s Clear into the Future Initiative, and after a call from Bill, DuPont committed \$5,000. This contribution gave DOS’s Delaware Bird–A–Thon credibility and was an impetus that allowed us to solicit other organizations. Alan Dages approached AstraZeneca and the DBAT received \$3,500. The DBAT had nearly \$9,000 by mid-February, before most DOS members had heard of it.

The fundraising concept of the DBAT was that individuals or teams collected pledges for the number of different species they could find in one 24 hour period of birding in Delaware. The chosen week in May was peak migration and there was hope that teams would have competitive Big Days. In fact, money was raised by both corporate donors and participating birders. Prizes were donated by business sponsors, and were given for various categories of participating birder/teams. The primary emphasis of the prizes was for monies raised and secondarily for the number of species counted.

In the first year (2007), 3,000 brochures were printed with a Great Egret on the cover, and it was distributed throughout the state. Kim

Steininger's photos were featured on the inside as well as on the cover. DOS members created teams, collected funds, and several Bird-A-Thon walks were designed as DOS field trips, allowing members and other birders to make a donation after the bird walk. Several youth teams participated, including teams from St. Anne's, Tatnall Middle School, and St. Edmonds Academy. The first ever Delaware Bird-A-Thon went spectacularly well, and by the end of May had raised \$28,000. We were able to honor our \$15,000 pledge to the Conservation Fund with significant funds left over. We reserved some funds for the next year's brochure, and with the remaining funds the Conservation Committee decided to fund a hawk watch intern for the start of the Ashland Hawk Watch.

The Conservation Fund's negotiations were successful and the 2007 DOS contribution was perfectly timed to help purchase seventeen acres at Fowlers Beach on the Delaware Bay. The Conservation Fund completed the purchase and transferred the property to Prime Hook National Wildlife Refuge. DOS finished the year with a piece of property to show for the DBAT's efforts.

The Ashland Hawk Watch (AHW) was an idea that Joe Sebastiani pursued after noticing significant numbers of raptors passing over the Ashland Nature Center during the fall migration. Under the direction of Derek Stoner who was President of DOS, a partnership with Delaware Nature Society (DNS) was created to fund this hawk watch. DOS agreed to underwrite a professional hawk counter, and DNS provided housing, office space, promotional support, and importantly for DOS, free meeting space for the organization. Using funds solely from the 2007 DBAT, Forrest Rowland was hired to be the first hawk counter/compiler in this unique partnership between DOS and DNS. The sightings of the AHW were reported daily to HMANA and have been documented in this journal.

The 2008 Bird-A-Thon committee met in January to begin plans for the second annual DBAT. DuPont and AstraZeneca recommitted with their respective funds, giving us \$8,500, and the second brochure featuring a Marsh Wren was designed by Jay Gundel Associates. That year 5,000 copies were printed, and in addition to their distribution our story was picked up nationally and endorsed in several blogs and in Wildbird Magazine. David Sibley, with no prompting by us, spoke glowingly of the DBAT in his blog. When Bill Stewart asked for per-

mission to use his quote in our brochures, Sibley replied “Anything for bird conservation!”

The DOS conservation committee made a verbal agreement with the Conservation Fund that 2008 funds would go to them for another land purchase. They had several properties in discussion, but nothing was imminent. DOS also made a commitment to underwrite the 2008 Ashland Hawk Watch. Due to the first year’s success and subsequent publicity and enthusiasm as well as the hard work of both organizers and participants, 2008 went very well. A total of \$43,000 was raised with contributions from seventeen states, seven ornithological related organizations, and twenty-eight businesses. Over 750 people participated in some way, either as birders or contributors who pledged. Winners included ten youth birders from three states, and 23 of 27 Delaware birding trail locations were visited.

Unfortunately, the perfect timing of the negotiated sale the previous year did not happen again, so the money raised did not result in an immediate acquisition. Because of this, the Conservation Fund set up a special account called “The Delmarva Ornithological Society Shorebird Habitat Acquisition Fund” and \$28,000 was deposited, to be held by the Conservation Fund until shorebird habitat could be successfully purchased.

The 2009 Bird–A–Thon geared up with enthusiasm and a growing competitive edge among the top birding teams. We lost the AstraZeneca funds due to the changing national economic conditions, but we gained more local business donations and prizes. The third annual Bird–A–Thon was held 2–10 May and that year’s brochure featured a Red Knot, the poster child of the event. We had an enthusiastic youth team from Baltimore ‘Friends of the Red Knot’, led by Mike Hudson. There were contributors from twenty-three states and three countries, twenty-one business sponsors, and contributions from four different ornithological organizations. Over 243 species were tallied, and contributions for 2009 totaled over \$45,000. The top adult team was Matt Sarver and Lauren Morgans who found 157 species in a day of pouring rain and strong winds. With their combination of prodigious efforts and good contacts, the Sarver/Morgans team raised \$8,092.

Due to the real estate situation nationally and within Delaware, the Conservation Fund was not able to negotiate any sales of property along the coast that would be suitable to the mission of DOS and the DBAT. The Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife had long been involved

with the Shorebird Project, monitoring and studying shorebirds during migration. DOS approached them with the possibility of using DBAT funds to help them purchase shorebird habitat. Coincidentally, the Division of Fish and Wildlife had an opportunity to buy a property near Mispillion Harbor that they wanted to restore as roosting habitat for shorebirds, specifically the Red Knot.

The DOS and the DBAT committee re-evaluated the Bird-A-Thon mission in the winter of 2009–2010. Should the funds raised be solely for shorebird habitat or for other conservation projects like the Ashland Hawk Watch? What was the DOS responsibility for funding hawk watches in the state? Could the money be used for restoring habitat or for purchasing land that was not necessarily for shorebirds? The Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife was interested in funding Delaware hawk watches as part of their avian research. DOS worked with them to that end, relieving DBAT from the responsibility of funding the AHW. With that funding assurance, the DBAT committee confirmed that the funds raised would be solely used for purchasing and enhancing shorebird habitat.

As Fish and Wildlife was negotiating for the proposed property at Mispillion, the Fourth Annual DBAT got under way 8–16 May. DuPont's Clear into the Future continued to be the lead sponsor with a \$5,000 donation, and the cover bird was the Black-necked Stilt, the logo bird of DOS. Competitive teams were formed, pledges were collected, prizes and corporate donations were collected and the results were in by the end of May 2010.

2010 was not a good financial year for many businesses and individuals, but we still collected \$34,120 by the end of May. Contributions were from twelve states, three countries and eight ornithological organizations. Six categories of prizes were awarded, with the top adult team (Stoner, Steininger, Montgomery, Stewart) raising \$6,970 and finding 153 species. The top youth team was the Delaware Dunlins (Hudson, Watson, Mielnikiewicz) raising \$1,200 and finding 150 species.

By mid-summer, the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife successfully negotiated the purchase of fifty-two acres using DBAT funds as a match for their funds. This created a total of sixty-nine acres of shorebird habitat purchased with the help of DOS efforts.

The Fifth Annual Delaware Bird-A-Thon was conducted 7-15 May and as of mid-June the 2011 Bird-A-Thon raised over \$33, 600 with contributions from over 600 people hailing from fourteen states.

Donations came from as far away as New Zealand. The cover photo of the 2011 brochure is one of Kim Steininger's best—a pair of American Avocets. DuPont is still the lead sponsor, and DOS is negotiating with both the Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife and The Conservation Fund about potential properties to purchase.

What is the future of this DOS initiative? After five years, are we committed to this into the future? DOS has had spectacular success due to the hard work and enthusiasm of Bill Stewart, the DBAT committee, the corporate donors and every participant. If any of these partners fails, the entire Bird–A–Thon will struggle. Being a totally volunteer organization, DOS must keep this effort in perspective. Meanwhile, make a pledge, create your team, and line up your Big Day ... and have a great day in the field during your own Bird–A–Thon day. As Bill is fond of saying, “Birding for conservation makes cents!”