



New York Birders

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NYSOA 2025 Weekend Recap

*by the NYSOA 2025 Steering Committee,
Cayuga Bird Club*



Some of the many participants of the 2025 NYSOA Annual Meeting. Photo above: Paul Anderson; photo below: Chris Tessaglia-Hymes.



We had a fabulous weekend for the 2025 NYSOA conference this September in Ithaca! This year's conference, hosted by the Cayuga Bird Club, drew 225 registrants, including 29 young birders. We had excellent weather for field trips and great presentations by our speakers!

Following Friday afternoon field trips and tours of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology Visitor Center, attendees came together for a welcome reception at the Ithaca Downtown Conference Center and heard a fascinating presentation by Dr. Adriaan Dokter. Adriaan spoke about BirdCast and how weather radar can be used to measure abundance, timing, and locations of birds in flight during their nighttime migration. Adriaan also explained what has been learned about avian population changes over time, and how the data from weather radar tracking can help inform conservation decisions.

A Friday evening night flight call recording session was also announced, offered by night flight call experts Bill Evans and Chris Tessaglia-Hymes, atop a nearby parking garage. This activity provided an intriguing demonstration of a night flight call recording setup and a chance to hear some of the brief vocalizations of birds in flight.

Fields trips were offered by 24 field trip leaders to a dozen different sites over the weekend, including trips to Finger Lakes National Forest and Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge on Sunday. Overall, a com-

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bined total of 147 different species were seen or heard. Highlights included seeing Northern Waterthrush and an American Woodcock at Sapsucker Woods, an American Golden-Plover with a Dunlin and Lesser Yellowlegs at Myers Point, Common Gallinule at Stewart Park, a vagrant Purple Gallinule at Freese Road chased by many and seen by some, three species of falcons seen in 15 minutes at the Hawthorn Thicket, a Black Vulture seen at the Arboretum, and a young Bald Eagle eating a fish at Lighthouse Point. A combined eBird trip report listing all species for the NYSOA weekend can be viewed at <https://ebird.org/tripreport/414010>.

At the conference center, people had a chance to visit 23 different exhibitor/vendor tables with art, books, optics, crafts, bird-feeding supplies, or information on special projects. There was also an opportunity to bid on a wide variety of silent auction items donated by sponsors, vendors, artists, and Cayuga Bird Club members.

Julie Hart and the Breeding Bird Atlas team hosted a lunch celebration for folks who helped with this recently completed volunteer effort. Julie presented some comparisons of new survey results with those from earlier NY Breeding Bird Atlas data. Bald Eagles and Ospreys for example, are increasing in numbers. However, breeding Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolinks, and other grassland species have decreased significantly across the state. Atlas results are expected to be published in 2028.

Saturday afternoon's paper session included a wide range of topics: restoration of Piping Plovers along Eastern Lake Ontario; using eBird data to model flow of specific bird species during migration; how weather radar data can identify migration stopover sites in spring and fall; Whooping Crane protection and their significance to Native American cultures; relationships between climate change and timing of spring migration among warblers; marsh management and use of wetlands by waterbirds; using AI to transcribe very old handwritten notes for egg collections to digitize records; and the importance of including insulating features in nest box design to reduce high internal temperatures.

Following the paper session, the New York State Young Birders Club led a challenging Bird ID quiz, showing photos of only part of a bird to identify it, with teams at different tables competing against one another. No team got a perfect score, but all had fun!

The banquet was followed by NYSOA awards presentations, including the Lillian C. Stoner award to Julian Batista, Elias Markee-Ratner, and Emma Murphy. Shai Mitra announced that Kim Hartquist was the recipient of the Emmanuel Levine Memorial Award for the best article of 2024 in *The Kingbird*, and also recognized John Confer, lead author for best paper in 2023.

Saturday evening's main event, Peter Kaestner's keynote presentation, was a delightful and exciting story of his lifetime of birding adventures and his quest to see a representative of every bird family in the world, and then to become the first person to see 10,000 bird species. Peter emphasized how connecting with other

people had been important both for reaching his goals and enriching his travels. It turns out that 10,000 species is a moving taxonomic target and with recent species "lumping" his total dropped below that number. He made plans to find new species to add to his list to achieve the 10,000 birds milestone again. [October update: With Peter's additions of new birds this fall and also recent taxonomic revisions, Peter again reached a life list of

10,000 species, with his sighting of Pale-winged Trumpeter in Bolivia.]

Peter was a warm and engaging presenter and made time to chat with many people at the conference, including young birders. We were very pleased to have him and his wife, Kimberly, as such friendly and interactive guests for our NYSOA weekend.

The Cayuga Bird Club would like to whole-heartedly thank our sponsors who made this year's conference possible: Zeiss, Field Guides Birding Tours, Vortex Optics, Kowa, and Holbrook Birding Expeditions. We also thank Visit Ithaca for providing youth scholarship funding, enabling us to offer a very reduced registration rate for young people. And finally, we thank our field trip leaders and many volunteers for their contributions in making the 2025 NYSOA conference weekend such a successful and enjoyable event.



Peter Kaestner gave the keynote presentation. Photo: Rachel Lodder.

Kid's-Eye View: NYSOA 2025

Conference Highlights

By Pilar Castle-Kuhl, age 13

The Saturday Field Trip: Myers Park, Cayuga Lake

Our hotel was almost an hour away from Myers Park. We got up at 6:00AM to find it a cold morning, with fog covering a lot of the land. The edge of Cayuga Lake where we started the bird walk was quite stunning in the morning sun with the fog, and to add to it, there were two Trumpeter Swans out on the lake. An American Golden-Plover got quite close to where the group was, and we would later see the same bird from another viewpoint on the lake.

Another highlight in my opinion was seeing a Belted Kingfisher for probably the first time. It might not have been that rare, but it still made me delighted to see it, as all birds do. We also saw Northern Flickers, Bald Eagles, an Osprey, Red-bellied Woodpecker, Yellow-rumped Warbler, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue-headed Vireo, about 150 migrating Blue Jays, and a Northern Waterthrush which was only known because it was caught in a photo mid flight. (I wouldn't count that one.)

Along with all the birds, I really enjoyed the company of all the other more experienced birders—professionals who, in some cases, had studied birds most of their life. It was amazing to meet them and bird together. I might've felt less knowledgeable, but not completely out of place. We were all there to watch, learn, and share our experiences about these beautiful creatures.



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The Paper Session

During the paper session, we listened to the speakers talk about an interesting range of things. I really liked learning about Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge management from the DEC Region 8 Wildlife Biologist in particular. It was also interesting how young some of the speakers were, some not far from my own age, and yet just as good as all the rest.



The Banquet

In the social time before the banquet, we met Tim Gallagher, who told us some of his stories about raptors and the birding world. When the banquet started, thanks and awards were given out, and one of the recipients, John Confer, was at our table, along with Tim and some other birders. From then on, while we ate, Peter Kaestner shared his stories of trying to see 10,000 birds (he succeeded!).

These are some highlights of the conference, but the whole time was a blast! All these kinds of experiences remind me why I love birds and nature in general. I hope I'll get to see more amazing birds and meet more amazing people in the near future.

Left: Myers Park, photo by Cevan Castle.

Below: Observing an American Golden-Plover, photo by Cevan Castle.



Kid's-Eye View: A Whirlwind of a Conference!

By Rook Schucker Mallo, age 15

My second time attending and participating in the (in-person) Annual NYSOA Conference was everything that I hoped for, and extra! Ithaca and the surrounding nature around the Finger Lakes has long been a crucial center for the study of birds and bird conservation. Having the conference there this year gave me a unique perspective on just how much goes on in and around the city, and the vast expanses across the globe that ornithologists and conservationists based there have reached in the endeavor to make the world a better place for birds and people.

Traveling up with my parents Friday afternoon, our first stop before the reception was Sapsucker Woods. While we arrived too late to make any of the tours earlier in the afternoon, the silence and cool breeze was a pleasant break from the recent September heat we had been getting in NYC. Getting to do some stress-free birding for the first time in a while was also a relief with the upcoming barrage of cross country meets over the next few weekends.

Friday evening at the conference center brought the start of presentations, and a wonderful talk was given by Dr. Adriaan Dokter, who has worked with the Cornell Lab to create some of the most recent means of forecasting bird migration and shifts in population through BirdCast. This talk (as well as the papers on Saturday covering BirdFlow Technology and tracking crucial stopover sites, given by Yuting Deng and Fengyi Guo, respectively) piqued my interest by highlighting the importance of hands-on field work, yet also reaping the benefits of the computing and animation power

and speed of AI, which has proven to be both accurate and efficient in its ability to quickly organize and map data over time. But the next day had even more in store...

Saturday kicked off with an early morning field trip at the F. R. Newman Arboretum, just outside of Ithaca. Despite the weather being mainly in the 40s, the relatively small group was able to stay satisfied with an abundance of Eastern Bluebirds, American Goldfinches, Song Sparrows, and surprise pairs of Cape May Warblers and Bald Eagles! Presentations got started at the Conference Center with the celebration of the success and participation in the third New York State Breeding Bird Atlas, of which I am glad to have partaken in every year with the young birders club. Soon enough, it came time for the day's paper session (accompanied by delicious and diverse lunch options!), jam-packed with intriguing presentations on studies local and abroad on bird migration, population patterns, and social and cultural significance, including an incredible study of the creation of cooler and better-placed nest boxes by NYSYBC's own Arabella Pajoohi! Grete Pasch also made one of the best presentations of the day, describing the use of AI corroboration in decoding and learning about early accounts of ornithologists and collectors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (she did it without slides,



Enjoying the Purple Gallinule, photo by Samantha Cassetta.



Banquet time, photo by Sean Murphy.





The photo quiz team, photo by Lizzy Ratner.

thanks to a temporary network glitch!).

Then came the fun part: the NYSYBC photo quiz! Presenting it once again was extremely fun, and the club truly came together to swiftly and successfully stump some of the best birders in the state (and the world)! As the evening grew nearer, what better way was there to spend the designated social time than to go birding! Almost all of the NYSYBC members attending (including myself) struck out on a mission to get a glimpse of a continuing Purple Gallinule at a small pond in Ithaca, and were successful in seeing and doc-

umenting the bird, returning to the conference center just in time for the evening banquet! The buffet didn't fail to continue to impress, and was almost totaled by the time of the awards and recognitions ceremony, where Julian Batista, Elias Markee-Ratner, and Emma Murphy received Lillian C. Stoner Awards (congrats to the three of them!)

The last presentation of the day was given by the famed Peter Kaestner, who told stories of his many journeys in the ultimate endeavor to be the first person in the world to see 10,000 bird species worldwide. I have many opinions on world birding and listing, with a hefty amount of them being negative. His stories changed some of these long-standing views and upheld others, overall confirming a still largely mixed viewpoint.

This exciting whirlwind of a conference was capped off by a trip to the Lindsay-Parsons Biodiversity Preserve on Sunday morning, where a first-of-site Lincoln's Sparrow was banded, and 35 additional species, including a rare Gadwall, were seen in much more pleasant conditions than Saturday morning. Thanks to NYSOA, NYSYBC, and the Cayuga Bird Club for yet another amazingly executed conference—it made my year!