

HISTORY OF PRINCE GEORGE'S AUDUBON SOCIETY

The early impetus behind the formation of the Prince George's Audubon Society (PGAS) can be attributed to one man, Benjamin Bereskin. Mr. Bereskin came to the county in the late 1960s and immediately became aware and alarmed that there was no local chapter of the National Audubon Society in the area. The Patuxent Bird Club of the Maryland Ornithological Society was extant, but Ben was an environmentalist and felt a more activist group was necessary for the area. He contacted three other bird enthusiasts, Robert Patterson, Donald Henderson, and Matthew Perry, to join him in the formation of a local chapter of the National Audubon Society.

The four men had many meetings at the Bereskin home on Millstream Drive in Bowie and learned about Mr. Bereskin's vision. He wanted an activist group that could fight for the environment and through films and lectures could educate the public. He had come from Ames, Iowa, where he had been involved with a large Audubon Society chapter that had sponsored a popular film series for the public. They all agreed with the plan and signed the initial document forming the Prince George's Audubon Society (PGAS).

It was in the first year of the organization in 1972 that it got involved with a controversial conflict with the City of Bowie. A sports organization had proposed an exercise and tennis club on City land that would eventually become the responsibility of the city. The PGAS Executive Committee on behalf of the society made it clear they were opposed to the proposal on city land. During several open hearings on the proposal, the city and the company offered compromises to PGAS by offering the construction of nature trails and other amenities to favor the environment. Although three of the founders were willing to compromise with the city, Mr. Bereskin was not. At an open public hearing concerning use of the land and construction of the sports facility, Mr. Bereskin resigned as President and as a member of PGAS, after chastising other founders for not fighting harder for Audubon Society principles.

Mr. Bereskin then went on to form the local chapter of the Sierra Club and remained active with this organization. His leadership and activism in the Prince George's County were significant and commendable. The loss of Mr. Bereskin's leadership was an immediate disappointment to the PGAS, but it quickly regrouped and elected new officers.

Early presidents of the PGAS after the departure of Mr. Bereskin included Robert Patterson, Matthew Perry, Carol Beyna, Maureen Blades, Susan Pearl, Paul Leifer, and Carolyn Sturdevant. Many other presidents followed over the years as leaders of the society including Bill Sefton, Tom Loomis, Mike Callahan, Lynette

Fullerton, Fred Fallon, and the current president Kenneth Cohen.

Shortly after formation in 1972, the PGAS inaugurated the Bowie Christmas Bird Count. This 15-mile diameter circle included the Patuxent Research Refuge. Ornithologists working at the Refuge, including Chandler Robbins and Robert Stewart, had records of bird counts at the Refuge during the years 1938 to 1948. This count, conducted on one day annually during the Christmas-New Year holiday period, has had many participants from the PGAS and their friends, and has provided good information on the long-range trends of birds in the area. By combining data from hundreds of other survey areas across the country, ornithologists and amateur birders can detect national trends in bird populations. In recent years Fred Fallon and Dave Mozurkewich have been compilers of the Christmas Bird Count and faithfully submitted the results to the nationwide compilers at National Audubon Society.

Fred Fallon has also been active in bird conservation, and for several years had the leading role with the MD Partners in Flight Habitat Committee. The work by this committee in collaboration with knowledgeable regional experts, resulted in the ground-breaking manual *Habitat Management Guidelines for the Benefit of Land Birds in Maryland*.

In 1986, Richard Dolesh initiated plans for the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) to purchase land along the Patuxent River and adjacent to Patuxent Research Refuge. Mrs. Myrtle Henry, the widow of Dr. William Henry, who had served as president (1942-1967) of Bowie State College (now University), owned 29 acres of forestland. Mr. Dolesh contacted Matthew Perry, as the guardian of Mr. Francis M. Uhler, who was a long-time biologist of the Refuge, and who was interested in land preservation. They acted as negotiators between the seller and the buyer. The purchase of the land from Mrs. Henry was finally made with a generous contribution of \$52,000 donated by Dr. Uhler. The land was called the Fran Uhler Natural Area (FUNA) and was “adopted” by the PGAS as part of the newly formed Adopt a Refuge Program of the National Audubon Society.

The dedication of the area occurred on May 2, 1987, and Mr. John W. Rhoads, Chairman of the Prince George’s County Planning Board, acted as Master of Ceremony. The one-hour long program included an invocation by Reverend Kenneth Schwengel, rector of Trinity Lutheran Church in Bowie and was followed by comments by Mr. John Rhoads, Dr. John S. Gottschalk, Former Director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Dr. Parris N. Glendening, Prince George’s County Executive, and Ms. Wanda Adams, President of PSAS. Ms. Adams introduced Ms. Lea Knapp, Chair of the Adopt a Refuge Committee of the PGAS, who presented Dr. Uhler with a Certificate of Appreciation.



Ribbon Cutting at Dedication of Fran Uhler Natural Area –May 2, 1987. (l to r) K. Schwengel, K. Wineland, J. Gottschalk, F. Uhler, P. Glendening, J. Rhoads, W. Adams, M. Perry, L. Knapp.



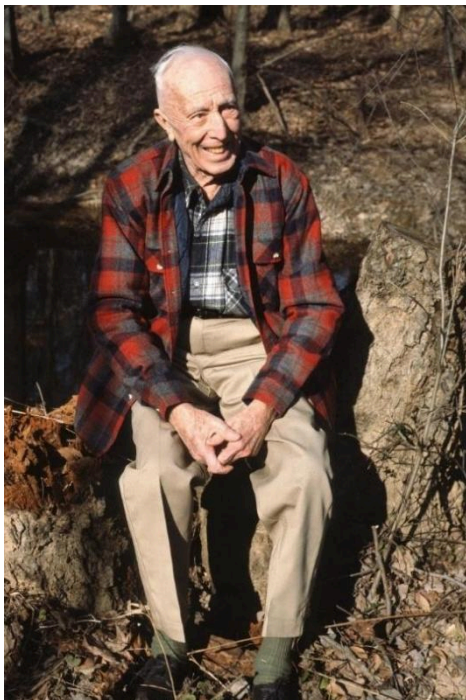
Group involved with an early work party at the Fran Uhler Natural area. Some members with Dr. Uhler (seated in center) included Woody Martin, Luther Goldman, Fred Fallon, Wanda Adams, Leonard Lutwack, Tom Loomis, and Dan Boone. Photo by M. Perry

The preservation of land like the FUNA that has been done by donors like Dr. Uhler and the leadership of the M-NCPPC, P.G. County, Maryland Natural Resources Department, and USFWS, has created a corridor of natural habitat along the Patuxent River that has attracted large bird numbers and numerous species making the area unique for research and birding. Dr. Donald Messersmith, professor at the University of Maryland, authored the *History of Birding in Prince George's County, Maryland* in 2008, which presents early research and observations in the County as well as the numerous publications contributed by government biologists in federal agencies located in the County such as Patuxent Research Refuge and Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. Many of the employees in these agencies have been members of PGAS and have donated many personal hours to surveys and recreational birding in the county. This closeness of professional ornithologists and a rich group of amateur birding enthusiasts has benefited all and produced many excellent publications.

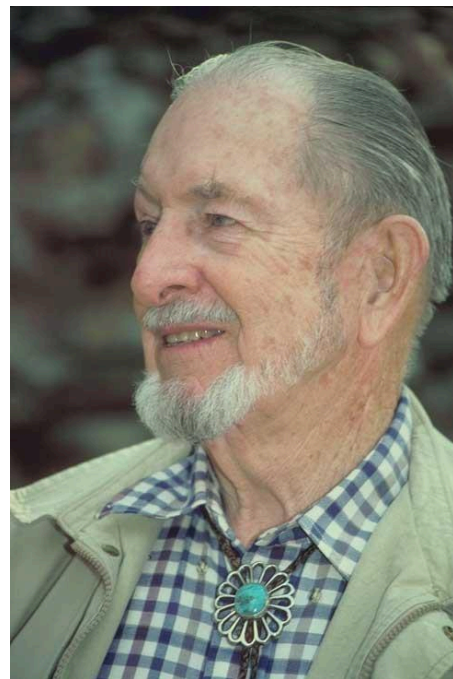
Over the 50 years, PGAS provided several scholarships to elementary school teachers to attend the environmental education Audubon Camp in Greenwich, Connecticut. In one year, PGAS sponsored a middle school boy to attend the summer camp on Hog Island in Maine for a week of outdoor/environmental education, which turned out to be a life-changing experience for him. PGAS also arranged for several dozen elementary classes in the Prince George's County schools to receive the monthly Audubon Adventures educational series of mailings. Carol Beyna coordinated several of these efforts for the many years when she was active with PGAS.



Birding trip to Fran Uhler Natural Area attended by PGAS President, Kenneth Cohen (back row, 2nd from left), and co-led by Anne Ringer and Bill Sefton (back row 2nd from right and far right), 2019.

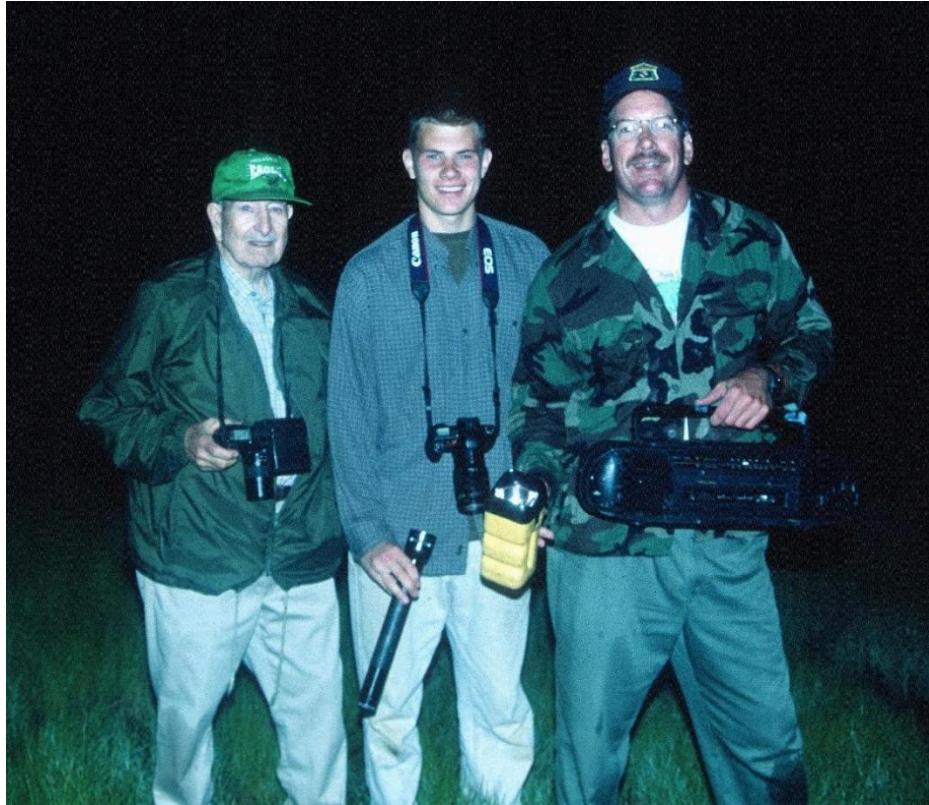


Dr. Francis M. Uhler at one of the many early work parties at the Fran Uhler Natural Area.
Photo by M. Perry



Luther Goldman, active member of PGAS for many years. Photo by M. Perry.

One professional U.S. Fish and Wildlife employee, who was very active with PGAS, was Luther C. Goldman. Mr. Goldman was an avid birder and led many birding tours. He especially liked the Lake Artemesia area, which was a private water garden before the Metro came to the area. A birding trail was dedicated at Lake Artemesia in Mr. Goldman's memory after he died in 2005. It was very fitting that the Fiftieth Anniversary celebration of PGAS was held on September 24, 2022, in this popular area. Active member of PGAS Lisa Bierer-Garrett is coordinator of the Anniversary event held in conjunction with Migratory Bird Day.



Luther Goldman, Christopher Perry, and Greg Kearns on a night birding trip to Elliot Island, MD, in 1999 in search of black rails. Photo by M. Perry.

Luther birded and led tours with Leonard Lutwack, another active PGAS member for many years. Before coming to Maryland Luther had been a longtime refuge manager in the Southwest and was fluent with the Spanish language. Luther was also the chief photographer for the USFWS. He led many birding trips to the Southwest and relived his days there with stories. He conducted a Birdathon with Fred and Jane Fallon, and others. They heard many of the exciting stories of his early days in the Southwest refuges.

PGAS conducts several birding surveys during each year, including the Christmas Bird Count and other seasonal surveys. These surveys are popular with birders in PGAS and have benefited by having many expert amateur and professional bird

enthusiasts. In recent years many members of PGAS have participated in the three Breeding Bird Atlas projects. Some notable avian species that have been recorded by PGAS members in Prince George's County include red-cockaded woodpecker, greater white-fronted goose, lesser black-backed gull, brown-headed nuthatch, Harris's sparrow, sedge wren, rough-legged hawk, and scissor-tailed flycatcher.

PGAS has published a newsletter since its beginning and keeps members informed of programs and field trips that are open to the public. In 2005, The Patuxent Bird Club, a chapter of the Maryland Ornithologist Society, combined forces with PGAS and now all programs and field trips are done jointly with the two organizations. Programs have been conducted in several locations and many noted birders and ornithologists have been speakers.

In the 1980s, PGAS assisted on a major conservation achievement with the preservation of the Belt Woods old-growth forest. PGAS worked with other conservation groups to preserve the land as wildlife habitat. Maryland State Government, under leadership of Governor Parris Glendening, eventually purchased Belt Woods to be managed by the Department of Natural Resources as the Belt Woods Natural Area. The area is still protected. In 2016 PGAS participated with other organizations in formulating the Department of Natural Resources' management plan for the area to assure its continued protection while permitting a hunting season for deer during fall and winter.

Dr. Chan Robbins, of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center had conducted early bird studies of the Belt Woods in the 1940s and considered this area to have the highest density of bird species in the country. Chan was involved with activities in the 1980-90s to draw attention to this valuable area. With PGAS members and outside conservationists like musician, Mr. Paul Winter, and college professor, Dr. Bill Feller, activities were conducted to educate the public and bring pressure on government officials and the owner of the land to preserve this property.

Concurrent with these activities by zealot birders was the writings of Ms. Lynn Cherry, who made many trips to the area and wrote the very popular children's book, *Flute's Journey: The Life of a Wood Thrush*, about Belt Woods that focused on a wood thrush named Flute. Ms. Cherry worked with PGAS and local activists, like Pam Cooper and former Bowie Mayor, Mr. Gary Allen, to bring recognition to these unique woods and the eventual preservation.



Early morning Earth Day activities in 1995 at Belt Woods. Attendees (l-r) Ajax Eastman, Dan Boone, Barbara Dowell, Judith Whitcomb, Robert Whitcomb, Chan Robbins, and Jane Robbins.



Image from Lynn Cherry's book showing children waving goodbye to Flute the wood thrush.

In 2014 while Maureen Blades was president at the suggestion of and under the direction of Lynette Fullerton PGAS initiated a fall celebration of our migratory birds at Lake Artemesia entitled Mi Casa es Su Casa to emphasize the connection of our migratory birds with their winter homes in Latin America. This festival included an early morning bird walk and a family birdwalk, the release of Monarch butterflies, children's craft construction of tube binoculars, Paula McNeil's raptor display and educational talk, information about native plants and providing microhabitats for birds, and information about PGAS and its accomplishments.

Covid did not halt PGAS' activities. Monthly meetings switched to zoom. This format enabled PGAS and PBC to draw on speakers outside the local areas. Michael O'Brian, a coauthor of [The Shorebird Guide](#) gave an informative talk about shorebird identification with insights not presented in his book. When the country went into lockdown in March, 2020 PGAS under the leadership of Kathy Shollenberger and her husband Barry Stahl initiated the Audubon Wildlife Habitat Program. In coordination with Patterson Park Audubon Center in Baltimore, they trained volunteers to serve as habitat advisors for county residents willing to transform their yards into bird-friendly habitat. The program, now in its third year, has grown in size and scope, with 300 visits and counting.

PGAS and the PBC resumed bird walks in August 2021, but still continue to hold monthly meetings by zoom.

During the fifty years that the PGAS has been in existence, there have been many good records of birds in Prince George's County and other areas recorded by devoted members of the society. There also have been major conservation activities conducted by members that have had a positive effect on bird habitat and the environment in general. Along with these positive activities there have been many hours of personal enjoyment and camaraderie that has been beneficial to all members and others associated with the members. Hopefully, the society will continue to provide these benefits to the County, the environment, and to the devoted members for many years into the future.

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