

# The Gnatcatcher

**Newsletter of Juniata Valley Audubon**

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as a benefit for members of the

JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY



[www.JVAS.org](http://www.JVAS.org)

**President's Message: A Season of Reflection and Hope**

Dear Friends of Juniata Valley Audubon Society,



As we approach the close of another year, I am filled with gratitude and inspiration for the shared commitment of the Juniata Audubon Society to the protection and appreciation of the natural world. Our love for birds and wildlife is not just a hobby or pastime—it is a shared responsibility, a passion that unites us in our collective goal of ensuring a healthier planet for future generations.

This year, I've been reminded time and time again of the importance of our work—whether it's advocating for habitat preservation, promoting sustainable practices, or simply witnessing the joy that a bird sighting can bring. Every step we take as a community, every action to protect and conserve, makes a difference. The beauty of nature is a gift, and it is our privilege to protect it.

As we enter the holiday season, one of my favorite highlights is our annual Christmas Bird Count. This event not only strengthens our connection to nature, but it also brings our community together in the spirit of collaboration and shared purpose. There is something truly special about spending time outdoors, counting the birds, and knowing that the data we gather contributes to vital conservation efforts across the continent. It's a beautiful reminder of the critical role each of us plays in preserving the creatures we hold dear.

Looking ahead, we know that the work is far from finished. The challenges facing our environment are complex and ongoing, but I take heart in knowing that, together, we are making meaningful strides. With each project we undertake and every educational effort we champion, we are leaving a lasting legacy for future generations to enjoy the same natural wonders we cherish today.

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Juniata Valley Audubon Society (JVAS) is a chapter of the National Audubon Society and is dedicated to the conservation and restoration of natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the Earth's biological diversity.

Juniata Valley Audubon accomplishes its mission through advocacy, science, land stewardship, and education – working directly with Audubon Mid-Atlantic, the district office of the National Audubon Society.

The JVAS is a tax-exempt, not-for-profit, educational organization as described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Gifts are deductible for income tax purposes (Tax ID # 25-1533496).

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**CONGRATULATIONS**  
to  
**EMILIO GARCIA**  
for obtaining the  
**Environmental Gold**  
**Standard of**  
**Sustainable Coffee:**  
**The Smithsonian's**  
**Bird Friendly® Label –**  
which certifies Lenca  
Farms Coffee as shade-  
grown, organic, and  
grown in a safe habitat  
for birds.

#### WHY WE PROMOTE SHADE-GROWN COFFEE

Most coffee that you buy is **SUN COFFEE**– all native plants are destroyed, and the coffee shrubs are grown in big fields where they are sprayed with pesticides and often irrigated and fertilized - just like a corn field! Since the natural habitat has been destroyed there are very few insects to support birds. Most of the coffee sold in grocery stores is **SUN COFFEE** and is often poor quality.

**SHADE-GROWN** coffee farmers like Emilio Garcia don't use pesticides and often create compost to naturally fertilize the coffee shrubs. Emilio plants his coffee shrubs on the forest floor, under the canopy of native trees. This means there are a lot of insects for birds to eat. Researchers have found that many of our songbirds spend the winter in **SHADE-GROWN** coffee farms because they are able to find abundant insects to eat and abundant cover for protection.

We are proud to support Emilio and his efforts to produce healthy coffee and a healthy environment for birds that breed in Pennsylvania, but spend the winter in Honduras.

**Celebrate Earth Day Every Day - Drink Bird Friendly® Coffee**

**Emilio Garcia**, our partner who produces bird friendly coffee on his farm in Honduras, has expanded his coffee sales to include sustainably harvested, shade-grown coffee from other countries.

You can order freshly roasted coffee (ground or whole bean) from **Lenca Coffee Roasters**: <https://lencacoffeeroasters.com> Order the Honduran coffee if you want Emilio's single origin, direct trade coffee that is certified Bird Friendly®.

Fair Trade shade-grown **decaf coffee** from Colombia is also available. Emilio sells his green coffee beans through <https://lencafarms.com>

**Remember, shade-grown coffee is good for you and good for our birds!**



# JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY EVENING PROGRAMS

Join us at the Bellwood-Antis Library, 526 Main St. Bellwood, PA

**Tuesday, JAN. 21, 2025: “MEMBERS’ NIGHT” at 7 PM.**

We will hold our annual “Members’ Night” on January 21, 2025, at 7 PM following our **POTLUCK at 6 PM**. Bring a covered dish, salad, or dessert to share. Don’t forget to bring your own silverware, cups, and utensils (to save on clean up and waste). Susan Braun will bring mugs if you’d like to enjoy some free Lenca coffee that Bird-friendly®.

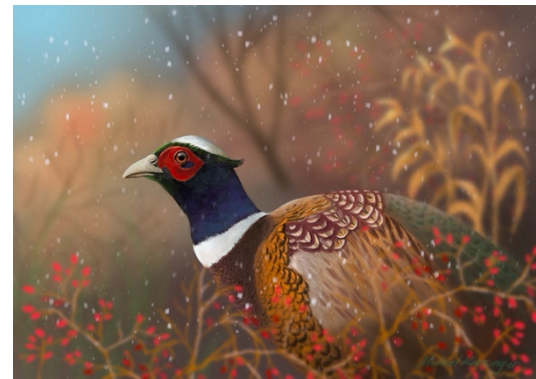
This is a wonderful opportunity for our members to share their interests, projects, and passions with those in attendance at our meetings! Whether it’s an art project, conservation effort, photography, poetry, or an exciting birding experience, we invite you to present something that would be of interest to the society!



As this is a members’ event, we encourage all interested individuals to email our President at [MichaelKensinger@gmail.com](mailto:MichaelKensinger@gmail.com) to express their interest in presenting. When contacting Michael, please include a brief description of the topic you would like to share.

## **Possible topics for presentation include, but are not limited to:**

- Art projects related to birds, nature, or wildlife
- Conservation initiatives or environmental stewardship projects
- Birding experiences or fieldwork
- Interesting facts, observations, or discoveries about local wildlife
- Conservation efforts and environmental challenges in the Juniata Valley
- Nature photography or other creative works inspired by the outdoors



Ring-necked Pheasant Artwork  
by Michael Kensinger

Please note that the time allotted for each presentation may vary depending on the number of participants. We strive to accommodate as many members as possible, and we will make every effort to ensure each speaker has sufficient time to present their material. SLIDE PROGRAMS SHOULD NOT EXCEED 10 MINUTES.

We look forward to a memorable evening filled with inspiration, creativity, and shared enthusiasm for the natural world. Don’t miss the chance to connect with fellow members and contribute to the community of the Juniata Valley Audubon Society. If you’re interested in presenting, please reach out as soon as possible. We look forward to hearing from you!

## FEB. 18, 2025 - "CHASING RARITIES" with Susan Braun

Join us at the Bellwood-Antis Library, 526 Main St. Bellwood, PA



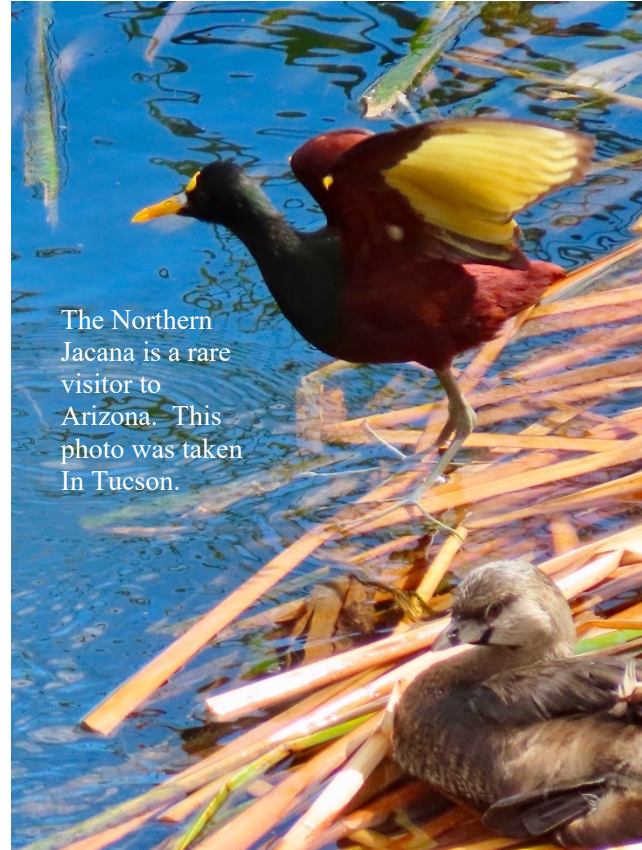
Free dinner starts at 6 PM and will feature lemon pepper chicken, salad, vegan and gluten free options, as well as apple and peach crisp dessert.

Freshly brewed **Bird-friendly®** Lenca Farms coffee will also be served.

We are excited to announce a special presentation by Education Chair Susan Braun on February 18, 2025, at 7 PM. Susan will be sharing her captivating journey in "Chasing Birds", an exploration of her personal experiences and adventures in birdwatching.

As a passionate bird enthusiast, Susan will take us on a virtual tour of some of the most remarkable birding spots, sharing stories, tips, and insights gained from her travels. Whether you're an experienced birder or just beginning to appreciate the world of birds, Susan's presentation promises to be both informative and inspiring.

Join us for an evening of adventure, learning, and connection as we explore the fascinating world of birds with Susan Braun. This event is free and open to all, and we encourage you to bring a friend or fellow nature enthusiast! We look forward to seeing you there!



The Northern Jacana is a rare visitor to Arizona. This photo was taken in Tucson.



### PRESIDENT'S Message by Michael Kensinger, continued

This holiday season, I encourage you to take a moment to reflect on the impact we've made and the work still ahead of us. Whether it's a quiet walk through the woods or a birdwatching adventure in your backyard, let us continue to find inspiration in the natural world around us. And, as we gather for the Christmas Bird Count, let's remember that every bird we count, every tree we protect, and every effort we make—no matter how small—has the power to change the world.

Thank you for your continued dedication to our mission. Together, we will keep the spirit of conservation alive and ensure that the beauty of the wild will always have a place in our hearts.

Wishing you all a joyful and peaceful holiday season, filled with the sounds of nature and the hope of a brighter future for all creatures great and small.

Warm regards,  
Michael Kensinger  
President, Juniata Valley Audubon Society



## JVAS FIELD TRIPS Winter 2025

### Greetings JVAS,

Contact Field Trip Chair Michael Kensinger if you have any suggestions for field trip locations, questions about a trip, or would like to lead a trip. Contact him at (814) 505-3410 or [MichaelKensinger@gmail.com](mailto:MichaelKensinger@gmail.com).

**\*In the event of inclement weather or dangerous conditions, Field Trip Chair Michael Kensinger reserves the right to cancel. Feel free to call or text Michael at (814) 505 – 3410 to check on the status of a field trip. You can also email Michael at [MichaelKensinger@gmail.com](mailto:MichaelKensinger@gmail.com)**

***FIRST TUESDAY WALK: Jan. 7, Feb. 4, & March 4 from 10 AM to NOON***  
**Birding the Ray Amato Memorial Trail behind the Northern Blair County Recreation Center**

### Address for Northern Blair County Rec Center (NBCRC):

4080 E Pleasant Valley Blvd, Altoona, Pa.

Join JVAS Secretary Connor Schmitt to explore the nature trail that runs behind Northern Blair Recreational Center in Tipton, PA. Enjoy an easy-grade hike, where you will enjoy a variety of habitats including streamside (Little Juniata River), wetland (Robert P. Brooks Wetland), meadow, and forest. This location is always a great choice for birding due to the myriad habitat choices. Even the NBCRC's soccer field boasts Killdeer, Canada Geese, Eastern Bluebirds, and others that like a more open area.



Connor (middle) and boys posted up.

**What to bring:** Please wear clothing suitable for weather conditions. Snack/drink. Binoculars if you have them. No dogs permitted on the nature trail.

**\*In the event of inclement weather or dangerous conditions, Field Trip Chair Michael Kensinger reserves the right to cancel. Feel free to call or text Michael at (814) 505 – 3410 to check on the status of a field trip. You can also email Michael at [MichaelKensinger@gmail.com](mailto:MichaelKensinger@gmail.com)**

Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers don't breed in Bedford County, but they migrate from parts north to spend the winter in our backyard. To the near right is a juvenile sapsucker, which lacks the bright vermilion markings of the male (far right). Adult females have the red crown but have a white throat instead of red.

We see sapsuckers regularly on our suet feeders from October until early spring and they leave tell-tale marks on many of our trees. Our pawpaws, sugar maples, apple trees, and white spruce are riddled with small holes that sapsuckers drill in a straight line. They "drink" the sap that flows out of the holes and eat any nearby insects. Their call reminds us of a baby crying, a sound that tells us fall has arrived.

Photos-Laura Jackson



**CONSERVATION CROSSROADS** is a section of *The Gnatcatcher* that features environmental issues across a spectrum of local, national, and global concerns. Contact Conservation Chair Laura Jackson if you know of an issue that deserves our attention and subsequent action. More information on conservation concerns is found at [www.JVAS.org](http://www.JVAS.org) then click on the Conservation tab.



## **Update on the Rutter’s Gas/Convenience Store upslope from Old Crow Wetland near Huntingdon, Pa. – Nature loses again**

Unfortunately, Big Business won again at the expense of wildlife, clean water, fresh air, and open space. As you can read in Greg Grove’s LTE below, after DEP approved the permit for construction, the Smithfield Township Supervisors ignored their own ordinance and approved the truck stop adjacent to Old Crow Wetlands at their November, 2024 meeting..

The Coalition to Save Old Crow is still working with their attorney to modify some of the damage proposed for the construction, but has decided to drop their appeal based on the advice of their attorney. This is an all-too-common defeat when it comes to Big Business versus Nature.

We applaud and thank everyone who donated countless hours and contributed to the cause to stop this development in hopes of protecting Old Crow wetland.

### *Letters to the Editor*

## **Should we have expected a different outcome?**

Editor  
The Daily News  
Dear Editor:

Wednesday evening was the long-delayed vote of the Smithfield supervisors on the Rutter’s to be built literally on the edge of and uphill from Old Crow Wetlands. After testimony and pleas by many citizens (including a wetland ecologist), a motion was made by the supers to discuss among themselves the merits of Rutter’s vs. Old Crow. There was, in fact, no discussion, and one minute later the unanimous vote made. Old Crow is of no significance, has no importance to the community, except as being a thorn in the sides of those in pursuit of the dollar.

During Wednesday’s pleading for Old Crow, the supervisors sat as three stone-faced lumps, except one whose occasional remarks were of outright antagonism.

Should we have expected a different outcome? Well, no, not likely. In five years of attending most of the monthly meetings and frequently making the case, I don’t recall the supers ever asking a single pertinent question of me or anyone else to demonstrate the least inkling (or care) that here was a question worth considering.

Again — why should we have expected different? We humans have not put into the past ignorance and outright attack on the natural world by the one supposedly (though self-appointed) superior species. The mindset continues. One needs to look no further than the recent election — the futures for our children and grandchildren being unworthy of even a brief thought.

Greg Grove  
Henderson Township



## CBC 125 – the 55<sup>th</sup> Culp Christmas Bird Count - Compilers Mark Bonta and Susan Braun

On a frigid and blustery winter solstice, over 30 hardy souls counted around 5,500 birds and 69 bird species across northern Blair County and a sliver of Huntingdon County. Nine teams spent at least 75 team-hours in the field and covered well over 200 miles of roads and trails on foot and by car, from the lowest points along the Lower Trail to the highest elevations of Brush Mountain and everything in between, starting around 5 AM and ending up after 5 PM, after which many of us met for dinner at the U.S. Hotel Tavern in Hollidaysburg. Several people counted at feeders across the circle as well.

For the 55<sup>th</sup> straight year, 177 square miles centered on the tiny Sinking Valley hamlet of Culp were scoped, pished, tramped, and glassed. The day started in the teens and never reached last year's low temperature of 30 °F, and the species count never approached last year's record of 81 species, but it was still, after all that, the third-highest total ever, a quite satisfying result.

*The data haven't been finalized yet, but we're pleased to bring you some preliminary results.*

No completely new species for the count turned up this year, but a few haven't been seen in quite some time. A **Horned Grebe** on the Little Juniata River below Tyrone hadn't been picked up since 1977, while a **Rough-legged Hawk** in Sinking Valley is the first since 2009.

Best of all, a new scouting team on a nine-mile hike into State Game Lands 166 yielded a Ruffed Grouse. Despite always being present in the count circle, this once-common species hadn't been picked up since 2016 and become a sort of nemesis bird.

While the cold weather and mostly frozen still water surfaces led to predictably lower numbers of birds across the count circle compared to 2023 and 2022 (around 1,000 less than last year, for example), at least 16 species were found in higher numbers in 2024. Raptor numbers continued to climb, with ten **Northern Harriers**, tied for an all-time high, three late-migrant **Golden Eagles**, the first time more than one has been sighted, and at least 18 **Bald Eagles**, more than double the previous record high! **Turkey Vultures**, with 13, also were the most ever, while a respectable 24 **Red-tailed Hawks** were counted, and **American Kestrels** held steady at seven. (Red-shouldered Hawk was missed altogether, however.)



Ruffed Grouse – Michael Kensinger

Other notable high numbers included **Belted Kingfisher** (11, compared to a record high of 13), **American Crow** (288, up from 261 last year, but nowhere near the 530 counted years ago), **Horned Lark** (142, up from three last year), **Golden-crowned Kinglet** (70, near the all-time high of 74), **American Pipit** (47, an all-time high), and **Dark-eyed Junco** (701). **Common Raven** clocked in at 52, well above last year's 38, and also an all-time high, part of a trend across the state.

Twenty species were turned up by only one field party, a testament to the dedication and endurance of the Culp CBC family. Of course, we not only wish to thank everyone who participated, but we also hope you will join us for #56. We have already put in an order for warm weather. Thanks again!

## CBC 2025: A Sinking Valley Perspective – Field Observer Michael Kensinger

The annual Culp Circle Christmas Bird Count (CBC), hosted by the Juniata Valley Audubon Society, once again brought together nature enthusiasts and birdwatchers for a day of field observations and camaraderie. Held on December 21st, the event culminated in a festive gathering at the U.S. Hotel Tavern's Gold Room, where participants enjoyed a pay-your-own meal and reflected on the day's birding adventures.

As always, the CBC offered birders an opportunity to explore the local habitat and contribute valuable data to national bird monitoring efforts. While not all participants were able to attend the dinner, the sense of community among those who did was palpable. Conversations about the species spotted, and those that eluded us, created a lively atmosphere.

Reflecting on my team's efforts, Connor Schmitt, Joe Glass, George Mahon, and I recorded 1,001 individual birds across 44 species.



Several Killdeer were observed, including one with a rather glamorous "eyebrow!" Photo - Joe Glass.



One of four Red-headed Woodpeckers (right) observed by the Sinking Valley Team. Photo - Connor Schmitt.

Among our most exciting finds was an astonishing number of American Pipits, which we encountered at various points throughout the day (photo on right). American Pipit was a lifer for JVAS President Michael Kensinger. Over 40 were tallied, which was a conservative estimate.

Photo - Joe Glass.



Despite the cold temperatures and biting wind-chill, we also counted 32 White-crowned Sparrows—a personal favorite and one of the many reasons I love birding the Sinking Valley route. We also tallied four Red-headed Woodpeckers, perhaps the most stunning of all our woodpecker species. Our team's list, however, was missing several expected species, including Hairy Woodpecker, American Robin, Purple Finch, Northern Flicker, and Cedar Waxwings.



## CBC 2025: A Sinking Valley Perspective, continued – Field Observer Michael Kensinger



One-hundred Canada Geese were tallied by the Sinking Valley team, including 99 at Sinking Valley's Golf Course.  
Photo - Connor Schmitt.

A single Canada Goose was counted at Maple Croft Farms, taking the Sinking Valley team from 99 to 100 Canada Geese for the day. Photo - Joe Glass.

This year's total count was impressive, with 69 species observed by participants. Final tallies are still being compiled by former President Mark Bonta and Education Chair Susan Braun, but several highlights—and a few disappointments—stood out. Among the most notable species that eluded us were the Barred Owl and Red-shouldered Hawk, both of which many had hoped to spot. Personally, I was disappointed that the Red-shouldered Hawk I had observed during my scouting at Fort Roberdeau just days before the count was not to be found on the official count day. However, I was pleased to learn that Dave Bonta and Justin Merry located the first Ruffed Grouse for the Culp CBC since 2016.

Another close call was a potential sighting of a Short-eared Owl, a rare species for the event. While I couldn't confirm the identification—only catching a brief, distant glimpse as the bird disappeared into a sea of dead grasses—I made the ethical decision not to add it to our list. Though the bird exhibited the characteristic underwing pattern of a Short-eared Owl, the brief view was insufficient for a positive identification.

As the official count drew to a close, a pair of Northern Harriers was observed harassing a Rough-legged Hawk. This "Roughie" had been spotted a week earlier during one of my pre-scouting trips, and it was gratifying to see it again.

As the current President of JVAS, I want to emphasize that the CBC is about more than just the species counted. It's also a celebration of the season and the joy of birdwatching. For anyone looking to continue the birding fun, be on the lookout for the upcoming Earth Week Birding Classic competition. Details will be shared soon, and those interested can stay updated by following the Juniata Valley Audubon Society's Facebook page and website (JVAS.org). We are aiming to have a 'tally dinner' for this birding event at the U.S. Hotel Tavern as we do the CBC each year.

Overall, this year's Culp Circle Christmas Bird Count was another successful event, further cementing the Juniata Valley Audubon Society's role in fostering a passionate and dedicated birdwatching community. Thank you to all who participated, and we look forward to the next birding adventure!

## Winter Birding: A Season of Surprises – Article and Photos by Michael Kensinger

There's something uniquely special about winter birding. While many dread the snow and the cold, I relish the season. The harsh weather often drives fair-weather hikers indoors, allowing nature to return to its more authentic state. By the time inclement weather arrives, the local wildlife, shaken by the occasional hunters passing through the woods, has settled into more typical patterns of life.

One of my favorite things about winter is the return of the White-crowned Sparrow. For the past several years, I've watched these striking sparrows fill the thickets in Sinking Valley, taking shelter from the biting cold. In fact, this is one of the few places I can consistently find White-crowned Sparrows, apart from occasional sightings during migration in October. I'm always surprised by how much they sing on their wintering grounds, their cheerful notes defying the snowflakes that batter the branches around them.

More common than the White-crowned Sparrows, but no less delightful, are the White-throated Sparrows. I'm not sure if I've simply become more observant, but it seems to me there are more White-throated Sparrows around now than when I was a child. Perhaps it's just that I didn't pay enough attention back then—often, we overlook the “little brown birds” in favor of brighter, flashier species. Fortunately, the white-striped morph of the White-throated Sparrow is one of the most beautiful and easiest to recognize, even for new birders.



Another winter species I look forward to seeing is the Rough-legged Hawk. In 2024, I've already had the pleasure of observing two of these magnificent birds. One, a female, hovered over a Cambria County meadow, her wings held still like a kestrel, while the dead grasses swayed beneath her. Another sighting was in Sinking Valley, not far from the White-crowned Sparrow spot. I've also seen them hunting along the center strip of I-99 near the 17th Street exit. The pale plumage of these hawks, contrasted with their dark “wrist” markings, makes them easy to identify. In my opinion, they're some of the most beautiful hawks we have. Look for them in the same habitats as Northern Harriers, Short-eared Owls, and American Kestrels—some of my favorite birds to observe in the winter months.



## Winter Birding: A Season of Surprises, continued

Of course, winter isn't complete without waterfowl watching. Where open water remains, it's worth keeping your eyes peeled. Open water and food availability are key to waterfowl migration, and you stand a good chance of spotting straggling birds—more so than with many other species.

I'll never forget a day when Joe Glass, George Mahon, and I stopped to scan a small, postage-stamp-sized pond during a 17-degree snowstorm. As we drove by, we noticed a mix of wild mallards and a few domestic ducks. I insisted we stop and take a closer look, and sure enough, tucked among the splashing waterfowl was an elegant drake Northern Pintail. While not the only pintail we recorded on the count that year, it was certainly a rare find, not a bird we see every season.

Winter birding can be full of surprises. Doing your research to understand which birds are likely to appear in your area will enhance your experience. But as we all know, you can expect the unexpected. Maybe a towhee will show up at your feeder, or perhaps you'll spot a rare Cape May Warbler in December. Whatever you find, from Horned Larks to Great Horned Owls, I wish you a winter season filled with birds that bring joy and wonder to your days.

Early Winter in Blair County....





## Exploring and Protecting Nature in Central Pennsylvania

President: Michael Kensinger  
 Vice-President: Catie Farr

Secretary: Connor Schmitt  
 Treasurer: George Mahon

Address: P. O. Box 1013 Altoona, PA 16603

## JOIN JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY

Your continued support will make a difference in our work to protect birds, their habitats, and the natural world we love. Even if you can't attend any of our activities, your membership provides important financial support. Please consider joining or renewing your Chapter-only membership in Juniata Valley Audubon Society.

### Renewing members will continue to enjoy:

- 5 digital issues of our newsletter, *The Gnatcatcher*.  
**The March issue of *The Gnatcatcher* is the last issue if renewal is not paid by April 15.**
- Local birding and community events
- A voice in the fight to protect birds and their habitats

**If you join as a new member in June – December, your membership is good for the next year, too! Chapter members who renew on Sept. 1 or later are carried over for the entire following year.**

Sincerely,

Michael Kensinger  
 Michael Kensinger

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### Become a JVAS Chapter-only member at one of the annual membership categories:

#### Check the appropriate box:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual Membership, \$20 | <input type="checkbox"/> Friend of the JVAS, \$55    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family Membership, \$25     | <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate Membership, \$100 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Supporting Membership, \$40 | <input type="checkbox"/> Life Membership, \$500      |

**Membership Year runs from January 1<sup>st</sup> to December 31<sup>st</sup>**

Make your check payable to the JUNIATA VALLEY AUDUBON SOCIETY and mail to:

Juniata Valley Audubon Society  
 P. O. Box 1013  
 Altoona, PA 16603



Point your phone's camera at this QR code to join online.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_ E-mail Address \_\_\_\_\_

(needed so we can send you *The Gnatcatcher*)