

# Habitat *works*

*The newsletter about designing, restoring and managing wildlife habitat*

Summer 2023

*Habitat Works is published by Chesapeake Wildlife Heritage, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to designing, restoring and managing wildlife habitat and establishing a more sustainable agriculture through direct action, education and research in partnership with public and private landowners. We welcome your comments and contributions.*



## 2023 Wetland Update

CWH has been fortunate to complete the restoration of 18 acres of wetlands we designed as well as 20 acres of associated ditch and meadow buffers since the year began. While dry weather in early summer made growing healthy plants challenging at times, drought can make excavating wet areas in farm fields a bit easier. The watersheds where we worked were Harris Creek and Wye River in Talbot as well as Red Lion Branch (Chester River) in Queen Anne's County. All of these projects will improve water

quality and provide much-needed shallow water habitat for a diversity of wildlife from pollinators to shorebirds. These shallow water wetlands are somewhere between modest imitations of herbaceous Delmarva bays and beaver ponds in form and function.

Sadly, the majority of Maryland landowners continue to have beavers trapped out of their properties, making the restoration of wetlands in farm fields even more critical to improving the quantity and quality of wildlife habitat in our greatly overworked landscape. Note that the desire to

create habitat for wild waterfowl was the driving force behind the willingness of all of the landowners involved to remove tillable land from commodity production. CWH helped these landowners to enroll their projects in CREP, which remains the best program for wildlife habitat restoration in the nation thanks to the taxpayers who fund it. We thank the employees of FSA, NRCS and the soil conservation districts in Talbot and Queen Anne's counties for helping us get this habitat on the ground.

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# WILDLIFE PROFILE: *White-breasted Nuthatch*

By Andi Pupke, Education & Outreach Director

Found throughout the United States, White-breasted Nuthatch (*Sitta carolinensis*, WBNH) is a common bird in wooded habitats. I was lucky enough to have a pair nest in one of my backyard Bluebird houses last nesting season. This compact, no-necked, short-tailed bird with a long, sharply pointed bill is easy to recognize. WBNH are blue-gray on the back with stark white cheeks and breast. The male has a black cap, while the female's cap is gray. Underneath, it has a white belly and rusty spots near its rear.

They are entertaining to watch, as they will move up and down a tree trunk and even perch upside down. The pair was vocal as they established their nesting territory. The female built the nest alone, with the male standing as lookout and occasionally inspecting the progress of the nest.

WBNH typically build their nests in natural tree cavities or abandoned woodpecker holes, but they obviously will use a manmade nesting box on occasion. They sometimes enlarge cavities but rarely excavate them entirely on their own. WBNH are smaller than woodpeckers and don't seem to be bothered by nest holes considerably larger than themselves.

During the nest building phase, I watched as both male and female spent a great deal of time bill sweeping the front of the nesting box. I had never noticed this behavior before, so I did a little research and found documentation to suggest that Nuthatches sweep around the nesting cavity with an insect in the bill to lay down scent as a nest hole defense. By sweeping the insect back and forth in

an arch formation over the bark or wood near the entrance of the nesting cavity, they may be laying down an odor that will deter tree-dwelling squirrels from coming too close to their nest. I watched as both the male and female stopped what they were doing many times a day to vigorously sweep an insect back and forth around their nest. This behavior continued throughout incubation until the chicks fledged. The dark marks clearly visible in the photo below were left when the WBNH was bill sweeping.



The female carried fur, bark and clumps of dirt into the nesting box. Then she built a nest cup of fine grass, shredded bark, feathers and a great deal of hair from our dogs. She laid seven eggs but quickly discarded one that she knew would not hatch. The eggs were creamy white and speckled, with reddish brown spots concentrated on one end. She incubated for about 14 days while being fed by the male. The female left the nest on occasion, but the male would stand guard.

Once the six chicks hatched, the pair were busy all day feeding them. I set up a blind near the nest and, using a longer lens, could record the pair feeding the





chicks. The male would fly from branch to branch, approaching the nest from the woods. If I was in the yard, the female would not enter the nest to feed the chicks. Instead, she would hold the insect in her mouth safely up in a tree and the male would retrieve the insect and take it to the nest for feeding. So, I could never stay and watch too long. As the chicks grew larger, they competed to have their heads poking out of the



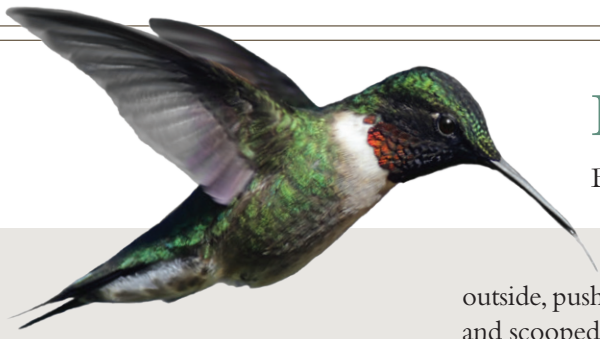
entrance hole to intercept the food the parents would bring. All six chicks successfully fledged about 20 days after hatching, and it was truly a joy to be able to watch their progression. The male and female will both continue to feed the chicks for about two weeks after they fledge the nest.

WBNH forage up and down over tree trunks and around large branches. They probe the bark crevices or chip



away at the wood to find food. When they find large nuts and seeds, they jam them into the bark and hammer them open. They will often store seeds and insects one at a time under loose bark. In wooded habitat, they are also a common sight at bird feeders. You can attract them by offering large nuts and seeds, such as sunflower seeds and peanuts. ●





## ELEVATOR ELATION

By Carolyn Moorshead

We are native plant enthusiasts and let lots of “weeds” grow in our yard. One of these is native jewelweed, whose blooms attract hummingbirds late in August and September.

One September morning, just after dawn, I was passing one of our picture windows.

*Outside this window is a two-foot roof overhang with lots of four-foot jewelweed underneath. In horror, I noticed a grotesque sight.*

A hummingbird was hanging upside down and stuck by one wing to a large spiderweb. Heart pounding, I raced

outside, pushed through the jewelweed and scooped the tiny creature into my hand, cradling it next to my abdomen. It stayed quiet as I inspected it for injury and removed the web. I then put it on the ground, but it didn’t move. It just sat with its wings spread. I could see that the right distal wing feathers were stuck together. Scooping the quiet bird back up, I ran inside and put on my high-powered reading glasses. Letting the right wing feathers stick out from my cupped hand, I carefully and sparingly used soap to wash the sticky wing and remove more web from the bird’s back.

I took the bird outside again to release it. It fluttered a little but could not fly. Cradling it, I ran to the computer and attempted to key in bird rescue and bird vets with one hand. The tiny

bird started to become active and push against my hand. A sign???

Again, I took it outside. This time, I let it sit in my open hands. It sat with its eyes wide open and its cocked head moving back and forth. What a thrill to inspect this tiny creature with its iridescent emerald back resting in my cupped hands! After what seemed to be at least 30 seconds, it took off flying but only achieving a height of four feet. My heart sank, as I knew the outcome for a doomed wild cripple. At that magic moment, it did an elevator lift. I lost sight as it approached the tops of our 100-year-old trees.

My interaction with this wild and beautiful creature gave me such joy and hope in these troubled times that I wanted to share the story. ●

## 2022 Purple Martin Survey

Waiting for this year’s arrival of Purple Martins gave us time to tally our totals for last year. While it’s always sad to see these wonderful little birds leave at the end of the nesting season, we enjoy knowing that we are able to provide support and quality habitat when they’re here. In 2022, we added three new sites to monitor and nine new Martin houses to these properties and to sites we were already monitoring.

For the 2022 nesting season, we monitored Martin houses in Talbot, Queen Anne’s and Kent counties, with most of the monitoring sites in Queen Anne’s. In addition to checking on the welfare of the eggs and chicks in each nest, we control English House Sparrows that try to take over the cavities. These birds will peck holes in

the Martin eggs and kill chicks if left on their own.

**We make needed repairs to the houses throughout the nesting season and perform regular nest maintenance when needed, like replacing old nesting material when it gets wet or infested with mites.**

In total, 1,246 Martin chicks fledged from the 59 houses and 29 gourds that CWH monitored in 2022. This marks a substantial increase from 1,096 chicks in 2021 and 991 chicks in 2020. Weather, insecticide use and other factors can affect production from year to year, but last year we monitored more houses on more sites.

We also monitored 99 Bluebird houses in 2022 (30 more than in 2021),



*Hatch-year Martins beg for food on their Martin house porch as the adults work to feed their chicks.*

which fledged 339 Bluebirds, 78 Tree Swallows, 8 House Wrens and 14 Carolina Chickadees.

To learn more about CWH’s Purple Martin program, contact our office at 410-822-5100. Check [cheswildlife.org](http://cheswildlife.org) this fall for data from the 2023 Purple Martin nesting season. ●



*Purple Martin chicks.*





# Yellow Garden Spider

By Andi Pupke, Education & Outreach Director

a stabilimentum. The exact purpose of this feature is unknown, but it may serve to alert birds to the web's presence so they don't fly through it. The spider may eat and re-spin the web each night.

A male Garden Spider seeks out the female and courts her by plucking at her web. After mating, the female deposits one or more egg sacs on the web. The offspring hatch in late summer or autumn. If they are in an area with cold winters, the young spiders may remain in the egg sac in a dormant state and emerge in the spring. Egg cases are often parasitized by wasps and flies. On average, the Garden Spider lives for about one year. Females usually die in the first hard frost after mating. In warm climates, females may live a few years, but males usually die after mating. ●



Garden Spider eggs



The familiar Yellow Garden Spider (*Argiope aurantia*) commonly seen in summer is known by many other names, including **Golden Garden**, **Zigzag**, **Zipper**, **Orb Spider** and many others.

These large, orb-weaving arachnids spin a circular web with highly visible zigzagging in the center. Most spiders have two claws on each foot, but orb weavers have an additional claw to help them spin their complex webs. In females, the top side of the abdomen is black with symmetrical patches of bright yellow. The legs are reddish brown at the base and black toward the tips. The much smaller males are less noticeable, with brownish legs and less yellow coloration on the abdomen. Females average .75 to 1.1 inches in body length, which is up to three times larger than the males.

Yellow Garden Spiders can be found throughout the Continental U.S., Canada, Mexico and Central America. The population is stable and widespread. They spin webs in sunny areas with plants on which they can anchor their webs. They are often seen in backyard gardens and farmyards.

Their diet comprises flies, bees and other flying insects that get caught in the web. Garden Spiders produce venom that is harmless to humans but immobilizes prey. The web contains a highly visible zigzag pattern called



# ASK ANDI

By Andi Pupke, Education & Outreach Director

***Q: What should I do when a bird hits my window? How can I prevent future bird strikes?***

***A: Birds strike windows for a variety of reasons, including reflections, territorial behavior and predators. Windows reflect foliage or the sky, which can confuse birds by looking like an area they can fly through.***

A bird that flies up against a window repeatedly is often displaying territorial behavior. The bird mistakes its own reflection for a rival and strikes the window while trying to drive away the

interloper. A predator such as a hawk may scare a bird into hitting a window.

Since birds most commonly strike windows in residential areas, homeowners who experience bird strikes should take steps to make their homes bird safe. Adding decals to the outside of the window is a simple way to break up the reflection. Another way to increase window safety is to add netting or a screen. Other options include adding a design to the outside of the window with paint pens, moving large indoor plants away from the window and moving bird feeders and baths 30 feet away from or within two feet of the window.



*Red-bellied woodpecker strike.*



*Place in a paper bag.*



*Not ready for flight yet.*



*Ready for takeoff.*

After a strike, evaluate the state of the bird on the ground below the window. If it is still alive, gently enclose it in your hands and place it in a confined container like a paper bag or a cardboard box with holes punched in it. Place the container in a protected place like a garage where a predator cannot reach it. Ensure the bird is not lying on its back, as this will kill it.

A concussed bird may recover quickly, so check on the bird in the container every 30 minutes. When it appears to have recovered, release it outside. If the bird is unable to fly, return it to the container for another 30 minutes. Refrain from interacting with the bird more than necessary to prevent unneeded stress.

If the bird has other injuries, contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator for additional help. ●



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## Fall Seed Planting for Common Milkweed (*Asclepias syriaca*)

Planting common milkweed is one of the most important actions we can take for Monarch butterflies. You can increase resources for next year's Monarchs by harvesting and planting milkweed seeds this fall.

Harvest the milkweed seed pods in mid- to late fall, when they are no longer green. Allow pods to dry out by placing them in a paper bag in the refrigerator until they start to split open. Exposing seeds to cool temperatures before warmer spring temperatures will allow them to break their dormancy. Planting

outside in fall will save you the hassle of in-home stratification.

Pick a planting spot with moist soils and full sun, remembering that a milkweed patch will spread once it gets started. Clear your planting area to bare dirt. Spread the seeds on bare soil and rake them in lightly or run the sprinkler to ensure good seed-to-soil contact. Make sure they are planted no deeper than the width of the seed. Seeds will move over the winter, and some will not germinate, so exact spacing is not needed.

Mark your planting area and wait for spring. Milkweed will have upward growth later in the spring, as it is a true warm season plant. Be patient—once the soil temperatures stay consistently warm, you will see seedlings begin to appear.