

Rare birds wing way here

First-known count lists 308 species in Middlesex County

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EDISON — Middlesex County may not have Old Faithful, but it can claim almost as many species of birds as Yellowstone National Park, according to a study by the Edison Wetlands Association.

In completing the first-known bird count in the county's history, the association said 308 species of birds have been spotted in Middlesex County, including a number of rare birds such as the American White Pelican, which traveled to the area from subtropical regions.

"Middlesex County is in many ways a microcosm of New Jersey with all its different habitats," said David Wheeler, the wetlands association's director of operations who headed the study along with Angela Gorczyca and Diana Morgan. "This gives you a tremendous diversity and is the biggest factor in the number of species the area is able to attract."

The study combined pre-existing lists from local environmental and bird-watching groups. Since many of the sightings may be several years old, the study said all of the birds listed may not have been seen in the past year, although the majority of the birds have.

Wheeler said the county's proximity to water, most notably the Raritan Bay and the Raritan River and its tributaries, makes the area exceptional for bird watching. He said the county features several great singular locations for birds, including the Dismal Swamp Conservation Area, Cheesequake State Park, the Rutgers Ecological Preserve and the John A. Phillips Open Space Preserve."

"It is amazing to find this number of birds in such a densely populated area," Wheeler said. "It's amazing when you compare an area like ours with Yellowstone National Park, which is 10 times the size, and we have the same diversity in bird life."

Wheeler said Yellowstone National Park features 318 species of birds.

Arnold Henderson, a member of the Highland Park Environmental Commission, said he is excited about the list because it organizes the county's bird population, making it easier to watch birds for enthusiasts, such as himself, and to learn about birds for children.

Henderson said the Cornell University's Lab of Ornithology tracks bird movements throughout the country. He said the the lab has a program for children, who are taught how to watch and record birds in their own yard, gathering statistics that can be used for analysis of bird trends. Henderson said he hopes the Middlesex County list could spur interest in bird-watching in the area.

"The thing with birds is that it is just not looking and counting," Henderson said. "You have to plan and preserve and maintain these areas to keep wildlife in the area."

Wheeler said some endangered or semi-endangered species have been spotted as well, including the Wood Stork in South River and Cranbury, bald eagles and the Parasitic Jaeger in Old Bridge.

Anyone who sees a bird they think may be rare is asked to call the New Jersey Audubon Society's hot line at (732) 872-2500.

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