

Chesapeake Audubon: Origins

Chesapeake Audubon Society was founded in 1974 by a group of friends, many of whom worked at the Social Security Administration in Woodlawn, MD. All were concerned about the environment and wanted to do something positive for its benefit. Several of these folks subscribed to *Audubon* magazine and so were familiar with the organization; in addition, Audubon was one of only a few national organizations with local chapters. Right from the start, Chesapeake Audubon differed from many Audubon chapters in that it was not primarily birders. Instead, the founders joined many Americans who after the first Earth Day in 1970 became increasingly concerned about environmental problems and the conservation of plants and animals.

The first meeting was held on April 17, 1974 at UMBC with a speaker from the National Audubon Society discussing endangered species. For the next year, the chapter had provisional status, until it met certain milestones for membership and activities; eventually, it became a formal tax-exempt 501c3 organization. By December 1975, there were 319 members. The founding President was Rodger Waldman, who for the next decade or so led the Chapter, did much of the administrative work, and held the Society together. Without his dedication, CAS would not have grown as successfully as it did.

In the next few years, CAS held monthly membership meetings with a speaker or movie, and monthly work sessions to plan activities. (In that pre-VCR, pre-cable TV era, there were only limited opportunities to see nature films, and those showings were avidly anticipated.) The newsletter came out monthly as well. In addition to chapter news, it was an eclectic sampling of state, regional, national and international environmental news and issues.

Almost from the start, Chesapeake Audubon was interested in promoting conservation by saving land. The first sanctuary, Farm Creek, was bought in 1977 (see the page on Farm Creek). This was a bold step for a three year old, all volunteer organization whose bank account was less than \$2,000 at the time!

The Audubon cause and message was presented by CAS at many local fairs and festivals, and they were a good source of new members. By the late 1970's, there was an active schedule of field trips, mostly to unique natural areas around the state. Many of these trips had an educational component, and the chapter soon found itself moving in the direction of wanting to do environmental education. In 1980, Audubon was contacted by Mr George Olds about preserving his farm, and within a few years CAS was focused on establishing an environmental education program at what became Pickering Creek Audubon Education Sanctuary (see the page on Pickering Creek).

By 1984, CAS was one of National Audubon's most successful chapters. The loan for Farm Creek was paid off. Pickering Creek belonged to the chapter, and had an endowment of \$33,000 (that eventually became more than \$100,000 raised by CAS alone). Fundraising for these signature projects was frequent, enthusiastic and eclectic. Members sold birdseed annually at a time when few stores sold it; several years topped 100,000 pounds! (Fifty pounds of black stripe sunflower was \$11.40 in 1978, and was only \$15.50 in 2006!) Other activities included a

wildlife art show, dance, car wash, tee shirt sales, working a concession stand at Oriole games, an auction, sale of AHonorary Deeds@ to the sanctuaries, sale of bluebird houses, 50/50 raffles, and many others. Our annual spaghetti dinner was first held in 1984 and continues today.

Chesapeake Audubon has also been active in environmental causes, especially at the regional and state level. In the early 1980's, CAS participated in a Stream Symposium and sponsored an Endangered Species Symposium. This latter event, along with a second at Towson University, helped change the Maryland Department of Natural Resources= focus to include non-game species. Members have participated in the Governor=s Executive Committee on Trees and Forests, a Baltimore City Watershed Task Force, and been active in the Maryland Conservation Council.

Since the mid-1980's, CAS has continued to evolve as a chapter. It has had more than 2000 members for the last fifteen years at least, with foci in the Baltimore metropolitan area and in Talbot County, near Pickering Creek. For a period, CAS employed an educator in the Baltimore area who presented the Audubon Adventures curriculum to elementary schools. Pickering Creek has been successfully Afledged@; it is now an Audubon Center administered by the National Audubon Society and overseen by a local Board of Trustees, although still owned by CAS. There is still an active field trip program, although most now focus on birding for beginners and non-experts. Farm Creek, after two decades of benign neglect, has now been discovered to be ecologically unique. CAS supports a new Audubon Center in downtown Baltimore, Patterson Park. Audubon Center. While we don=t know what opportunities and challenges the future will bring, we do know that Chesapeake Audubon is always willing and able to contribute to the welfare of birds, wildlife and their habitats in the bay region!