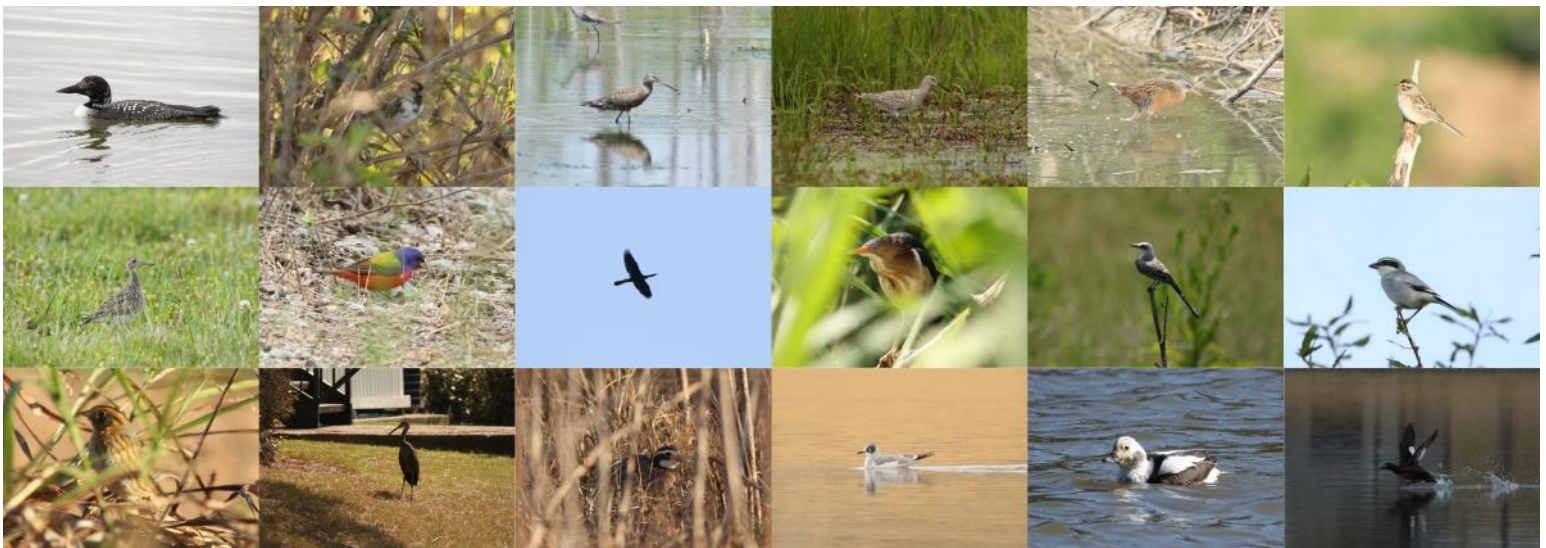


# Tennessee Ornithological Society Memphis Chapter

<http://birdmemphis.org>

February 2024

## 2023 YEAR IN REVIEW



2023 has come and gone. With it came some fantastic birds in Shelby County. These birds were seen and reported by many of the members of the MTOS. We have definitely seen an uptick in birding participation. We had 17 people in the county that reported seeing 200 or more species in 2023. In 2022, that number was 6. We had a total of 275 species reported in Shelby County last year. In 2022, that number was 260.

It was also a good year for the Christmas Bird Counts. The Memphis CBC had a record number of participants at 44 with a record number of species at 112 and a high count on 10 of those species. The Fayette County CBC also had a record number of participants with 19 and high counts on 15 of the species. Thank you to all who participated!

This year has already started with a bang! MTOS member Sarita Joshi reported and documented a Black-chinned Hummingbird at her feeder on January 2 and a Rufous/Allen's Hummingbird on January 14.

I am looking forward to another "birdy" year and I hope you are as well. Grab a friend and go watch the birds. It is good for your health, good for their welfare, and good for the community. But please make sure not to stress the birds if you are trying to get that award-winning photo. This would be a good time to read or re-read the ABA Code of Ethics <https://www.aba.org/pdfviewer/code-of-ethics/>.

If you are interested in the science side of things, please consider regularly documenting your sightings at [ebird.org](http://ebird.org). While we all like to see those "cool" birds, the most important data is the consistent daily data of what you see. This gives a good picture of the "regular" species. Even a five minute list from your backyard or at work on your lunch break is helpful. There are also many citizen science projects like [feederwatch.org](http://feederwatch.org), [www.birdcount.org](http://www.birdcount.org), [ebird.org/globalbigday](http://ebird.org/globalbigday), [www.audubon.org/conservation/new-to-climate-watch](http://www.audubon.org/conservation/new-to-climate-watch), [www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count](http://www.audubon.org/conservation/science/christmas-bird-count), and many others that can put your birding talents to good use.

See you out there!

-Cliff VanNostrand

## **BIRDING NONCONNAH CREEK IN 2023**

During 2023 Nonconnah Creek Conservancy did a yearlong biodiversity survey to see how many species we could document in the Nonconnah Creek Watershed. Over the year there were about 1080 species that were documented in the Nonconnah Creek Watershed. There were even a few observations that were likely the first time for a species to be recorded in Shelby County. A few of these observations were shared in the presentation at the November 2023 MTOS meeting.

Birds accounted for about 14 percent of the species documented in 2023. Over the last century about 200 species of birds have been documented in the Nonconnah Creek Watershed (176 in the last decade) Between 1923 and 2013 156 species were documented. In 2023 there were 152 species documented in the Nonconnah watershed.

There were a few interesting bird sightings during the year. Snowy Egrets were listed on one checklist; that checklist was from Memphis International Airport. During the summer I came across an American Woodcock while walking along the edge of a wetland area near the Nonconnah Greenbelt Park on Forest Hill Irene. The only other account of a woodcock in the Nonconnah Watershed on eBird is a checklist from 1948. Beyond those two accounts, the only other woodcock documented in the Nonconnah Creek watershed was a dead one I found in November of 2022 near Getwell Rd. There was a Canvasback that showed up at Medal of Honor Park (which is right by the airport). There is one other checklist on eBird within the watershed that has Canvasbacks on it, but I believe the location to be inaccurate, which would make that the first time a Canvasback has been documented in the watershed on eBird.

There were just over 2000 observations posted on iNaturalist in 2023 in the Nonconnah watershed. Only about 100 of those observations were made south of the I-240 or TN-385 and weren't on a property immediately adjacent to the creek. This is a similar trend that I see with hotspots on eBird. There are certain places that people tend to visit regularly like Shelby Farms, Ensley Bottoms, Shelby Forest, Overton Park, and T.O. Fuller. There are also many great spots for birding that are hardly visited for a variety of reasons. I encourage anyone, when thinking about where to go birding, to consider visiting a hotspot that is new to you. Better yet find one with zero likely species for the time when you will be birding. When you submit a checklist from a place that is less frequented you are helping to give us a fuller picture of the birds that live around us. Beyond that, you never know what you may see.







# Rusty Blackbird

These cinnamon-dusted migrants are uncommon, yet one of these elusive birds visited my yard during the snowy winter of 2022. Now a flock of around ten birds is busily trampling the snow in our yard. I suppose word of our feeders spread quickly.

**Scientific name:** *Euphagus carolinus*

**Habitat and Range:** Rusty Blackbirds breed in Canada during the summer and spend the winter in the Eastern (and particularly Southeastern) US.

They prefer the watery, wooded habitats that harbor other birds like Red-winged Blackbirds. Rusty Blackbirds nest near rivers or in boreal swamps and bogs. In winter, they prefer swamps with trees, although they do venture into open fields and onto soggy lawns to feed.

**Diet/feeding:** Like many birds, this blackbird's diet varies with the time of year. In summer, they eat insects. In winter, they forage for grain and other seeds in fields and sometimes feedlots. Their diet also includes berries, fish, salamanders, and even other birds.

**Behavior:** These blackbirds are not afraid of water. They forage at the edges of streams and ponds or on muddy ground, turning over leaves and bobbing their heads as they walk. In spring, pairs of birds scatter across the boreal forests of Canada, although some birds will gather into sparse colonies. The female builds the nest and lays pale blue, marked eggs while the male feeds his mate and offspring. The cup nest is located near water and made of sticks, detritus from the forest floor, and grass. Offspring fledge in 10-12 days. They begin traveling down two to three migration flyways in September and reach their destinations in November.





**When, where, and how to see:** Rusty blackbirds look ... rusty. In winter, the brown edges of new feathers give them their characteristic color. However, just as with cardinals, these edges wear off with use, revealing glossy black plumage just in time for the breeding season. In summer, they resemble the Brewer's Blackbird, a western cousin. When searching for Rusty Blackbirds in mixed winter flocks, look for their comical yellow eyes, brown plumage, and relatively short tails. Their song is as jarring and dissonant as a Red-winged Blackbird's gurgle or a grackle's metallic screech.

**Conservation:** This bird suffered a 75% population decline from 1966 to 2019 and is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN's Red List. Many factors contribute to the blackbirds' perilous situation, including the loss of habitat due to deforestation, swamp draining, and the historic decline of beavers. Rusty Blackbirds were also found to contain high levels of mercury, a toxic metal that becomes more easily absorbed when found in wetlands. Adding to their plight, competition with Red-winged Blackbirds and Common Grackles pose a problem for Rusty Blackbirds.

### Fun facts:

- Rusty Blackbirds face many challenges. If current population trends continue, half of the population could disappear in less than 20 years. The International Rusty Blackbird Working Group (see link in Bibliography) was founded to help conserve this vanishing species.
- They may forage on pecan farms, waiting for other birds to break the pecans into smaller pieces.
- These blackbirds may be unintentionally persecuted as grain pests, along with other blackbirds.



### Bibliography

- All About Birds: [https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Rusty\\_Blackbird/overview](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Rusty_Blackbird/overview)
- Audubon Field Guide: <https://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/rusty-blackbird>
- International Rusty Blackbird Working Group: <https://rustyblackbird.org/species-information/wintering/>
- The Canadian Encyclopedia: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/muskeg>
- All photos by Lynn Hui

*Editor's Note: Special thanks to MTOS member Lynn Hui for contributing this article.*





# FAMOUS BIRDERS IN HISTORY

BY CATE VANNOSTRAND



## Alexander Wilson: Father of American Ornithology



Alexander Wilson was born in Paisley, Scotland on July 6, 1766. His family was very poor, as his father was an illiterate whiskey distiller. Wilson apprenticed under his brother-in-law William Duncan as a weaver at the age of 13. During this time, he grew interested in poetry and he developed a close friendship with Ebenezer Picken, known as the “Poet of Paisley”. Wilson did many other odd jobs throughout his adolescent years, working as a livestock herder, peddler, and grouse hunter.

When he was in his mid-twenties, Wilson found a knack for writing satirical poems that were popular within his community. However, when one of Wilson’s poems detailed what he viewed as unfair treatment against weavers by their employers, he was arrested, sued for libel, and forced to burn his work in the town square. Because of this and his non-committedness to his weaving, Wilson lived in poverty. But all of that changed when he decided to move to America.

In 1794, Wilson and his 16-year-old nephew took a four-month voyage to America, where they slept on the ship’s open deck. Wilson was penniless when he arrived on the United States’ shores due to a lack of demand for weavers. But after working a few odd jobs and taking

out a loan, he and his nephew settled in Philadelphia and Wilson began teaching school in Milestown in 1796. A scandal with a married woman, however, forced Wilson to move in 1801, and for a brief period of time he taught in New Jersey. Finally, he found a more permanent position in Gray’s Ferry, Pennsylvania. It was there that he met William Bartram, a famous naturalist who piqued Wilson’s interest in birds.

Wilson began to draw and make paintings of American bird species. In 1803, he wrote to a friend: “I have had many pursuits since I left Scotland... music, drawing, etc. etc. I am now about to make a collection of our finest birds” (Erickson, n.d.). For two years, Wilson traveled through Pennsylvania and studied the birds of his state. During this time, he also traveled to Niagara Falls; this was uncharacteristic of him, as he seldom went far from his home. The trip to the falls, which he took by foot, left a striking impression on Wilson, and he wrote a lengthy poem about the falls titled “The Foresters,” even hiring Irish artist John James Barralet to make a painting of the falls. It is believed that because of this poem, Wilson came in contact with another client of Barralet: Meriweather Lewis. He investigated Meriweather Lewis’ death after the man met his untimely demise in October 1809. Wilson used the birds collected by Lewis and Clark to illustrate his book on American ornithology.

Finally, in 1808, Wilson went on the hunt for subscribers and to further research birds. He also met John James Audubon, calling him “Mr. A” in his notebook. Even though Audubon never subscribed, Wilson had gathered 250 subscribers by the time he arrived home. He hand-delivered his first volume of *American Ornithology* to perhaps his most famous customer, the President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson. Many of the western birds featured in *American Ornithology* were not seen by Wilson, but were drawings of Lewis and Clark’s specimens. A press worker strike required Wilson to color most of his own engravings. He juggled this newfound responsibility while collecting shorebird specimens for his final two volumes.

Wilson died on August 23, 1813, at the age of 47, a year before the final volume of *American Ornithology* was published. The official cause of death was dysentery, but “overwork, and chronic poverty” (*Alexander Wilson’s Birds*, n.d.) were probably also contributing factors. Wilson is buried in Philadelphia in the yard of the Swedish Church, contrary to his final wish that he be buried “where the birds would sing above him” (*Alexander Wilson*, n.d.). His friend, George Ord, completed the nine-volume series for his friend, publishing the final book in 1814.

Two-hundred and eleven years later, Wilson is remembered as the “Father of American Ornithology”. His legacy can be found in his nine-book series on North American birds, *American Ornithology*.



-Cate VanNostrand

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# Christmas

## BIRD COUNT



The 95<sup>th</sup> Memphis Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was held on December 17, 2023. This was the 124<sup>th</sup> CBC in the US. The day started chilly and lovely with mostly clear blue skies and occasional light wind gusts. A few clouds rolled in later on. We set a record – again! - with 112 bird species. Last year's 111 species was also a record with the previous high count being 104 species seen in 2003. We had forty four observers participating in the count, also a high number.

Notably, again, no Northern Bobwhites or Loggerhead Shrikes this year. However 310 Least Sandpipers were counted. A large flock of 24 Wild Turkeys was seen on Presidents Island, bringing the total to 26 for the day.

An unusual bird for the Memphis count is the very surprising Wood Thrush (1) that was first heard and then seen in the very early morning. I found only one other Wood Thrush listed on the Memphis CBC, in 1978. Cameron Rutt noted that, according to eBird, there are only five other winter records of the Wood Thrush in the state, mostly in east Tennessee, with one in Davidson County. We also had one Virginia Rail (VIRA) added to the count this year. Maybe a first? I was unable to find any mention of a VIRA in a Memphis CBC!

The first Long-tailed Duck (LTDU) in the area this past year hung around to get counted for the CBC. There have been 4 other years in which LTDU was part of the Memphis CBC - 1985 (3), 1992 (1), 2003 (1), and 2014 (1).

Other high counts this year included the Greater White-fronted Goose (282), Northern Pintail (118), Great Egret (10), Black Vulture (189), Sora (3), \*Wilson's Snipe (46), \*\*Barn Owl (2), Barred Owl (8), Short-eared Owl (14), Eastern Phoebe (28), White-breasted Nuthatch (32), \*\*\*Winter Wren (18), and Marsh Wren (12). There were 914 Lesser Scaup - many more than the 87 from last year but about half the 1831 max ever counted in 2012.

There were very few Snow Geese (792), about 10% of the 7792 we had last year. Blackbirds were down, too, with 1437 European Starlings, 1481 Red-winged Blackbirds, 4889 Common Grackles, and 171 Brown-headed Cowbirds.

Thanks to everyone for making the CBC the success that it is. I especially appreciate the leaders who compiled and organized the information from the individual counts, getting it to me in a very timely





manner. Margaret has been a BIG help. Thanks for everyone's patience. I've enjoyed learning the compiler role, looking at all the info, and overthinking everything. Happy Birding!

Both old and new bird names are listed in the CBC count information and summary forms. Now I know! Here are details related to some of our counted birds this year:

*\* In 2003 the name of Snipes in America was changed from Common Snipe to Wilson's Snipe. Snipes reported on CBCs before 2003 are listed as Wilson's/Common Snipe. One hundred twenty Wilson's/Common Snipes were reported in 1990. The 46 Wilson's Snipe reported in our recent count is the highest since the name change.*

*\*\*Barn Owl is also listed as Barn Owl (American). The Memphis CBC has two records of Barn Owl (American) with 3 as the highest number reported, and six records of Barn Owl with 2 as the maximum reported. Two is still a high count.*

*\*\*\*Winter Wren was split into two species, Pacific (west) and Winter (east) in 2010. Wrens reported before 2010 are listed as Pacific/Winter Wren on the CBC checklist. We have 14 records of Winter Wren with 18 as the highest number seen (this year), however there are 81 reports of Pacific/Winter Wren with 50 as the maximum reported in 1975.*

-Anita Vincent

### **December 23, Arkabutla CBC**

7 observers, 105 species. Notable: Marsh and Sedge Wrens, American Avocet (3); Virginia Rail (2); Merlin (2) and Short-eared Owl (3).

### **December 30, Wapanocca/Shelby Forest CBC**

17 observers, 97 species. Notable - Barn Owl (4); Short-eared Owl (1) and LeConte's Sparrow (2).

### **January 4, Moon Lake (MS) CBC**

2 observers, 85 species. Notable - Limpkin (5) first for the count, second county record; Long-billed Dowitcher (2) first for the count, and Lincoln's Sparrow (1).

### **January 5, Holly Springs CBC**

7 observers. Notable - Sora (1), Virginia Rail (1), Marsh Wren.

-Dick Preston







# Upcoming Events

February / March 2024

**Saturday, February 10**

Wolf River WMA

Meet 3:30 pm in LaGrange, TN

*Field Trip Leader:* Martha Waldron

[martha.waldron@gmail.com](mailto:martha.waldron@gmail.com)

**February 16-19**

Great Backyard Bird Count

<https://www.birdcount.org/>

**Wednesday, February 21, 7:00 pm**

Chapter Meeting

St. George's Episcopal Church

2425 South Germantown Rd.

Germantown, TN

**Saturday, February 24, 7:30am**

Shelby Farms/Agricenter

*Field Trip Leader:* Cliff VanNostrand

[birdinginthe901@gmail.com](mailto:birdinginthe901@gmail.com)

**Wednesday, March 20, 7:00 pm**

Chapter Meeting

St. George's Episcopal Church

2425 South Germantown Rd.

Germantown, TN

**Saturday, March 23, 7:30am**

Shelby Farms/Agricenter

*Field Trip Leader:* Martha Waldron

[martha.waldron@gmail.com](mailto:martha.waldron@gmail.com)



Short-eared Owl



Barred Owl



Short-eared Owl

**PHOTOS BY: ALLEN SPARKS**





Short-eared Owl



Short-eared Owl



Barn Owl



Barn Owl



Barred Owl



Short-eared Owl



Great Horned Owl

PHOTOS BY  
**TRICIA VESELY**





Great Horned Owl



Short-eared Owl



Barred Owl



Barn Owl

PHOTOS BY:  
**CLIFF VANNOSTRAND**



PHOTOS BY  
**CONNOR ROBINSON**



Hermit Thrush



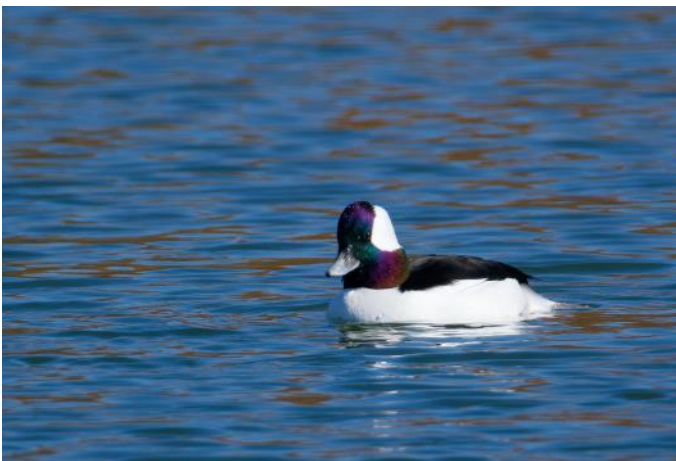
Ruby-crowned Kinglet



Fox Sparrow



Common Goldeneye



Bufflehead



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker

# SUBMISSIONS WELCOME

Submissions of any of the following are desired:

- Birding Events
- Stories about birds or birders
- Birding Tips
- Poetry, quotes, sketches, or photos
- Photo of birds or people at events or field trips.

Deadline is the 22nd of each month,  
Email submissions to [mtosnewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:mtosnewsletter@gmail.com)

## A LA CARTE

- The Courtship Flight of the Short-eared Owl (HT: Judy Dorsey)  
<http://tinyurl.com/y4hnpp49>
- Project SNOWstorm researches the annual movements of Snowy Owls (HT: Judy Dorsey)  
<https://www.projectsnowstorm.org/>
- January 2024 Photo Quiz  
<https://www.aba.org/january-2024-photo-quiz/>
- Flamingo Fever, Limpkins on the Loose, 'Mega' Rare Terns—the Biggest Bird Events of 2023  
<https://www.audubon.org/news/flamingo-fever-limpkins-loose-mega-rare-terns-biggest-bird-events-2023>
- 9 Woodpeckers With Red Heads in North America  
<https://birdfeederhub.com/woodpeckers-with-red-heads/>





HUMMINGBIRD SIGHTING BETWEEN  
**November 1 and March 15**

If you do get a hummingbird, Please contact  
Cyndi Routledge - [routledges@bellsouth.net](mailto:routledges@bellsouth.net)

Please consider leaving  
out your feeder out year-  
round. Keep it clean,  
maintained and  
easily viewed

Since November 1990,  
300 hummingbirds of 7 different  
species have been captured, banded  
and released here in Tennessee as  
part of a winter banding  
research program.

### TOS Membership Information

Members may join online  
at [www.birdmemphis.org](http://www.birdmemphis.org) or by mail.

Benefits include monthly programs, field  
trips, quarterly journals, and state and  
chapter newsletters.

Categories and dues are:

Individual	\$36
Family	\$40
Sustaining	\$55
College Student	\$15
Other Student	\$10
Lifetime	\$450 one time +\$18 yearly

Dues payable by PayPal

at [www.birdmemphis.org](http://www.birdmemphis.org) or by check, made  
out to MTOS.

Please send dues to: Barbara Pyles

8488 East Askersund Cove

Cordova, TN 38018

(901) 570-1009

E-mail [brbpyles@gmail.com](mailto:brbpyles@gmail.com)

### Newsletter Delivery Options

To reduce printing and mailing costs, a  
digital version, which is usually expanded  
with photos and occasional articles, is  
provided. Notify Margaret Jefferson,  
[mjefferson100@hotmail.com](mailto:mjefferson100@hotmail.com). If you have no  
internet access, a printed version can be  
mailed.

### Chapter Newsletter Submissions

Email submissions to Deon VanNostrand  
[mtosnewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:mtosnewsletter@gmail.com)

*Deadline for submissions to the Newsletter is  
the 22nd of the month.*

### Field Cards

Please mail or e-mail your field cards and  
notable sightings to Dick Preston.

[dickpreston48@gmail.com](mailto:dickpreston48@gmail.com)

### Tennessee Warbler Deadlines

\*March 15 for the April Newsletter

\*July 15 for the August Newsletter

\*November 15 for the December Newsletter

Forward contributions to:

Theresa Graham, Editor

P.O. Box 366 Oakland, TN 38060

(901) 489-0795

Email: [2graham@bellsouth.net](mailto:2graham@bellsouth.net)

### Chapter Meeting

**February 21, 2024. 7:00pm**

St. George's Episcopal Church,

2425 South Germantown Rd. Germantown, TN

Phone 901-754-7282

### Program

**Cathy Justis, MTOS**

*Wolf River Conservancy*

### Hospitality

Refreshments will be provided by Betty Blaylock, Sue  
Ferguson, and David Young.

### Upcoming Field Trip Information

**February 10:** Wolf River WMA

**February 24:** Shelby Farms/Agricenter

Thank you to all who contributed to this month's newsletter.

For our next issue, we would like to feature some photos of  
love birds, or bird couples.

Please send your submissions to  
[mtosnewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:mtosnewsletter@gmail.com)

### New Members

Rifat Huq [rihuq@yahoo.com](mailto:rihuq@yahoo.com)

Todd and Shanna Winn

[flyinghoudini@yahoo.com](mailto:flyinghoudini@yahoo.com)

[shannao33@yahoo.com](mailto:shannao33@yahoo.com)

### Treasurer's Report

The balance in the Treasury as of January 22, 2024  
is \$15,360.30.

-Barbara Pyles