



City of Lake Geneva, 626 Geneva St, Lake Geneva, WI 53147- 262.248.3673- www.cityoflakegeneva.gov

**AVIAN COMMITTEE
TUESDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2024 - 6:00 PM
LAKE GENEVA CITY HALL; CONFERENCE ROOM 2A (UPPER LEVEL)**

Members:

President Sarah McConnell, Beverly Leonard, Jill Rodriguez, Karen Gallo, Victoria Ross, Kelley Happ,
and Cindy Yager- Alderperson

AGENDA

1. Call to Order
2. Roll Call
3. Approval of the Avian Committee minutes from November 12, 2024
4. Comments from the public limited to 5 minutes, limited to items on this agenda
5. Budget Update and 2025 Financial Review
6. Update from City Council
7. Bird City Application Status
8. Partnerships and Funding Opportunities
9. Birding Backpacks Project
10. Climate Change Topics/Updates
 - a. World Migratory Bird Day Activities
 - b. EV Chargers in Lake Geneva
 - c. Dark Skies Project
11. Next Meeting Date & Time
12. Future Agenda Items
13. Adjournment

*A quorum of the Council may be present; however, no official Council action will be taken.
Requests from persons with disabilities who need assistance to participate in this meeting should be made to the City Clerk's
office in advance so that the appropriate accommodations can be made.*

City of Lake Geneva Avian Committee Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, November 12, 2024 6:00 P.M.

City Council Conference Room 2A

1. Call to Order: 6:05 PM by Sarah McConnell

2. Roll Call. The following members were present: Sarah McConnell, Jill Rodriguez, Kelley Happ, Beverly Leonard, Karen Gallo, Victoria Ross and Alderperson Cindy Yager.

3. Approval of Avian Committee meeting minutes

A motion to approve the minutes from the October 8 meeting was made by Rodriguez, seconded by Ross. The motion passed.

4. Visitors and Comments from the Public:

Alderperson Cindy Yager updated the committee on city matters:

Park Committee – the committee has heard from one of several companies about a proposal for a new playground in Veterans' Park. The concept is for an all-inclusive, multi-generational playground that will meet ADA standards and appeal to all ages. The Parks Committee will select the materials and plans to use money from impact fees. An environmental or veteran theme have been among the suggestions. The committee hopes to start the project in 2025.

Holiday Lights – The city would like the BID to come up with a new plan for holiday lighting – perhaps on buildings instead of trees. BID will take lights off after the holidays. She also mentioned that several of the city's downtown trees had been sawed off this fall by vandals.

Parks Director Position –this position is on hold until the new City Administrator has been installed. The city has received more than 60 applications for the City Administrator position and hopes to have an applicant selected by early January.

5. Bird City Application

McConnell reported a breakthrough in our attempts to work with Bird City Wisconsin. After a successful attempt to change our password, she was able to get into the website and find last year's application to modify it for next year. She also found a tutorial to help. McConnell has requested assistance from Ross to help upload and update our application for the 2025 year. The tutorial stressed tourism, which will work well with our plans to create and distribute hotel birding backpacks.

McConnell showed a tourism report detailing how birdwatching has doubled since 2016 and is now big business for the tourism industry. Lake Geneva is still listed with high flyer status.

6. Proclamation for Bird City Application:

The updated Bird City application is due February 29, 2025. We will need to create a proclamation from the city (there should be a copy of last year's on file at the city). Yager will talk to the city clerk about the proclamation and will suggest time at the City of a Whole Meeting on December 9 to read the proclamation.

7. Budget Update and 2025 Financial Review:

We followed up on a discussion last month about paying for supplies out of pocket or through Amazon and being repaid. Rodriguez spoke to the City Comptroller and reported that the city will order for us through their Amazon account, but will also repay us if we order directly.

Leonard proposed using Avian funds to power wash the bird houses every other year at a cost of \$450 each time. She projected needing a total of \$990 each year for ongoing maintenance. McConnell moved to set a budget line item for Martin house maintenance. Ross seconded the motion. McConnell also asked Leonard to send her updates on house maintenance.

The City Council will discuss and vote on the 2025 budget at their next meeting. Therefore, it was suggested we wait for their approval of our budget request. We are confident it will be approved because we asked for less money this year (we still have some carryover funds to be used).

8. Partnerships and Funding Opportunities (see item 9)

9. Birdwatching Backpacks for the City of Lake Geneva

Rodriguez reported that the Tourism Commission met in November and granted us the \$3000 we requested for marketing materials in the avian backpack project. In fact, they were excited and want us to make more than the five we had planned. We need to add the Tourism Commission logo to our materials. The backpacks will include binoculars, bird books, the backpack, and bird location materials. It was suggested that we put information about birding apps (like Merlin and Cornell University) on the brochure in our birdwatching kits. Rodriguez will create a letter to the hotels to solicit interest and will follow up with suggestions as to circulating the backpacks. This will include making sure the backpacks are returned after being checked out – maybe by putting on the room tab. We will also need to find a good artist to create a map of birding locations and maybe a seasonal birding list.

10. Climate Change Topics and Updates

Ross asked to carry this discussion of World Migratory Bird Day activities to the December meeting. It was reported that the Lake County (IL) Board has approved a new building code to help mitigate bird collisions on new buildings, and city of Libertyville has a new building with special windows to help alleviate the problem of bird strikes. Rodriguez suggested that the Avian committee advocate for such issues and McConnell agreed to pursue this topic, perhaps with some similar ordinance information from Madison.

11. Christmas Tree Decorating at the Geneva Lake Museum

Rodriguez reported that we will be included in this year's Christmas Tree Decorating Contest at the Geneva Lake Museum. Those who can help will meet at the Museum at 10 am November 20. We need to find/create rack cards for under the tree.

12. Next Meeting:

The Next Avian Committee meeting is on **Tuesday, December 10 at 6 pm in Conference Room 2 A**

15. Future Agenda Items

- Update from City Council
- Bird City Application status
- Budget Update and 2025 Financial Review
- Partnerships and Funding Opportunities
- Birding Backpacks Project
- Climate Change Topics/Updates
 - World Migratory Bird Day activities
 - EV Chargers in Lake Geneva
 - Dark Skies project
- Other
- Next meeting Date and Time
- Future Agenda Items

16: Adjournment:

Rodriguez moved to adjourn, seconded by Happ and approved. Meeting was adjourned at 7:15 p.m.

Respectfully submitted, 11/26//2024
Kelley Happ

MEMORANDUM

TO: Avian Committee Members
FROM: Victoria Ross
DATE: October 30, 2024
RE: Migratory Bird Day Event

The following items have been completed:

1. The date and time of the event has been set as Saturday, May 17, 2025 from 10:00 AM to 12:00 PM;
2. A speaker has been secured. Dr. Benjamin Zuckerberg from UW-Madison will present from 11:00 AM to 12:00 PM and a \$500.00 speaker fee has been agreed upon. Dr. Zuckerberg's information is at Attachment A; and
3. The Smith Meeting Room at the Lake Geneva Library has been reserved, and can hold 70 participants. An alternate location is still being investigated.

The following items still need to be determined:

1. Additional programming needed for the 10:00 AM to 11:00 AM hour. Some suggestions for consideration are:
 - a. Reading of the story "Purple Martin Palace" by Lucy Jerue. A synopsis of the book is at Attachment B;
 - b. A presentation on the Dark Skies initiative by Kelly Happe;
 - c. Input from Peg Esposito regarding Friends of Hillmoor participation;
 - d. Children's activity off the library patio (or in another section of the library). I am thinking this would be appropriate for audience members too young for the main speaker presentation. I will confirm with Dr. Zuckerberg what he believes is the target age for his presentation.
2. What other organizations do we want to target for audience and / or to offer space for literature (previously brainstormed list is at Attachment C)
3. I have included the article about the Purple Martin research on Ilha do Comaru, Brazil just for information (Attachment D)

Attachment A

Benjamin Zuckerberg

Background

Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, I arrived a bit late to the wonderful world of ecology. I was, however, lucky enough to start studying birds as an undergraduate at Connecticut College (under the tutelage of Bob Askins), and went on to get my Masters from the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. After spending several years studying birds in the field, I became interested in how the environment influences bird populations at geographic scales. I received my Ph.D. from SUNY-ESF where I focused on studying range shifts in bird distributions as a consequence of climate change. I got hooked, and then spent three great years as a postdoc and research associate at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. I joined the faculty at UW-Madison in 2011 and it's been a wild ride working with great collaborators and building a lab focused on studying how modern climate change impacts birds and mammals. I remain a strong advocate for the role of the public in collecting data on wildlife and feel that citizen science has opened entirely new fields in ecological research. Although I enjoy all the natural beauty and craft beers of Wisconsin, I am a New Yorker at heart and remain a diehard Yanks, Knicks, and Giants fan.



Contact Information

Benjamin Zuckerberg, Ph.D.

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[Google Scholar Profile](#)

[Curriculum vitae](#)

Education

- Connecticut College; B.A. in Zoology, 1998
- University of Massachusetts-Amherst; M.S. in Wildlife & Fisheries Conservation, 2002
- State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry; Ph.D. in Ecology, 2008
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Research Associate, 2008-2011

Affiliations

- Chair, Wildlife Working Group, Wisconsin Initiative on Climate Change Impacts
- Affiliate Member, Center for Climatic Research (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Attachment B

Purple Martin Palace



by Lucy Jerue

Illustrated by the Artists
of "Young At 'Art'"

This unique book is the story of Martin and Martina, two Purple Martins who migrate from Brazil to New Jersey for the summer. Martin, in humorous fashion, tells of their search for the perfect home. He hopes it will be just the place to raise a family. Children will delight in the colorful illustration as they learn about these fascinating birds, often described as the acrobats of the bird world.

28 pages, Paperback

Published November 13, 2020 by Blurb

ISBN 9781715800437 (ISBN10: 1715800435)

ASIN 1715800435

Language English

Attachment C

Some groups we would be targeting as potential partners and event word spreaders are:

- Lake Geneva Public Library - [Lake Geneva Public Library \(lglibrary.org\)](http://lglibrary.org)
- Geneva Lake Museum - [Home - Geneva Lake Museum](#)
- Badger High School Environmental Club - [Activities & Clubs - Badger High School \(lakegenevaschools.com\)](#) & students in the Agricultural Science Curriculum - [2024 - 2025 BHS Career Planning & Course Guide \(updated 9/9/24\) | PDF to Flipbook \(heyzine.com\)](#)
- Wild Ones - [Chapters in Wisconsin - Wild Ones: Native Plants, Natural Landscapes](#)
- Lyons Biodiversity Project - [Lyons Biodiversity Project – Kettle Moraine Land Trust \(kmlandtrust.org\)](#)
- Michael Fields Agricultural Institute - [Michael Fields Agricultural Institute](#)

AUDUBON MAGAZINE / FALL 2022

This Tiny Brazilian Island Could Hold the Key to the Purple Martin's Future

Vast numbers of the swallows pass through one roost in the heart of the Amazon before winging their way to North American birdhouses. Studying it could provide clues to the species' decline.



Radio tags affixed to Purple Martins (left) will help researchers track their journeys north. Photos: Dado Galdieri/[Hilaera Media](#)

By **Daniel Grossman**
Reporter, Audubon Magazine

Published Fall 2022

Just off a splinter of land sitting midstream in Brazil's Rio Negro, a crew of scientists in two boats intently scan the sky. Silhouetted against twilight lavender and golden clouds, the crown of a Macacarecuia tree droops with fist-size seedpods. Like other trees nearby,

Macacarecuia tolerate the river's seasonal flooding. The island, known locally as Ilha do Comaru, is submerged as it is every year in March, and only the trees' crowns poke above the surface.

A handful of Purple Martins dart by, their notched tails and angular wings splitting the heavy air. Then a flock amasses into avian clouds, the birds' tempestuous movements like particles in Brownian motion. Suddenly, one throng forms a synchronous swirl. With a woosh, the birds drop like a shower of black sleet against the crepuscular horizon, alighting in the canopy just a few feet from the boats. More birds pour down, encrusting the trees, their clamorous calls rising. In a matter of minutes the spectacle has ended, leaving the sky still but for the emergence of stars.

The tiny island—just 12 acres, or slightly larger than Yankee Stadium— attracts an outsize number of the shimmery swallows. Host to a concentration of roughly 250,000 birds between February and April, it's one of the largest Purple Martin roosts ever discovered. Its significance isn't just its size, however, but also the pivotal role the roost may play in the bird's long-distance migration. Comaru could be the staging ground, or launchpad, the scientists suspect, for many of 9.3 million Purple Martins that funnel from South to North America.

Mario Cohn-Haft, the curator of birds at the National Institute of Amazonian Research in Manaus, believes the island could be a key to understanding the species' steady decline as well. "It is the single biggest window we have into what Purple Martins are doing in South America in the winter," he says. The North American breeding population is thought to have decreased 25 percent since 1966; in some areas the drop has been even steeper, and in others the birds have disappeared altogether. Little is known about the challenges Purple Martins encounter when they head south each fall. "If we can trace their movements, figure out what they're eating, and analyze whether they've been contaminated by pesticides and other pollutants, we can learn something about how they're doing down here," he says.



Purple Martins at Comaru roost at a comfortable height for researchers to gently take them in hand. Photo: Dado Galdieri

Cohn-Haft watches the birds' restless silhouettes, his binoculars slung over his shoulder. He is among a dozen American and Brazilian scientists who have gathered here to observe and perform the most wide-ranging study yet of Comaru. By taking a close look at the birds packed onto this small isle, they hope to glean insights that can help secure the future of the entire species.

The arrival of Purple Martins each spring is eagerly anticipated across North America. The birds' breeding range extends from Canada to Mexico and consists primarily of the United States east of the Rockies. Apart from small populations on the West Coast, in the southern Rockies, and in Southwestern deserts, they nest exclusively in structures—from hollowed-out gourds to miniature condo

complexes—that humans erect to welcome them. The birds often return to the same yard, and even the same martin house, each year. If they show up a little late, “our phone rings off the hook with folks beside themselves, worried that their babies aren’t going to come back,” says Joe Siegrist, president of the Purple Martin Conservation Association, a nonprofit advocacy and research organization.



A floating restaurant serves as a laboratory for scientists studying Purple Martins at Comaru. Photo: Dado Galdieri

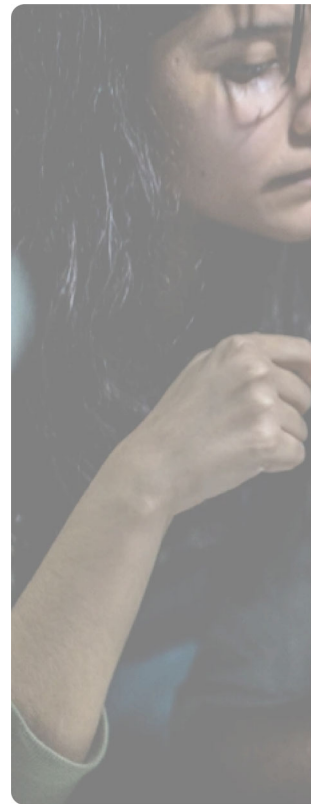
This close relationship didn’t always exist. Natural cavities, such as tree hollows, once offered ample nesting sites for Purple Martin colonies, but the loss of those—coupled with competition from aggressive, non-native species like the European Starling—has made the birds “100 percent reliant on humans providing housing for them to reproduce,” Siegrist says. As a result, Purple Martins have also

become valued research subjects; thousands are banded every year. And more recently the birds' site fidelity has made them ideal for carrying tracking devices, many of which must be recovered to retrieve information.

Although Purple Martins have been studied extensively in North America, scientific knowledge tapers off when they fly south. Just where they go, what routes they take, and what critical habitat lies along the way remain largely a mystery. Purple Martins are aerial insectivores—they hunt insects on the wing—and that places them among the fastest-declining avian groups. (Insect populations have also dropped, due to causes such as pesticide use.) But the birds' risk is compounded by their marathon journeys.



egrist observes the collaborative work unfold from the head of a makeshift lab table. Photo: Dado
:ri



Purple Martins had long been seen in the Amazon, but conventional wisdom held that they were only passing through. Some of the first evidence to the contrary came in 2007, when Bridget Stutchbury, a biologist at York University in Toronto, equipped the first songbirds—20 Purple Martins and 14 Wood Thrushes—with geolocators. By measuring light levels, the devices could determine a bird's location to within about 200 miles. Stutchbury recovered two geolocators from martins the following spring and discovered that one bird had spent the winter in the Amazon while the other wintered much farther south.

Purple Martins had long been seen in the Amazon, but conventional wisdom held that they were only passing through.

Seven years later Stutchbury's postdoc Kevin Fraser, now an ornithologist at the University of Manitoba, equipped 105 Purple Martins with more advanced trackers: GPS devices that could place a bird to within about 30 feet. The 14 loggers he retrieved revealed that all but one had overwintered in the Amazon and five had spent a lot of time near Manaus crammed into an area no larger than a suburban home lot. Siegrist, who collaborates closely with Fraser, says this almost certainly proved the birds had gathered in a roost—and if the scientists could locate it, they might begin to understand what role wintering grounds play in Purple Martins' survival.

Siegrist and Fraser decided it was time to go have a look around for themselves. They visited Manaus with two other colleagues in November 2016 and again two years later. They checked the sites that Fraser's birds had visited but found nothing. As it turned out, their timing was off; they were three months early. They also eventually discovered that the birds relocated their roost from Ilha do Papagaio, where Fraser had pinpointed them. "They switched right when we thought we knew where they were," says Siegrist.

Finally, early in 2019, Cohn-Haft heard from a student about a huge flock of birds that a local had showed her, only 20 miles from Manaus. The guide, named José Francisco dos Santos de Moraes, runs a honky-tonk theme park featuring trained freshwater dolphins. With an eye for new attractions, he had started taking visitors to see the flock as it arrived at dusk. The guide offered to take Cohn-Haft, too. Cohn-Haft knew right away that it was a roost of Purple Martins: "It really was just one of these absolutely goosebump-raising, heartwarming, uplifting, inspiring moments." And he sensed immediately that the roost could provide a treasure trove of scientific data.

It's evening at Flutuante Restaurante do Paulão (Big Paul's Floating Restaurant), anchored a short distance from Comaru. The scientists have rented the whole place as a cafeteria, dormitory, and lab. They sit around a table where they had earlier lunched on feijoada, Brazil's national meal of pork and beans, recalling the ease with which

they have just collected Purple Martins. “You can paddle a boat right up and pick them off the trees like apples,” says Siegrist.

Now the captives dangle in cotton sacks from a taut line like a load of socks hanging out to dry. The scientists remove the feathered subjects one at a time and pass them from person to person in a slow ornithological bucket brigade.

Ramiro Dário Melinski, a Brazilian research assistant at Cohn-Haft’s institute, wipes a bird’s mouth and cloaca with small cotton-tipped swabs. He seals the samples in pinkie-size test tubes and drops them into a thermos of liquid nitrogen. Genetic studies of material collected from the birds will help Erika Hingst-Zaher, a researcher at Brazil’s Instituto Butantan, and her collaborator, C. Loren Buck, a biologist at Northern Arizona University, determine what pathogens the birds carry. Disease, perhaps aggravated by a toxic exposure, could explain the birds’ declining numbers.

Melinski passes the bird to Clarissa Santos, then a research assistant and now a grad student studying ecotoxicology at the University of São Paulo. She clamps a band on its leg and hands it to Cohn-Haft.

Cradling the animal in his palm, Cohn-Haft gently blows its glossy breast feathers aside. He scrutinizes the heft of the pectoral muscles. He fans out a wing like a poker hand. The bird has recently molted and its flight feathers are fresh. “They’re all brand spanking new,” he says. Flight feathers become scruffy with use. That’s good enough for short excursions, but making an intercontinental trip with worn feathers would be like driving cross-country on bald tires. He declares the bird fit to depart for North America.

This is the third year that Cohn-Haft and Siegrist have studied the martins at Comaru. They’ve captured about 100 birds each time, and most of those seem about ready to head north—not just because their feathers are fresh but also because their muscles are bulked up for travel and they have ample fat stores. Radio tags attached to birds in past seasons have shown they stay at most two weeks. This gives Cohn-Haft confidence that many more individuals pass through than the count reflects at any given time—potentially closer to 1.5 million.

The fact that such a large fraction of the world’s Purple Martins relies on a single site raises conservation concerns. Though there are currently no plans to dam the Rio Negro, a future hydroelectric dam

could, for instance, wash away the roost. “That tight concentration makes them vulnerable,” says Siegrist.

The research at Comaru could point to more global implications as well. Mercury from natural and human sources, such as artisanal mining operations, transforms in hydroelectric reservoirs and farm ponds into a highly toxic form that may then travel up the food chain to Purple Martins. Hingst-Zaher and Buck, who both joined the team at Comaru, are investigating whether mercury contamination affects the birds’ endocrine systems, reducing their fat stores and making them less fit to migrate. Buck has already found mercury in the feathers of Purple Martins in North America; samples from their wintering ground will help determine the severity of the problem there. A martin contaminated in Brazil might not reach North America for study, he says: “We may never even sample it because it flies and dies.”

The scientists hope any discoveries they make will help uncover what’s behind the decline of other songbirds, especially other aerial insectivores. Siegrist likens Purple Martins to the proverbial canaries in the coal mine. An early run of bad luck made the Purple Martin dependent on the kindness of strangers for survival. But the bird’s adaptability and now the discovery of Comaru could give it a lead role in saving its feathered brethren.

It’s around midnight before the researchers have processed the last bird. Two graduate students lift them all off the line, still trapped inside their cloth bags, and gingerly step into an aluminum boat. Cohn-Haft urges them to hurry up. The birds must get back to their roost so they can have a good night’s rest. After all, they have a long journey ahead.

This story was supported by the Pulitzer Center. It originally ran in the Fall 2022 issue as “Home Away From Home.” To receive our print magazine, become a member by [making a donation today](#).

Full article is at
<https://www.audubon.org/magazine/fall-2022/this-tiny-brazilian-island-could-hold-key-purple>