

BCN Quarterly Meeting
Saturday July 12, 2025
Location: Online Video Conference

QUARTERLY MEETING MINUTES—FINAL (Adopted October 7, 2025)

Present: Pat Andersen (TCA); Jeff Aufmann (MCA); Tim Balassie (KCA); Stephanie Beilke (AGL); Diann Bilderback (DBC); Sonny Cohen (Lake-Cook); Robyn Detterline (COS); Bob Fisher (IAS); Jim Giocomo (ABC); Jim Greene (DBC); Linda Gohlke (Lake-Cook); Kathryn Gorman (At-large); Matt Igleski (CBA); Vera Leopold (TWI); Michael McNamee (COS); Rita Renwick (WCA); Carla Schmakel (LCA); Aubrey Sirman (Loyola SES); John Sprovieri (KCA); Fred Thompson (Lake-Cook)

Call to Order: President Diann Bilderback called the meeting to order at 1:00 pm. There was a quorum with 14 organizations represented.

Administration

1. Approval of minutes of April 12, 2025 Quarterly Meeting

Bilderback explained that BCN electronically voted to approve the April quarterly meeting minutes back in May, as required by the bank in order to have Gohlke installed as Treasurer.

2. Membership and Treasurer's Report

Gohlke reported that a \$10,000 money market account was opened, at 4% interest rate. There is a required minimum balance of \$2,500 so that BCN does not incur fees. Almost all dues has been paid, and there were a few more donations.

BCN's account balance on July 5 was \$24,499.05, a change of \$3,757.08 since January 1, 2025. Cohen remarked that this is a larger balance than it has been, and it would be good to have a recap of what this money will be used for. Bilderback explained that BCN launched a fall 2024 giving campaign so that BCN would have funding for migrating its data to a platform that's easier to access by land managers and researchers. A team reviewed options for migrating the data and chose a tool called NatureCounts (an online platform developed by Birds Canada) which hosts datasets from all over America. BCN is in the process of talking to NatureCounts about making that transition. Bilderback said BCN was expected to spend \$15,000 on the database migration, but the actual cost might be lower. Next quarter BCN will start spending some of this money as the migration to NatureCounts takes shape.

Bilderback added that the money in the money market account might sit there for several months earning interest for us.

Kudos

1. Orland Grassland Volunteer Recognition from Village of Orland Park

Bilderback explained that the Orland Grassland Volunteers were recognized by the Village of Orland Park for exceptional contributions to Orland Grassland and their positive impact on the community, with over 3,000 volunteer hours. Michael McNamee provided background by explaining that Orland Grassland is about 1,000 acres and has been part of the Forest Preserves of Cook County since the 1960s. The forest preserve district planted trees, but a large section remained grassland. Some birders in the 1990s were concerned that some of the grassland birds would not survive if habitat destruction was not ameliorated. BCN established some points to start to get a count of the grassland birds. The restoration was done by the volunteers and was supported by Openlands, Forest Preserves of Cook County, and Audubon, but it was mainly manual labor. Then the Army Corps of Engineers accepted a proposal from one of their employees to do a massive additional restoration which removed almost all the trees except the ones on the outside of the perimeter. This was a 5-year, 12-million dollar project, completed in 2014. The restoration was largely targeted for Henslow's Sparrows, as their numbers were plummeting over the last 20-30 years. Because the BCN points remained the same, the results show that the Henslow's Sparrows more than doubled per acre between 2003 and 2019. Orland Grassland Volunteers applied for an IBA (Important Bird Area) designation for Orland Grassland, which was found to have the 7th highest abundance of Henslow's Sparrows per acre in Illinois. McNamee noted that's probably in the world, as well. McNamee credited the BCN data that was able to show the restoration was successful.

Bilderback noted the commitment and enthusiasm of the Orland Grassland volunteers, and congratulated them for their successful work.

2. Piping Plovers and Lake County Audubon

Next, Bilderback recognized Lake County Audubon (LCA) for their success with piping plovers on the shore of Lake Michigan. Carla Schmakel, representing LCA, spoke about the educational nature of the project for people living near the Lake. She said the project goes back to at least 2018, perhaps earlier. The plovers were very low in numbers and now there are 70 pairs along the Great Lakes. In recognition of the plovers, the LCA hosted a screening of the film "Sharing Our Shore and the Return of the Piping Plover to Waukegan Shores", which was produced by LCA president Carolyn Lueck. About 100 participants were present at the screening. Schmakel will speak more at a future BCN meeting on how the efforts of the group have led to a successful pair of plovers that fledged two chicks this year, confirmed and recognized by the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Projects and Initiatives

1. Database Team Update

Bilderback explained that BCN is moving forward with NatureCounts to migrate the database. In spring, BCN looked at the back end of the database and engaged Jorge Garcia of Windy City Bird Lab to remove inconsistencies and duplicate data, eg duplicate points. She said some manual reconciliation needs to be done, that will happen with help from the area coordinators after the monitoring season is over. However to date, NatureCounts has been able to take an ebird extract from the BCN database and integrate it into their platform and provide basic levels of access for about \$3,000—lower than previously thought. Once all the data has been migrated, BCN will test and make access available. BCN will allow land managers to explore the new platform to see how people respond to it and identify possibilities for further modifications and enhancements.

Evolving concurrently with the NatureCounts solution is a new development. Bilderback said BCN has a new volunteer with strong analytic skills in Tableau, a broadly used tool for data visualization, and BCN is exploring it as an alternative to NatureCounts in case their solution is not as powerful as predicted. The advantage of NatureCounts is that BCN's research would be available to any researcher anywhere in the world. However if BCN were to use Tableau, it may be easier to customize data according to how BCN would like it.

McNamee asked where the database resides now. Bilderback said it is in Ebird. Ebird rolled out its new capability, called Projects, and it's easy to download raw data, eg for a county, but a user has to know how to manipulate the data to analyze it. BCN is still trying to understand how that works, and it's possible to start making that available to land managers that want the data in that format.

Tim Balassie asked if the migration includes all of BCN's data, back to the late 1990s. Bilderback affirmed it's all of our data, all the way back.

2. BCN Survey Team Update

Kathryn Gorman gave an update about the monitoring season wrapping up. Gorman recognized the work of the area coordinators, which is essential to the Survey. She also thanked the Survey Team, which processes applications for new monitors, updates the website and collaborates with area coordinators. Gorman also acknowledged land managers (eg forest preserve districts) for their contributions in evaluating and selecting points and making sure monitors have access to the sites. Finally she commended the monitors themselves for collecting the data for the Survey. A special appreciation event will be held on Oct 11, 2025, to recognize and thank the BCN monitors. Gorman said BCN is still finalizing data from area coordinators, and updates will be shared at the next meeting.

Bob Fisher gave an update about monitoring at the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie in Wilmington, IL. He said that the University of Illinois (UI) was instrumental in the 2025 bird monitoring program at Midewin. There was potential risk that long-term monitoring at this site might be curtailed, given the current political climate and staff reductions. Co-incidentally, Mike Ward's group at UI, and The Nature Conservancy, a BCN member organization, were engaged

in a project evaluating the effect of shrubland removal on the bird population there. Ward and his team organized a complete monitoring program at Midewin in 2025, and all of the data available is being entered into the BCN website. Fisher said it should be finished later this summer. Fisher noted that without the cooperative efforts of the groups involved, there may not have been any monitoring at Midewin at all in 2025. He said he believes this process will continue next year as well.

3. Communications Team Update

- Sponsorship of Urban Birding Festival

Bilderback said that BCN has signed up to sponsor a table at the Urban Birding Festival this September 12-14. Last year was the festival's first year, and there were 460 attendees with a busy exhibit area. Matt Iglecki said the Urban Birding Festival is hoping to have even greater participation this year. He said Rosemary Mosco will be the keynote speaker, and there will be regional talks and vendors, some vendors are the same as last year and some are new. He said to watch for sign up information coming up in the weeks ahead. Visit the website for the festival at: <https://www.theurbanbirdingfestival.org/>

Bilderback said BCN news is still getting a high open rate and has over 700 subscribers. The Communications Team is looking for a volunteer for an organizational profile. Please let anyone on the Communications Team (Diann, Bob, or Vera) know if your organization is interested in being highlighted.

Fisher has been talking with Pat Andersen about the Discord channel she is hosting. Andersen said she has already begun posting to Discord, and is looking to post messages that are relevant and informative. She welcomed suggestions to be emailed to her.

Fisher added that Discord has 1900 participants on the rare bird alert channel. Many might not be aware of BCN and its member organizations. He explained that Andersen stepped up with the idea in order to foster some extra publicity for BCN. Andersen added that next year BCN could perhaps solicit new monitors with targeted messages to different counties.

- Feedback from Survey of BCN Representatives

Bilderback next explained that Vera Leopold, as outgoing BCN Secretary, produced a survey of BCN representatives to get feedback on the frequency of BCN communications, the current meeting time and date, the content of meetings, and the relationship representatives have with BCN and their affiliate organizations. She invited Leopold to share the results with the group.

Leopold explained that the survey consisted of 15 questions sent to all representatives in April-May of 2025. There were 27 respondents, which is almost 50% of all BCN representatives. The respondents consisted of a good cross section of members, from people who were new

members to long-time members, and members who are highly involved to ones who participate less often.

The survey found that when representatives do not regularly attend meetings, it is often because they know there is another representative from their group attending.

Most representatives said they are sharing BCN updates with their organizations in a variety of ways. The top ways are news and asks with leadership, advocacy alerts to whole membership, and news items to their organization's newsletter/communications contact.

Most representatives think their groups are at least "somewhat interested" in BCN, while others say their organization is "supportive and engaged".

Representatives feel they are hearing from BCN "the right amount", with some wanting to hear from BCN more often. Representatives also shared that they have a range of skills, from writing presentations to event planning and advocacy experience.

Nearly all representatives agreed BCN is making a difference for regional bird conservation, with nearly 60% saying that BCN is an important player.

Discussion of regional bird conservation issues and current BCN issues are viewed as valuable elements of quarterly meetings.

Leopold said the survey made clear that there is an interest in hearing more updates from member organizations during quarterly meetings, eg what are other groups working on. Bilderback said a high percentage of respondents wanted to hear what other organizations are doing, but did not want a round-robin approach; rather, highlighting a few groups per meeting was more desirable. To that end, if a representative has something their affiliate organization is doing that other groups could learn from, please let Bilderback or Leopold know. Also, representatives are encouraged to please add BCN to their organization's newsletter distribution list.

Leopold said members also shared thoughtful suggestions about how BCN can have more impact. Some ideas include: more direct community outreach about conservation; strengthening BCN's focus on grassland protection; making BCN survey data more accessible to land managers; and expanding data collection to include migration and or before-during-after habitat restoration studies. Additionally suggestions were made to provide more publicity to the average citizen of Chicago, and could BCN find ways to better represent the diversity of birders in the region, making BCN a statewide organization.

The last topic Leopold addressed was the day and time of quarterly meetings. She said nearly all respondents were open to changing the Saturday meeting time: 33% thought the date should probably be changed; 11% felt strongly that it should be changed; and no one was strongly opposed to the idea of changing. The most preferred alternative meeting time/day was weekday,

7-9 pm, with 70% of respondents favoring that. Leopold then researched options that avoid regular club meetings, with the result that the best alternative times are the first and second Tuesday of the month, and the first Thursday of the month.

Bilderback opened a discussion about what the representatives think about changing. Sproveri said he prefers a weeknight meeting. Several participants agreed with Anderson that the first of some day of the month (eg, Tuesday) would be easier to remember.

Motion: Rita Renwick moved to change the quarterly meeting to the first Tuesday of the month that begins the quarter, from 7-9 pm.

Seconded: John Sprovieri seconded.

Action: All were in favor and the motion passed.

The next BCN quarterly meeting will be October 7, 2025, 7-9 pm.

4. Fund-raising Team Update

Bilderback continued with the Fundraising Team's report. This team had limited activity this quarter because there was less urgency around the need for funding. She said BCN will launch a fall campaign again this year, around Giving Tuesday, which is December 2, 2025. BCN still needs to acquire member management software in order to administer the new member category of affiliation with BCN, and process membership fees and renewals. She said BCN has identified some possible sources of grants if funding is required.

Advocacy/Conservation Issues

1. Advocacy Team

Bilderback recapped the progress made by Lake County this spring. Lake County leads the way in bird-friendly building design ordinance. Last May, the Lake County Board voted to require all building construction in unincorporated Lake County to adhere to the criteria established by the American Bird Conservancy for bird safe building design. This followed earlier legislation requiring bird friendly design for government and commercial buildings in unincorporated Lake County. Bilderback said Lake County provides a model for other counties to do the same.

Schmakel added that the Lake County Board website states it may require more native plants as part of new residential developments; Bilderback added that's a natural next step in protecting birds.

2. Research Projects

- Black Crowned Night Heron Project

The Black Crowned Night Heron (BCNH) project is full steam ahead. Bilderback spoke with Amy Lardner, who reports that there were 768 adults and 520 chicks at the Lincoln Zoo rookery. The project has captured and banded 70 birds since 2022. Tracking data shows that the birds are dispersing to places including Wisconsin, Georgia, Louisiana and Cuba. As such, the project is helping to understand more about the migratory habits of these birds, and outreach with IAS and Cook County Audubon continues. The project encourages anyone seeing the birds outside the rookery to report sightings.

REPORT BANDED BCNH: <https://arcg.is/0vKHPW0>

BCNH NESTING: Report signs of possible BCNH nesting activity (other than at Lincoln Park Zoo) to Sarah Slayton at University of Illinois (email: slayton4@illinois.edu) or Brad Semel at Illinois Department of Natural Resources (email: brad.semel@illinois.gov)

- Grassland Research Project

Bilderback said the final report from the Grassland Research Project is in progress, with Eric Secker and Mary Bernat still at work on it.

Old Business

There was no old business to report.

New Business

An All-BCN Appreciation Event is scheduled for October 11, 2025. It will take place at the Jewel Tea Pavilion at the Barrington Park District. Secker will lead a bird walk from 11:30 to 1pm. Sirman will again run the trivia contest. Aufmann offered to expand the contest with questions he has developed. And there will again be a raffle and prize table. Contributions to the prize table are welcome, please let Bilderback know if you have something new or gently used to donate. Ideas include any bird-related items like books, feeders, garden items, home decor, art, games, etc.

Announcements

Meeting Takeaways:

- BCN representatives are encouraged to please send Bilderback or Leopold the key contact info for their affiliate organization, eg President, Treasurer, Communications Lead, etc.
- Please contact Kathryn Gorman if you have suggestions for candidates for the Area Coordinator roles that are open, especially in Northern Cook County

- If you have fundraising experience, please consider volunteering with the fundraising team by contacting Bilderback.
- If you have raffle items to donate, please let Bilderback know.
- Please consider volunteering to be a lead on an advocacy issue.

Igleski then shared some announcements from the Chicago Bird Alliance (CBA). Regarding bird-friendly building design, Igleski shared that there will be an informational hearing about collisions on July 23rd at 10am with the City of Chicago, and hopefully an aldermen will be willing to sponsor an ordinance.

Igleski also announced CBA has raised money to do a rat abatement alternative pilot project. Several big donors are helping to get the study going. The program would make a rat contraceptive available, instead of a poison, and this will make the environment safer for other animals, eg owls. Urban Wildlife is helping with the study so that there will be a good foundation of data to show the City. The rat contraceptive is distributed in a box that only rats can access, it is delivered in peanut butter flavored pellets. After a few months, Igleski said there should be a decrease in rat populations. Boston has done this and seen a nearly 70% drop in some areas.

Finally, Igleski announced that the Techny basin is not being mowed during breeding season. It has been an involved process to mark nests. Mowing doesn't occur until the end of summer. But there is a need to monitor and keep tabs on this. Also the model can be expanded to other areas: one suggested site is near Plum Creek, another near Tinley Park. Volunteers are needed to do the initial checking of what birds are there in the next couple weeks.

Proposed Next Meeting

The next BCN quarterly meeting will be held on the new day and time: **Tues Oct 7, 2025 from 7-9 pm.**

Adjournment

Bilderback adjourned the meeting at 2:38 pm.