Bird Conservation Network
Tuesday, October 7, 2025
Location: Online Video Conference

QUARTERLY MEETING MINUTES–*FINAL (Adopted January 6, 2026).*

Participants: Pat Andersen (TCA), Timothy Balassie (KCA), Stephanie Beilke (AGL), Mary Bernat (At-Large), Diann Bilderback (DBC), Sonny Cohen (Lake-Cook), Robyn Detterline (COS), Bob Fisher (IAS), Linda Gohlke (Lake-Cook), Kathryn Gorman (At-Large), Joanne Harrison (ENSBC), Matt Igleski (CAS), Vera Leopold (TWI), Carolyn Lueck (LCA), Mark Luscombe (Ft Dearborn), Michael McNamee (COS), Charlotte Pavelka (LCA), Judy Pollock (CAS), Rita Renwick (WCA), Carla Schmakel (LCA), Eric Secker (KCA), Laura Simpson (CFC), John Sprovieri (KCA), Fred Thompson (Lake-Cook).

Call to order: President Diann Bilderback called the meeting to order at 7:00 pm. There was a quorum with representatives from 15 groups present.

Administration

1. Approval of minutes of July 12, 2025, quarterly meeting

Bilderback asked for a motion to approve the minutes from the prior quarterly meeting.

Motion: John Sprovieri
Seconded: Linda Gohlke
Action: Pass

2. Membership and Treasurer's Report

Treasurer Gohlke reviewed the most recent Treasurer's Report. The ending balance on October 4th was $23,897.07. The sources of change since the last report were expenses at $3,092.72 YTD. The money market account accrued to $106.94. Dues collected was $2,787.26, and donations totalled $3,353.26. Expenses since the beginning of this quarter were the deposit of $450 for renting the venue for the BCN monitor appreciation event, and administrative expenses of $303.88 to reimburse Vice President Secker for web hosting and for a forms plug-in.

Kudos

Bilderback called out Joe Suchecki, Steward of Springbrook Prairie and BCN Monitor for being recognized with a Chicago Wilderness 2025 Force of Nature Award. Citizens for Conservation, the newest BCN member organization, was also recognized for their leadership with a Chicago Wilderness 2025 Force of Nature Award. Citizens for Conservation owns 777 acres of land in 14 preserves and also directs the Barrington Greenway Initiative.

Projects and Initiatives

1. Communications Team Update

- Sponsorship of Urban Birding Festival

Bilderback reported that BCN exhibited at the Urban Birding Festival at the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum in September. Representing BCN were Fisher, Bilderback and Harrison. Bilderback said BCN met lots of new people, many of them beginning birders. Igleski confirmed there were 670 attendees this year, up from 460 people last year. Bilderback said there were about 2 or 3 dozen new sign ups for the BCN newsletter.

- Presentation Abstract for Wild Things 2026

Bilderback stated that BCN submitted an abstract for Wild Things 2026, to be held in O'Fallon Illinois, in the St Louis area. The abstract covered BCN as a long term model for community science programs. It explained how BCN, as an all-volunteer nonprofit coalition of over 20 organizations, has been able to monitor breeding birds in the region and produce a 25-year data set. Bilderback invited Pollock to share some of the anecdotes from BCN's early days. Pollock said one of the first things BCN did at a conference was to start a monitoring program. She said attendees were gathered in the corner of a cafeteria, and it turned out over 100 people were interested in monitoring. Some of the land managers at first did not trust BCN monitors, but much has changed since then and continues to evolve, said Bilderback. Working with land managers is critical to BCN's success and next steps regarding our database will help strengthen those relationships.

- MailChimp database cleanup and reconciliation with Survey Team records

Bilderback explained that this topic will be discussed under the Survey Team update later in the meeting.

2. Database Team Update

Bilderback said BCN is now live on Nature Counts. This provides easy download of data by county area and species analysis. BCN data is now part of the Avian Knowledge Network, a national database. This means BCN's data is accessible to researchers all over the country, and because of its scope, it fills a gap in the knowledge that's been available.

Bilderback said next steps will be to rollout the database to land managers in one on one meetings in the next 3-6 months. There will be a webinar to introduce the tools to monitors and a Chicago Wilderness Cafe for 2026 to more broadly share the database to anyone who wants to have a look.

- Demo of NatureCounts and BCN's data in the Tableau data visualization software

Secker then conducted a walk-through of the database. He said after negotiations with NatureCounts, BCN paid about $3,000 (instead of approximately $5,000) for the data migration. Tableau is a free tool that BCN has been using to help view the data. He showed how a person can go to Naturecounts.ca and click on the explore tool. Going then to “projects”, a person will find BCN from the drop down list. Then one can look at the data by species, Secker said, using “bobolink” as an example. He outlined an area on the map, and the database showed all the data in that area as a table or the information can be downloaded. However to download, one must create an account.

Next Secker showed how the Tableau tool can be used. Tableau allows the user to view the data by year or by site for each species. There are filters for county, monitoring points, year, species, and site. Secker said this helps users understand where exactly people are monitoring the birds and what the history is. He stated that the team is working on adding filters for birds of concern and a few other categories to be determined. He explained that there is still about $7,000 that’s available, and that money can be used to improve the tools or applied to the rollout.

Bilderback noted that individual monitors can use this tool to see how the birds they monitor are changing and bring that to the attention of the land managers. Cohen said the database really highlights the value of the decades of data collection because a person can see all the different species by year.

Secker said the Tableau link is not yet live as of the time of this meeting, but once the database is rolled out, the tool can be embedded on the BCN website. Bilderback recognized and thanked Secker for his leadership and guidance on this process. She said this direction provides BCN with the flexibility and user friendliness it needs, and it is a big win for BCN. Rolling out and encouraging the adoption and use of the database will be next.

Fisher made the technical point that the land managers can overlay their burn history on a site and be able to connect that with the abundance or lack of abundance with species, so that helps them achieve the goal of maintaining a high quality habitat.

McNamee asked if the database updates automatically when someone enters data. Secker said he thinks NatureCounts will be something that updates 1-2 times a year. But Tableau will update more often because it is in BCN’s control to a greater degree. It will not be automatic, though.

3. BCN Survey Team Update

Gorman provided an update on the 2025 monitoring season. The eBird Projects rollout was a last minute effort that area coordinators and monitors had to adapt to, she said. Because of the extra workload, monitor recruitment for the season was paused. Over the last few months there has been a quality control effort underway to compile BCN monitor lists and reconcile them with MailChimp lists. The updated list of total estimated BCN active monitors is 218. Gorman said BCN is considering a Volgistics Volunteer database to help streamline applicant processing,

centralize compiling of monitor data and track status over time. She said Volgistics also makes it possible to run email lists and reports, and it is a financially low risk option because it's a monthly membership that could be cancelled at any time.

Bilderback said BCN has evolved to a point where it needs to empower volunteers to work more efficiently, and if that requires an investment, BCN should meet that need, because there are over 200 monitors and a complex web of people that need to be kept in the loop.

Gorman continued that recruitment efforts will begin in fall, as that is a better time to do it. Recruiting in the fall gives BCN, particularly area coordinators, more time to onboard monitors. It allows area coordinators and land managers more time to consider how many sites they have open.

The Survey Team has open roles: Area Coordinators are needed for Northern Cook County, Will County, and the Chicago Park District. Area Coordinators collaborate with land managers to identify priority sites and work with the Survey Team to determine details of monitor recruitment and training.

Gorman said she will step back from the Survey Coordinator role, so her position is also now open. The Survey Coordinator manages activities between Area Coordinators and land managers, and helps schedule and conduct monitor training. Bilderback thanked Gorman for her efforts over the last year, and added that Gorman will still help set up and organize the volunteer database.

4. Fund-raising Team Update

Bilderback said other priorities, such as the database and its rollout, have taken precedence over fundraising. However a fall campaign will be organized for Giving Tuesday. She said BCN needs to research member management software to administer the new member category of affiliation.

5. Advocacy/Conservation Issues

Fisher gave an update on advocacy issues. On July 23 there was a hearing on bird friendly building design, with widespread support. It remains to be seen what the results will be. Fisher said bird friendly construction is a course of action that BCN can undertake anywhere in our sphere of influence. Pollock explained that the aldermen are busy now with the budget, and efforts will continue in January.

Fisher said that he signed for BCN onto letters supporting important legislation sponsored by other groups including American Bird Conservancy, OpenLands and Bird Conservation Alliance. He emphasized that through membership in other groups, BCN is able to reach a large number of conservation groups and ask for their help, even on local issues. He encouraged member groups to bring issues to BCN's attention.

6. Research Projects

Bilderback said that the draft paper on Grassland Research is heading into review. Jim Herkert, Jim Giocomo and Aubrey Sirman will be science advisors. Judy Pollock, Christine Williamson and Jenny Flexman will be contributors. And Excomm representatives will be Bilderback, Secker, Fisher and Cohen. Bilderback thanked Mary Bernat for developing the paper, with Pollock also congratulating Bernat.

Featured Member: Lake County Audubon

Charlotte Pavelka, of Lake County Audubon Society (LCAS), then gave a presentation sharing the activities of this BCN member group. Pavelka explained one of their key projects is Birdscaping. The program used to be heavily dependent on volunteer support, so to make it more sustainable, LCAS has turned it into a grant program. Nine individual grants of $1,000 to $3,000 have been made so far.

Pavelka explained LCAS public programs now have an in-person option at the library, but they can still be attended by zoom. Now that both options exist, there are more people attending meetings. Meetings are then posted to Youtube.

LCAS has expanded their birdwalk program, sponsoring 40-50 walks per year. The bird walks are an important source of new members. Carolyn Lueck related how contacts made through the bird walks led to LCAS support for a new Audubon college chapter at Lake Forest College. LCAS continues to support bird monitoring programs, fundraising for bluebird boxes, and efforts to establish Bird City Illinois members which include Grayslake, Lake Bluff, Libertyville and Waukegan.

Pavelka then highlighted the LCAS program Sharing our Shore Waukegan. This initiative was started by Emma England and Diane Rosenburg, who were BCN representatives. They modeled the program on the National Audubon Society Share the Shore Initiative. LCAS partnered with Waukegan in 2019 to launch the program. England had found plovers nesting in a parking area near Waukegan beach in 2018. Those plovers relocated to Montrose Beach in 2019. In 2023, four captive fledglings were released in July in Waukegan. The area is a designated piping plover nesting area. This year there were 24 volunteer monitors, including interns from Carthage College and College of Lake County. Lueck related how the colleges provided funding for the interns.

But, Pavelka said, the real part of the project is community engagement in Waukegan. With the help of the city, Waukegan was designated as a Bird City. Waukegan is supporting the design and planning for an observation platform at Waukegan Dunes. Other city-backed efforts include proclamations for birds, signage at the lakefront, and training beach rangers. Pavelka suggested all chapters might think about working with the library, and she explained that the Waukegan library now provides birding back packs that have binoculars, a field guide and a list of places to go in the area. Public schools and summer camps can also play a role.

Pavelka spotlighted the LCAS film Sharing our Shore and the return of the Endangered Piping Plover to Waukegan Shores, directed by Lueck. The film can be seen at the LCAS Youtube channel. There is also an exhibit featuring the plovers at the Waukegan Museum at the Carnegie. The exhibit, “Through the Eyes of the Piping Plovers: The Flora, Fauna and people of the Waukegan Shores”, is available for viewing until Oct 31.

LCAS also is partnering with Windy City Bird Lab to establish a Grosbeak Wildlife Monitoring Station. LCAS will provide three years of sponsorship for the station that will use Nocturnal Flight Call technology.

Bilderback thanked Pavelka and commented on the range of programs and community engagement, and how that can be used as a model. Lueck then spoke in more detail about working with Lake Forest College. After years of outreach, she met a woman on a birdwalk and they talked about the opportunities that national Audubon offers for on-campus programs. A chapter was founded, with a full board and 20 students came to the first bird walk. Lueck said the next walk is also full. Regarding the college interns, a volunteer saw an article about piping plovers and went to speak to her environmental studies class. After that, four students reached out to volunteer as unpaid interns. Then Carthage College provided $2,000 for cost of living for the summer, and the College of Lake County did the same for the fifth intern. Lueck said they will try to expand this program for next year.

Bilderback said all bird clubs are challenged with attracting new members, and there are a lot of ideas in this presentation that other groups could adopt.

New Business

Bilderback stated that the Urban Wildlife Institute is interested in being an affiliate of BCN. Fisher has been in discussion with them. It’s too early to vote, but if something develops, there could be a vote in January, she said.

Bilderback then turned to the BCN slate of officers for 2026. She said Secker will retire as Vice President of BCN. He will continue to lead the database project and its rollout to land managers, as it is a big job that will take time for the managers to be comfortable with.

Other Excomm members will stay on, but there are open roles for Area Coordinators for Northern Cook and Will counties. Volunteers are still needed for Survey, Communications, Advocacy and Fundraising teams.

Bilderback explained that the Nominating Committee has a role for someone to reach out to people, right now the Excomm team is doing that.

Announcements

Bilderback said ABC is doing a proof of concept project to show state agencies that there are inexpensive ways to engage neurodiverse populations in nature. There are only two such trails in the US. ABC is sponsoring a nature walk on October 25 at Glacial Park in McHenry County and is looking for a few volunteers to be station guides to explain what the stops are about.

Old Business

The BCN monitor appreciation event is this Saturday, at the Jewel Tea Pavilion in Citizen's Park, Barrington Park District. There is still time to RSVP for this event. Secker will lead a bird walk at 11:30 at Cuba Marsh, followed by lunch and a trivia contest, led by Sirman. There will also be a raffle, donations for the raffle table are welcome.

The next BCN quarterly meeting will be Tuesday January 6, 2026, 7-9 pm on zoom. Bilderback reminded that meetings are now on the first Tuesday evening of the quarter.

Bilderback asked for any final questions. Leopold made a final appeal for coming to the appreciation event, she said it's a fun event in a really nice space open to nature.

Meeting Takeaways

- Representative Communication
- RSVP to the October 11 All-BCN Appreciation Luncheon
- Bring your birdy treasures for the raffle table
- Consider volunteering for open roles, especially critical VP role
- Suggest candidates for BCN Survey team, Area Coordinators in Northern Cook and Will counties

Bilderback asked if anyone would like to feature their organization at the next meeting; if an organization is featured at each meeting, then we will all get to know each other a little better, she said.

Bilderback adjourned the meeting at 8:33 pm.