

Bird Conservation Network
Tuesday, January 6, 2026
Location: Online Video Conference
Annual and First Quarterly Meeting–*FINAL MINUTES*

Participants: Pat Andersen (TCA), Jeff Aufmann (MCA), Tim Balassie (KCA), Stephanie Beilke (AGL), Mary Bernat (At-large), Sonny Cohen (Lake-Cook), Diann Bilderback (DBC), Robyn Detterline (COS), Lisa Draper (LCA), Bob Fisher (IAS), Jim Giocomo (ABC), Jim Green (DBC), Linda Gohlke (Lake-Cook), Joanne Harrison (ENSBC), Vera Leopold (TWI), Mark Luscombe (Ft. Dearborn), Charlotte Pavelka (LCA), Rita Renwick (WCA), Marwah Saleh (TWI), Carla Schmakel (LCA), Eric Secker (KCA), Laura Simpson (CfC), Aubrey Sirman (Loyola SES), John Sprovieri (KCA), Dave Taliaferro (Lake-Cook), Fred Thompson (Lake-Cook), Edward Warden (COS), Lee Witkowski (WCA)

Bilderback opened the meeting at 7:06 pm. There was a quorum with 16 member organizations.

President's Remarks/Year-End Review and 2026 Plans

Bilderback opened the annual meeting by reviewing 2025's accomplishments, major ones being the transition of BCN's database to NatureCounts and building the Tableau data visualization tool, for rollout to the land managers in 2026. BCN had another successful monitoring season, enhancements were made to the monitoring program, and BCN now has its own Project on eBird. Other major accomplishments were passage of bird-friendly building design in Lake County, IL, largely through the efforts of Donnie Dann.

Bilderback explained the proposed BCN 2026 strategy:

- Sustain momentum on current initiatives.
- Invest in tools to improve the efficiency of BCN volunteers.
- Build relationships with partners to augment our impact as a data source. Secker will lead an initiative to introduce our improved data access capabilities to land managers through one-on-one meetings and zoom calls - to introduce the tools and gain feedback to enhance our capabilities and promote user adoption.
- Sirman becomes leader of the BCN Survey team, which will invest in volunteer software to help support and communicate with monitors.
- BCN will build stronger relationships with coalition members by explaining what we are doing so as to earn their support.

Bilderback then defined the BCN work team roles: Communications, Database, Advocacy, BCN Survey, Development and Research Projects. Jim Green, of DBC, joined the Database team.

Area Coordinators for Northern Cook County and Will County are still needed, and the Development team is seeking more volunteer help.

2026 Officer Nominations/Election

Secker steps down from the Executive Committee. Bilderback thanked him for all of the work contributions to BCN over the years, notably, advancing the database capabilities. He will continue to be responsible for the Database team, the BCN website, and other technology matters. Giocomo replaces Secker as Vice President. The rest of the Executive Committee remains the same.

The slate of officers for 2026 was presented:

President – Diann Bilderback

Vice President – Jim Giocomo

Treasurer – Linda Gohlke

Secretary – Joanne Harrison

Past President – Sonny Cohen

At-Large – Bob Fisher (Communications Chair)

At-Large – Aubrey Sirman (Survey Team Chair)

Motion to approve: Bernat

Second: Pavelka

Action: Pass

Bilderback then presented the BCN organization chart; image available in the slide deck. The 2026 Annual meeting was then adjourned.

QUARTERLY MEETING

Administration

Approval of the minutes of October 7, 2025, quarterly meeting.

Motion to approve: Renwick

Second: Andersen

Action: Pass

Treasurer's Report

Gohlke presented the Treasurer's report. Beginning balance on 1/1/25 was \$20,741.97; ending balance for the year was \$21,063.82 - a positive change of \$321.85. Sources of change: dues, 2,787.62, donations \$4,803.54, money market earnings \$202.42, and expenses (\$7,471.73).

Gohlke called out the \$202.42 in earnings from the money market account. Bilderback thanked Pavelka for bringing up the idea of a savings account at an earlier meeting, but BCN had not

acted on it. Gohlke, independent of that recommendation, recognized the opportunity and acted on it to BCN's benefit. Like minds think alike!

2026 Budget – (See Appendix 1 for discussion details)

Bilderback presented the 2026 proposed budget. Dues - projected to be \$2,890. Donations - targeted to be \$6,000. In-Kind donations (\$504) will now be recognized (Mailchimp and Zoom fees). Savings in money market will drop to \$100 as BCN spends down for the database enhancements. Total income is expected to be \$9,494.00.

She explained BCN's 2026 projected expenses as approx. double 2025, at \$18,307. In 2026 BCN expects to spend \$7,491 for database enhancements. Website maintenance is higher than it was last year, to enhance the monitor application feature by integrating Volgistics volunteer management capabilities, add coalition member spotlights, and integrate member management software (JoinIt). The rest of the expenses are similar to 2025.

She explained that given BCN's current balance, this proposed 2026 budget is affordable, leaving BCN with \$11,784 at the end of 2026. BCN escrows money each year for a future Trends Analysis update, so would be starting the 2027 year with only about \$5,800 in the general fund, underlining the need to focus on 2026 fundraising, as our annual operating expenses are about \$7,500.

A further discussion about expenses vs. revenue, going forward, and methods of generating additional income, then followed. See Appendix 1 for the details of that discussion.

Motion: Fisher moved to adopt the proposed budget

Seconded: Leopold

Action: Pass

Projects and Initiatives

1. Database Team update (Secker and Bilderback)

Jim Green worked on vetting potential hires for polishing the Tableau tool and making it more usable and visually appealing. Secker is using Upwork to collect bids. The plan is to narrow down the candidates to 2-3 people. One-on-one meetings with land managers are targeted to begin in February 2026.

Additional to the Tableau tool, Secker is also working on fundraising so BCN could offer a contractor to help land managers obtain what they need from the database. Some land managers ask BCN what we think they should look at, so being able to offer them a person who could dig into the data for them would be ideal. BCN will also publicize the database with a link on the website, so outside groups like Chicago Wilderness Alliance members, researcher/scientists, or BCN monitors themselves, could have access.

2. Communications Team update (Bilderback)

The recent focus has been on annual giving appeal efforts. 802 people subscribe to the BCN newsletter, a substantial potential target group to ask for contributions. The BCN 2025 report to coalition organizations included a request for donations to help fund the rollout of the increased database capabilities to land managers.

Bilderback invited the affiliate representatives to write an article for the BCN news; if interested, please contact Leopold.

3. BCN Survey Team update (Sirman and Bilderback)

Sirman is working with Kathryn Gorman to finish transitioning Survey Team responsibilities. Volgistics software will give BCN a more efficient way to manage volunteers. Bilderback thanked Gorman for shepherding the volunteer management process during 2025. The Volgistics investment will help understand where our monitors are, process monitor applications, and nurture monitors who are still developing skills

4. Research (Bilderback)

Review of the Grassland Research paper continues with Jim Herkert, Jim Giocomo and Aubrey Sirman as science advisors. Bilderback thanked Mary Bernat for developing the draft results.

5. Advocacy (Fisher)

The biggest news for advocacy has been the activities of the federal agencies—the conservation community locally and nationally have been united in opposition to the rulemaking that is going on at the federal level. USFWS proposed a rule that would weaken implementation of the Endangered Species Act. The comment period ended in December 2025. The final rule will be out in February 2026.

The EPA is proposing a revised definition of the waters of the United States, which would weaken wetlands protections. That comment period has also ended.

Related to the waters of the United States, the IEC (Illinois Environmental Council) is attempting to pass legislation in IL to strengthen state-level wetlands regulations to adopt the level of protection that was provided by the previous federal rules. It will be crucial to ask the BCN coalition member groups to proactively extend that outreach to their members and provide tools for individuals to comment on the importance of this legislative effort to elected officials in Illinois, especially the governor.

Fisher did not have a current update on the Chicago effort to pass bird-friendly building legislation. Dettlerline confirmed that nothing currently is happening due to Chicago's budget crisis. The proposal is still active, it's just not the focus of the alderpersons right now.

Fisher said Donnie Dann asks to step down as Advocacy chair, a position he's held for many years. One remarkable achievement by Dann was getting bird-friendly construction mandated in Lake County. Fisher asked for those interested in advocacy to get in touch with him. The main

focus in early 2026 will be on the wetlands legislation and getting the governor to support it. (See attached slide, Slide 17 from Quarterly Update).

6. Fund-raising Team update (Bilderback)

An annual fundraising campaign is underway, with a target of \$5,000. At the time of this meeting, BCN had raised about half of that. First quarter of 2026 will focus on identifying funding sources and developing grant proposals for contract help to promote the adoption of the database. BCN would be looking for \$50,000-\$75,000 to pay someone over a two-year time period.

Old Business

The All-BCN Appreciation Luncheon in Barrington on October 11, 2025, was a fun event with about 34 participants. Sirman hosted a trivia contest, and there was a raffle. For 2026's event, Bilderback explained that BCN is open to hearing about a more centrally located venue, so we can book the space in the first quarter. If anyone can suggest a centrally located venue, please contact her.

New Business—WCA Activities Report, see Appendix 2

Meeting Takeaways

1—Help BCN raise funds within affiliate organizations, and please consider a donation if you are financially able to!

2—Volunteer for the Fundraising or Advocacy teams. Area Coordinators are still needed for Northern Cook Co and Will Co.

3—Consider submitting an article to the BCN News.

The next meeting is April 7, 2026, from 7-9 pm via zoom.

Bilderback adjourned the quarterly meeting at 9 pm.

Appendix 1 – 2026 Budget discussion details

Pavelka commented that the run rate used to be about half of the projected expenses. She pointed out that promotion at events at \$1,500 seems quite high. Bilderback said she included about \$500 to cover a branded item we can give away at events. Volunteer recognition is also higher, pointed out Pavelka. She asked, if fundraising hasn't come in, which items will be prioritized, after the database?

Bilderback said BCN could defer member management software but pointed out that that's a fundraising tool as well. There are several one-time expenses in the 2026 budget. For instance,

the Grassland Research project and the higher amount for website maintenance are not ongoing yearly expenses. Also BCN could decide not to sponsor the Urban Birding Festival and other events or scale back website enhancements.

Gohlke said she thinks BCN has to do promotion at events, that gets BCN's name out there and draws new members. The big numbers causing the deficit are the database and website management, and those are one-time expenses.

Cohen remarked that this is an aspirational budget. He said the good news is that we're not sinking the organization by the end of the year. It's incumbent on the group to try to achieve the revenue objectives we have, as there is money out there that we can get. From a budget standpoint, there is nothing that puts the organization at risk. Bilderback said in 2026 BCN needs to solicit grant money and focus on fundraising. We did not have anyone focused on that in 2025, as there was too much else going on. She welcomes participation in this effort by any volunteers who have extra time and would like to help put together a strategy.

Schmakel asked what the liability insurance covers. Harrison answered that it covers D&O insurance and liability insurance for BCN's 250 monitors. BCN looked at three different companies, and chose Erie, because theirs was the most cost effective. The insurance covers if a monitor damages the property by accident or accidentally injures someone else visiting the forest preserves. In those circumstances, Erie would insure/defend BCN. The insurance does not cover intentional wrongdoing by a monitor, that is always excluded. Nor does it cover injuries that a monitor might sustain on their own. That is a different class of insurance called volunteer accident insurance, and it is more expensive.

Bilderback invited other comments on the budget, then said BCN will carefully manage it and not overspend. If fundraising does not deliver results, we will pull back on things we planned to do. BCN is a 25-year-old organization, and it is time to give volunteers the tools that empower them to do their jobs, such as Volgistics. Leopold commented that the Volgistics platform will be a huge boost for BCN for the time saved, and this will free up existing volunteers to do other things.

Secker pointed out that if the one-time expenses for 2026 are taken out, then it's a pretty balanced budget, BCN would only need \$3,500 in donations. He also remarked that no expected revenue was included for membership dues, but dues from new members would offset the expense of the membership management software.

Aufmann stated that McHenry Audubon donates to BCN and asked if other Audubon chapters contribute to BCN. Bilderback said they do not. She explained she sent letters to leaders of affiliate members to ask for donations and asked them to share BCN's achievements with their members and ask for individual donations to fund our goals, which included most importantly the rollout of the database access tools to land managers.

Aufmann said he thought a lot of local Audubons could afford to contribute. Pavelka said that there were large donations in the past to the trends analysis from many of the clubs. She

explained the Executive Committee at that time felt it was better to ask for donations when there was something they were rolling out, rather than as part of a yearly giving campaign. She also said it's necessary to remember the cycle of the Audubon clubs—they have to take a donation request to their board and have it approved, which takes time. Many of the clubs will probably be willing to donate \$400-500. Andersen said it is helpful if people are donating to something tangible, something that is important to the members. Members may find it less appealing when they are asked to donate to an organization only in general terms.

Appendix 2 – Will County Audubon (WCA) Activities Report

Rita Renwick gave a presentation on the activities of the WCA, a chapter of the Illinois Audubon Society. Renwick shared the history of the group, which had been meeting prior to WW2 but disbanded. After the war; the Joliet Audubon Society was founded by Dr. George H. Woodruff and Dr. Gayle Hufford, partly at the suggestion of Woodruff's wife, who wanted him to be interested in birding so he would not take up flying!

Renwick shared Christmas bird counts from 1949 and 1950. The property that became Pilcher Park had been donated and a scout cabin was built. In time, it became the Pilcher Park Nature Center, built in 1969, with an addition in 1993. This is where WCA meetings are still being held. Meetings are Sept - May, on the 2nd Thursday of the month, continuous since the 1960s. There's a public viewing area on site, with a feeding area and a pondless waterfall. The waterfall was constructed in 2019. There is also a viewing blind, which was built as an Eagle Scout project.

In 2025, a grant from the Joliet Park District and Nicor provided funds to install native plants in the bird feeding area. WCA worked with Friends of Illinois Nature Preserves; volunteers came and helped plant the native plants and removed small trees, mostly maples, to open up the area for oaks to thrive.

WCA also assisted with the Illinois Nature Preserve Designation—Pilcher Park, which was celebrated in 2019. There are about 22 volunteers each year at the Lake Renwick Nature Preserve. There are nesting structures at the preserve, constructed when trees were removed. Volunteers work from the first Saturday in May until mid-August. The structures are deteriorating now, and the forest preserve district is involved in determining what to do.

WCA helped gather signatures to create the Copley Nature Park in 1998. The organization helped raise \$168,000, including 300 shares of Walmart Stock and \$15,000 from the raffle of a 1971 Porsche to make this possible. Renwick spoke of the wide reach of volunteers, including a radio station and the local high school, as well as the Copley Foundation, in order to make this happen.

Monitors record breeding birds at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie. WCA sponsors field trips at Midewin and Montrose beach. Volunteers post events on Facebook and that has helped significantly to get people from the general public to come to the field trips.

WCA worked with Exxon-Mobil to erect bluebird boxes. Contractors removed invasive plants and continue to partner on various projects. WCA also has a partnership with Wild Birds Unlimited, which organizes washing birdfeeders twice a year for a donation. This event raised almost \$400 each time. One time WCA used the donations to boost their chapter funds. Another time, WCA donated the money to the Motus Bird Tracking Project.

Renwick then spoke of several notable land acquisitions and the public support for such efforts to develop land for recreation. She said the Forest Preserves of Will County acquired Hidden Lakes/Savage Farm, a parcel of 241 acres. A \$70-million bond issue was passed in 1999 to acquire the property. In 2019, they passed a \$25-million bond issue, with no increase to taxes because the prior bond was paid off. Last year, there was a \$50-million bond issue. \$25 million will go to land preservation, \$12 million will be to develop trails and a visitor center, and \$13 million will be for habitat restoration. Hidden Lakes was one of the first acquisitions, near Coal City Road and Route 53.

A 495-acre parcel, south of the Calumet Expressway is the existing Goodenow Grove/Plum Creek Preserve. In August 2025, they acquired the north side; it was the second largest land acquisition ever done at 4.3 million dollars. This protects the Plum Creek waterway and adds to the greenway.

In November 2025, Renwick said a 40-acre parcel, the Riverview Farmstead Addition, was acquired at a little over one million dollars. This is part of the DuPage river greenway. Every time the forest preserve needs support, Renwick said WCA is willing to provide it. She said people are out on the trails so much because of their restorative value, it has become crowded, especially since covid.

Lee Witkowski remarked that Midewin sponsors bird tours every Saturday in June. Greg DuBois is a leader, as well as himself and his wife, Connie. Tours start at 8 am. To sign up, please call Midewin the week before, or check the website; he said it may be possible to register there.

Bilderback thanked Renwick for her presentation and noted that a profile of WCA will appear in the next quarterly BCN newsletter.