

Saw Mill River Audubon
February 3, 2025 Board Meeting Minutes (taken by William Kellner)
Meeting held via Zoom

Present (in **bold** type): **Erik Andersen, Cary Andrews, Ginger Bernardin, Mitchell Goldfarb, Philip Heidelberger, Rik Kaufman, Suzanne Kavic, William Kellner, Valerie Lyle, Tom McEnerney, Michael Madias, Jr., Mark Magel, Kara Mason, Kenneth Novenster, Steve Rappaport, Tom Ruth, Lynn Salmon, Richard Saravay, Jean Sparacin, Jennifer Stern, Larry Trachtenberg, Kathleen Williamson.** Executive Director **Anne Swaim** was also present.

Absent: Rik, Steve, Richard

Meeting started at 7:01 PM.

President's Report—Erik Andersen

Erik, noting that a quorum was present, began the meeting and called for a motion to approve the minutes of the January board meeting as circulated.

Motion: To approve the minutes of the board of directors meeting held on January 6, 2025 and as circulated.
Motion by: Ginger Bernardin. Seconded by: Lynn Salmon. Motion carried (all present voted affirmatively).

Erik called attention to the Conflict of Interest form that was attached to the email sent to board members prior to the January meeting of the board of directors. Board members who have yet to do so need to fill out and sign the form and return it to the SMRA office ASAP.

Erik called on Tom McE. who reported on the in-process dissolution of Central Westchester Audubon Society (CWAS) and potential reassignment of CWAS zip codes to SMRA. Tom reminded the board about the non-binding memorandum of understanding (MOU) that was vetted by attorneys for SMRA and CWAS and signed by both parties (see minutes of January 6, 2025 SMRA board meeting). CWAS will prepare a draft of its dissolution plan and present it to its membership at a special meeting with the goal of getting membership approval of the chapter's dissolution. Following membership approval, the dissolution plan will be sent to the New York Attorney General (AG). Dissolution requires approval by the AG. Anne will follow up with CWAS to find out when the membership meeting will take place.

The SMRA Annual Dinner is scheduled for April 6. We'll have publicity in the upcoming newsletter and do additional PR on the website and by email. Anne will circulate a volunteer sign-up sheet to make sure we cover all tasks that need to be handled in advance and at the dinner itself. Board members were reminded to sell as many tickets as they can for the quilt raffle to be held at the dinner and to purchase tickets for themselves.

Erik called on Bill, as chair of the Nominating Committee, to discuss the upcoming election for the board of directors and officers. Bill said the election will take place at the March meeting of the board of directors. Current board members and officers with terms expiring in 2025 can expect an email asking them to confirm their interest in running for new terms.

Bill noted that there are currently two vacancies on the board. Mitch asked if those slots are being reserved for CWAS board members who would join the SMRA board following dissolution of CWAS. Bill said that was a possibility. Phil asked if we could increase the size of the current SMRA board beyond its current level of 24. Tom McE. said that, yes, it could be done, provided the appropriate change was made to the SMRA bylaws.

Finance Committee—Phil Heidelberger

For our official quarterly report, as of January 1, 2025, the endowment portfolio balance was \$1,460,319, a 7.5% (\$102,265) increase above the January 1, 2024 balance of \$1,358,054. As of January 1, the one-year, three-year, five-year and ten-year investment rates of return were 14.1%, 3.7%, 7.8%, and 7.2%, respectively, compared to our Morningstar Allocation Fund Index benchmark returns of 8.7%, 2.5%, 5.3% and 4.9% for the same periods. There were \$84,877 in withdrawals from, and \$0 in additions to the portfolio during 2024. The balance as of February 1, 2025 was \$1,494,334, which is up 2.3% (\$34,015) YTD. As of February 1, 2025, we are 41.4% (\$64,856) above our guideline to maintain two years of budgeted withdrawals in highly liquid assets such as checking account, short-term CDs and money market funds.

Treasurer's Report—Lynn Salmon

[Reference report: SMRA Operating Revenue and Expenses]

The summary shows revenue and expenses for the first month of this year with comparison to last year, January 2024, and our 2025 budget.

Annual Fund donations for the month look low at \$655, but January and February are typically very low months for donations. Annual Fund donations in December alone last year were \$17,557, second only to the month of May when we did the fund letter. January revenue included money from a couple of employer matching grants. Plus, seed sale donations from people rounding up their purchase amounts were up considerably, \$103 in January compared to \$153 for the entirety of last year.

Of note with other revenue—we received a check for \$2,791 from the Rewilding School for programs that took place during the last quarter of 2024. And quilt raffle sales have begun.

Expenses all look as expected. Our biggest program expense of the year is for EagleFest, which took place on February 1.

To date, we have made a \$1,000 deposit toward our Annual Dinner at Travelers Rest on April 6. We have two additional payments of \$3,831 due in February and March. Tickets are \$150 each, and we will need to sell 58 to break even, which is not expected to be a problem.

In response to a query from Bill, Lynn explained that Annual Fund donations and matching grants received from donors' employers are tracked in separate budget categories.

Membership Report—Suzanne Kavic

[Reference Membership Report as of January 29, 2025.]

Membership has increased by about 19 since December. With the current 626 SMRA chapter member households and 461 joint NAS/SMRA member households, total membership stands at 1,087. Revenue from membership dues for chapter memberships so far in 2025 stands at \$410 (2025 budgeted goal is \$13,055).

Cary asked if renewal reminders are mailed to members (she reported that she was approached at EagleFest by a few people who were not sure if their memberships were current). Both Anne and Lynn affirmed that reminders are sent by U.S. mail or email. Anne also noted that it might be helpful to have a brief piece in the newsletter explaining that there are multiple Audubon chapters in the region as well as a state-level office, all of which are affiliated with the National Audubon Society.

Executive Director's Report—Anne Swaim

Anne called on Larry to update the board on the issue of the Pruyn Sanctuary neighbor who was prosecuted by the Town of New Castle for various environmental law violations and the related civil action filed by SMRA to recover damages to SMRA property. Larry informed the board that the defendants in the civil suit are appealing the default judgement against them. Assuming that the default judgment is upheld, the case will move to the damages phase in which SMRA must prove monetary damages. The next step, which will take place on February 4, is for the judge to set a date for the hearing to determine damages. SMRA has expressed its willingness to engage in mediation to see if a settlement can be reached; the defendants have not indicated whether they are willing to schedule an initial mediation session.

Anne continued, reporting on the current epidemic of avian influenza. There have been several reports of sick and dying waterfowl in our area. The NYS DEC is performing a necropsy on three swans from the Edith Read Sanctuary in Rye, although it is not clear when we will get the results showing whether avian influenza is responsible. At Ginger's suggestion, Anne said she would post information on how to report sick or dead waterfowl to the DEC. Anne repeated the information presented at the January board meeting that avian influenza in wild birds appears limited to waterfowl and that songbirds are probably not being impacted; the Cornell Lab of Ornithology has not recommended suspension of bird feeding, although caution is urged when handling bird feeders (e.g., hand washing is suggested immediately after handling feeders).

Anne called on Suzanne, who provided further information on avian influenza, noting that chicken eggs are a possible vector. To prevent viral transmission, eggs should be cooked to a minimum of 165° F., so soft-boiled and sunny side up fried eggs and loose scrambled eggs should be avoided. Hands should be washed immediately after handling raw eggs for cooking.

EagleFest was held on February 1. This was a highly successful, well-attended event. Numbers in the main exhibit tent appeared to be up to pre-pandemic levels. The bird walk that Anne led at Croton Point park had over 100 people. Anne thanked the many SMRA volunteers at the main exhibit tent and the various eagle viewing sites, including the Croton boat ramp, George's Island Park and the Verplanck steamboat dock. Bill noted that several visitors to the Croton boat ramp warming tent sponsored by SMRA expressed appreciation for Charlie Roberto's guidance on using the spotting scope and his patient and enthusiastic explanations about eagles.

We have encouraging news to report on our outreach to local schools and our efforts at rebuilding our education programs. We are looking to add preschools to our environmental education programs. We had a very successful session at the Holy Name of Mary Montessori School in Croton where Anne and Cathy Hildenbrand shared the teaching duties to positive reviews. Looking down the road to spring, we have two dates scheduled with Scarsdale schools in the Rockefeller State Park Preserve. These programs are paid for by the school district. The NYS Connect Kids to Parks program has not been reauthorized. Anne is preparing a statement advocating for the reestablishment of this program to be presented at the NYS budget hearing to be held on February 6.

Sanctuaries—Anne Swaim for Michael Madias

Boundary walks in the SMRA sanctuaries are ongoing. We'll finish walking the Brinton Brook boundary on the morning of February 6. On February 7 we'll walk the Graff boundary. Board members are welcome to attend; no RSVP is needed.

Pruyn Gardens—Mark Magel

The gardens are enjoying their winter sleep. The cold weather and some snow cover are helpful. Snow cover helps maintain soil moisture. We've avoided a January thaw, which can be problematic as, if it gets warm enough, plants can begin to come out of their dormancy and suffer damage when the cold returns. We plan to

defer garden cleanup to give eggs laid by pollinating insects a chance to hatch. We also are looking to repair fencing. We're considering the use of bamboo for our fencing upgrades.

We are working on creating new informational signage for the gardens. We would like to install several larger plaques that do more than identify plant species but rather discuss the importance of native plantings and how they help improve habitat quality. A possible sign will call attention to the attractive native plantings adjacent to the Pruyn House and advocate for the use of natives in residential landscaping.

Programs and Field Trips—Anne Swaim

Erik called on Kathleen to update the board on the next program of the SMRA Nature Book Club. Kathleen invited board members to attend the Zoom discussion of Dan Eagan's *The Devil's Element* on April 1.

Anne called attention to the list of upcoming programs and field trips in the agenda for tonight's meeting. Board members should consider attending the Zoom program Anne will lead for various libraries on February 6. The topic is Owls of Westchester. Finally, the late afternoon program at the Shawangunk Grassland National Wildlife Refuge on February 10 is highly recommended as we'll be treated to the thrilling sight of Short-eared Owls taking flight as darkness falls. Try to arrive early as parking is limited. We've scheduled a public program at the Croton Library on February 27: "Living with Bears." The presenter is Budd Veverka, Preserve Manager of the Nature Conservancy's Mianus River Gorge. This is a timely topic as bear sightings are increasingly common in our area.

An upcoming event not listed on tonight's agenda is the February 8 Eagle Watch at Lyndhurst where we'll look for overwintering eagles on the Hudson as well as other birds. Advance registration is required to keep the group to a manageable size.

Lynn has donated a sponsorship for SMRA at the upcoming mini golf fundraiser for the Ossining Library. Sponsors get to decorate a mini golf hole. Board member volunteers are needed to set up on March 7 from 3:00 – 5:00 PM.

SMRA's popular Birding Tea fundraiser has been scheduled for May 31 at Cary's home in Croton. Save the date and make sure to attend.

Advocacy Committee—Tom Ruth

The Advocacy Committee met on January 8. Since then, we've been informed that the Horseshoe Crab Protection Act, which was vetoed by the Governor, will be reintroduced at the upcoming legislative session. We'll continue our advocacy efforts to get the bill passed *and* signed into law.

We'll also continue to promote the Packaging Reduction and Recycling Infrastructure Act, which has yet to pass in the state legislature. Jenni has drafted a letter explaining the critical need for this legislation and why SMRA supports its passage. Pending board approval, the letter will be distributed to relevant state legislators as the bill works its way through the legislative process. A copy of the letter has been attached to the email that was sent to board members in advance of tonight's meeting.

Motion: To approve the distribution of the letter prepared by Jenni on behalf of the Advocacy Committee that explains why SMRA supports the passage of the Packaging Reduction and Recycling Infrastructure Act. Motion by: Cary Andrew. Seconded by: Tom Ruth. Motion carried (all present voted affirmatively).

Tom continued, informing the board that a Zoom program about invasive plant species and birds will be held on May 8. The Zoom program will be followed by a guided walk on May 10 at Croton Point Park in which the

importance of native plants for birds will be stressed. Kara and Advocacy Committee member Patricia Watson are planning these events.

Other topics being considered by the Advocacy Committee are habitat management strategies for larger land owners to promote grassland bird populations and advocating for installation of solar panels on larger parking lots. SMRA member Laura Lenihan is working with the Town of New Castle on their guidelines for solar panel installation and how to encourage solar panels at the Chappaqua railroad station parking. The next meeting of the Advocacy Committee is February 20.

Referring to the expected appropriation of \$100,000 by Westchester County for habitat improvements on the Croton Point landfill, we are following up to see that the funding comes through and is spent appropriately.

Bird Seed Sale—Tom McEnerney

Volunteers are needed for the February sale day (Feb. 16, 11:00 AM–1:00 PM). Michael has signed up; Erik will join him. We're pleased with the level of sales to date this winter. We've placed a second order for black oil sunflower, economy mix, and suet.

Newsletter—Jenni Stern

Spring issue deadline was February 1. The spring issue is in production; any last minute contributions should be submitted ASAP.

New Business—Erik Andersen

Larry called attention to the exhibit of duck stamp art at the Bruce Museum—"Conservation Through the Arts: Celebrating the Federal Duck Stamp." The exhibit will run through February 9.

Adjournment—Erik Andersen

Motion: Erik shall adjourn the meeting. Motion by: Cary Andrews. Seconded by: William Kellner. Motion carried (all present voted affirmatively).

Erik adjourned the meeting at 8:14 PM.