



January 11, 2021

Audubon Society of Central Maryland
P.O. Box 660
Mount Airy, MD 21771

Dear Maryland Delegates,

The Audubon Society of Central Maryland is a 501 c 3 organization, with a mission to protect and restore birds, other wildlife, and their habitats, through education and action, for the benefit of people and the earth. A chapter of the National Audubon Society, our territory includes Carroll, Frederick, and Howard counties, and we own two wildlife sanctuaries, in Mt. Airy and New Market. Those properties are havens for wildlife and people because they are managed to protect and restore our native plant biodiversity, thanks to dozens of volunteers devoted to planting native trees, grasses, and wildflowers, and to removing invasive non-native plants that threaten to overwhelm native vegetation. Informed by ecological science, members of our organization know that native birds, mammals, amphibians, and other wildlife that live in local ecological communities depend on the plants that evolved with them in Central Maryland.

We are presenting testimony in support of HB322, Real Property Restrictions on Use, Low Impact Landscaping. Many other Audubon activities also focus on supporting and promoting native plants. With two wildlife sanctuaries in a fast-growing part of the state, we seek to educate and enable our Central Maryland neighbors with homes, small farms, schools, and businesses about how their land can function as part of our shared eco-community. Since 2001, we have funded a grant program that enables schools, nature centers, and libraries in our community to establish Monarch Butterfly Waystations and wildlife, pollinator, and rain gardens. This spring, the 20th anniversary of our first grant, we will fund our 36th project, at Oakland Mills High School in Howard County. Our volunteer educators work with teachers to develop their garden plans, and to explore ways to involve students and school communities in outdoor learning—more important than ever during this pandemic crisis. Our educators and naturalists also help, when safety protocols allow, to educate the general public at library talks, table displays at community festivals, and at our annual Audubon native plant sale. A major fundraiser for our chapter for over 20 years, the plant sale helps to support maintenance costs at our sanctuaries. Even more important, the sale aims to provide education and access to native plants so that private yards can begin to function as part of a healthy natural landscape.

Isn't Audubon a bird conservation organization? Why is our small, all-volunteer bird group spending so much energy on native plantings and on educating people about native plants? One reason is the American Kestrel, North America's smallest falcon and our chapter's mascot. These beautiful birds were once a common sight in Central Maryland, perched on fence posts and hovering over farm fields. But shrinking habitat, including fewer nesting trees,



disappearing hedgerows, meadowlands, and other native plant communities, are believed to be driving the kestrel's rapid decline in our area. Pesticides and other pollution also reduce nesting success. The North American Breeding Bird Survey estimates that the Kestrel population has shrunk by 51% since 1966.

Like other farmland raptors, Kestrels are bellwethers of environmental health; their long-term and widespread population reduction is a warning. Our landscapes are unhealthy, and are failing to adequately support birds and other wild creatures that evolved to live in this once-bountiful place. About the size of a Blue Jay, an American Kestrel can migrate to Central America for the winter, and can plummet out of the sky at 40 miles per hour to capture dinner. But they can't live without grasshoppers, cicadas, voles, snakes, and other small animal prey. And those wild prey animals cannot live without healthy landscapes.

Luckily, each of us can help American Kestrels, and the 2/3 of North American bird species threatened with extinction by climate change and associated habitat loss. One way is to support organizations like Audubon, which work to educate the public and policy makers about the importance of healthy landscapes. We can also help directly, in our own yards and neighborhoods, by planting native flowers, bushes, and trees. Plants that evolved in our own location are part of our natural communities, and are best suited to feeding and sheltering the wildlife we know and love. In contrast, turfgrass is a food desert for wildlife, with very little to offer bumblebees, Monarch butterflies, birds, or any of the native wildlife people treasure in our state and region.

Clearly, we need to replace old fashioned, monotonous green lawns, which are heavily dependent on artificial fertilizers and pesticides, with diverse and complex communities of native plants. Currently, many homeowners' association rules limit freedoms to plant natives, and keep homeowners on treadmills of mowing, leaf blowing, watering, and chemical applications. Our Audubon wildlife sanctuaries can't work if they're small islands in a sea of turfgrass and lawn chemicals. HB322 would release us from these bad habits, and give us new, healthier, and more beautiful options. The Audubon Society of Central Maryland strongly urges the Maryland legislature to support HB322 to remove restrictions placed by homeowners' associations on low impact landscapes. Please help Maryland homeowners restore wildlife habitat in their own yards, a vital step toward a healthier environment for us all.

Thank you and best wishes,
Julie Dunlap, PhD
Education Chair
Audubon Society of Central Maryland