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**Committee: Environment and Transportation**

**Testimony on: H.B. 729—Nontidal Wetlands – Protection of Vernal Pools (Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2024)**

**Position: Support**

**Hearing Date: February 21, 2024**

I am representing the Audubon Society of Central Maryland as a long-time volunteer with a strong interest in wetland conservation. ASCM is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with a mission that includes protecting birds, other wildlife, and their habitats, and we recognize the vital but imperiled contributions that vernal pools play in supporting invertebrates, amphibians, and other species in wetlands throughout the state of Maryland. ASCM strongly supports HB 729, the Vernal Pool Wetlands Act of 2024.

Often small and easy to overlook, these temporary wetlands play outsized roles in forested ecosystems. In early spring they are home to fairy shrimp and nurseries for wood frogs and spotted salamanders. As the season progresses, they become a buffet for birds like great blue herons and barred owls, as well as rare and endangered species like the rusty blackbird. These quiet temporary ponds are fountains of abundance that maintain the health and biodiversity of numerous forests.

Yet dredging, logging, agricultural expansion, and widespread urbanization over vernal pools have seriously diminished these unique sources of biodiversity and ecosystem services. The threats of a warming climate make their future still more uncertain, especially in the face of the recent withdrawal of federal protections under the Clean Water Act. We do not even know how many remain in the state or where many are located.

Other states such as Massachusetts and Rhode Island have set examples by enacting laws and regulations that protect vernal pools and their buffers, an important component of this bill. This year, Maryland can take a leadership role in fostering biodiversity, forest health, and water quality by initiating planning to identify and protect seasonal wetlands.

ASCM's members throughout Howard, Carroll, and Frederick counties care about wildlife diversity and abundance throughout the state. ASCM's own Audrey Carroll Wildlife Sanctuary in Mount Airy, Maryland, hosts wood frogs in its woodland vernal pools. We urge you to pass the vitally important Vernal Pool Wetlands Act of 2024 to assure that these ephemeral wetlands continue to enrich our woods and watersheds long into the future.

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