



February 19, 2025

**HB 878 Department of the Environment – Nontidal Wetlands – Protection of Vernal Pools
(Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2025)**

TESTIMONY OF SAFE SKIES MARYLAND -- Favorable

Environment and Transportation Committee Members,

Safe Skies Maryland is a program of the Maryland Ornithological Society, focused on protecting wild bird populations throughout their habitats and in every season. We recognize vernal pools as a key element in woods and wetlands that support birds, and other wildlife in healthy ecosystems birds depend on. In December 2024, Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) developed a consensus definition of vernal pools that can be used for their protection. Safe Skies' supporters recognize that this bill incorporates that definition, and we strongly favor passing this bill into law.

Vernal pools, or seasonal ponds, are very valuable because they offer unique protections that are not possible in regular ponds. As a type of freshwater wetland that is water-filled only from early winter through mid-summer; but dry otherwise, there can be no fish. Certain animals that cannot survive the predation of fish will thrive in this special habitat. Vernal pools can be any size and are found in wooded areas or meadows, where they support frogs and salamanders and other animals that would perish in a pond with fish.

Birds can also benefit from this rich ecosystem. Teaming with insect life, birds can find food and water. They can also find shelter in dense grassy vegetation that often accompanies vernal pools.

Specifically, the Rusty Blackbird tends to nest near vernal pools and benefits from the abundant food source of insects while raising its young. The Rusty Blackbird is a species of conservation concern that needs our protection. Once a common North American Bird, the populations of Rusty Blackbirds have decreased 89-99% in over the last 40 years¹. When we protect vernal pools, we increase habitat for the Rusty Blackbird, which increases its chance for survival.

The Rusty Blackbird is just one example of a bird that specifically thrives nesting near a vernal pool. Many other birds also benefit from visiting vernal pools, such as ducks, songbirds, egrets and herons. They find food, water and shelter in this seasonal resource.

To continue the good stewardship of our waters, it is important that Maryland take this simple step of protecting vernal pools. The nearby states of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Maine have already enacted protection or certification programs for protecting vernal pools.

We ask for a favorable report on HB 878.

Carolyn Parsa
Director, Safe Skies Maryland

¹ <https://ebird.org/news/unlocking-the-rusty-blackbird-mystery>