



Maryland Office
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Baltimore, MD 21214

February 20, 2026

To: Chair Feldman, Vice-Chair Kagan, and members of the Maryland Senate Committee on Education, Energy and the Environment

From: Jim Brown, Policy Director, Audubon Mid-Atlantic

Subject: Favorable Testimony for Maryland SB 523 Vernal Pool Wetlands Protection Act of 2026

Audubon Mid-Atlantic submits this testimony in support of Senate Bill 523. Audubon Mid-Atlantic is the regional office of National Audubon Society, representing over 35,000 Marylanders who advocate for the protection of birds, bird habitat, and policies aiming to protect both birds and human communities in the face of increasing environmental challenges, habitat loss, pollution, and climate change. Along with the undersigned, independent Audubon Chapters across Maryland, we enthusiastically support SB 523.

Adopting tools to identify and protect vernal pools in Maryland is sound practice for bird conservation and ecosystem management. By identifying and protecting vernal pools, SB 253 will strengthen the state's network of landscapes that are critical to the survival of resident and migrating birds. Audubon has partnered with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to identify forty-four *Important Bird Areas* (IBAs) across the state. These locations were identified because they are most essential for sustaining resident and migratory bird populations in their regional or hemispheric flyways. These IBAs represent all types of Maryland landscapes; from Atlantic shorelines to Chesapeake tidal zones, to central Maryland river valleys and parks, to the high elevation forests, mountain tops and swamps of far western Maryland. Vernal pools are found in almost all these IBA locations. Vernal pools in Maryland are critical to hundreds of species of birds' wellbeing as they reside here and migrate throughout our hemisphere. Vernal pools in Maryland provide hawks, ducks, egrets, herons and other birds with important seasonal food and water sources.

Science tells us birds are in decline due to pollution and habitat loss. 1/3 of all Maryland bird species experienced significant population declines in the past 50 years. Our iconic Baltimore Oriole, and other species of marsh birds, warblers, and songbirds all face significant decline due to habitat loss and degradation. Protecting vernal pools will help reverse that decline. It is particularly important now for Maryland to protect natural resources and bird habitat as sustained attacks on long settled core conservation protections continue at the federal level. Ongoing attempts to weaken the Migratory Bird Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and clean water protections at the federal level mean Maryland must act to protect our environment. Enhancing vernal pool protections will help mitigate the ongoing current attacks at the federal level.

Birds in Maryland bring joy by filling the sky with flashes of color and brilliant songs. They provide priceless ecosystem services, and they are pillars of our economy with birders spending \$100s of millions of dollars annually in Maryland. But, vernal pools are not just for the birds. They also filter our groundwater and slow stormwater runoff, providing benefits to our human communities and cultural landscapes. They provide habitat, food, and water to countless other reptiles, amphibians, and beneficial insects, which all contribute to robust ecosystem services in Maryland.

By putting protections in place that identify and prioritize critical bird habitat, such as vernal pools, Maryland will be setting a standard of land-use planning that will bring added protections to birds and all of the co-benefits that birds bring us. It will hold Maryland up as a leader in the protection of birds now and in the future.

Audubon Mid-Atlantic respectfully urges a favorable review of Senate Bill 523.

Thank You,

Jim Brown
Policy Director
Audubon Mid-Atlantic

Lisa Garrett, President,
Prince George's Audubon Society

Julie Dunlap, Advocacy Chair
Audubon Society of Central Maryland

Ben Springer, Advocacy Chair
Southern Maryland Audubon Society