



October 2015 Newsletter

of the

Rockbridge Bird Club, encouraging
the enjoyment, knowledge, &
conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

Calendar

2015

Sat. Oct. 3, 7:30 a.m.—Birding at Boxerwood *

Weds., Oct. 14, 7:00 p.m.—Program by Clair Mellinger on tracking Saw-whet Owl migration

* NOTE: this program will be held at Hillel House, 117 W. Washington St., Lexington

Weds., Nov. 11, 7:00 p.m.—Program by Dick Rowe, “Winter Birding Destination:
Kiawah Island, South Carolina”

Dates TBA—Impromptu field trips *

2016

Weds., Feb. 10, 7:00 p.m.—Program by Bob Schamerhorn, award-winning photographer

Weds., Apr. 13, 7:00 p.m.—Program by Sergio Harding, VDGIF bird conservation biologist

**see article below*

Saturday, October 3: Monthly Boxerwood Bird Walk

Meet Kerry Kilday at 7:30 a.m. in the parking lot for the regular first-Saturday Boxerwood bird walk, lasting about two hours. If you have questions, or in case of doubtful weather, please call Kerry at (561) 389-9612. Directions are at www.boxerwood.org.

Wednesday, October 14: Tracking Saw-whet Owl Migration

Clair Mellinger runs a Northern Saw-whet Owl banding station in Rockingham County, and he'll give a presentation on his experience documenting the migration and wintering status of these tiny and elusive owls. Since 2001, he and colleague Charles Ziegenfus have banded over 1600 Northern Saw-whet Owls and have

(cont'd. next page)



Saw-whet Owl in hand



recaptured many birds banded at other stations in northeastern North America. Clair has had a strong interest in birds “since I was a kid,” and during his tenure as a biology professor at Eastern Mennonite University much of his research was in ornithology.

Note: Clair operates his banding station during the month of November, the Saw-whet’s migration period. Club officers plan to organize a night-time field trip to the station where, we hope, we can meet some little owls in person!

Saw-whet owl released, ready to continue its nocturnal migration. Photos courtesy of Clair Mellinger.

Impromptu Field Trips

Watch for emails from the Club about these. And if you’d like to instigate a birding expedition, please send date, meeting time, and itinerary to rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com for forwarding to Club friends and members.

Can you offer a good location for an American Kestrel nesting box?

You may be able to help a local family of American Kestrels, a species whose population is in decline. Kestrels need a pesticide-free open area (pasture, for instance) where they can find safe food to eat and a few perches for hunting, plus an appropriate nesting cavity—all increasingly hard to find. If you’ve got the habitat, the Virginia Society of Ornithology’s American Kestrel Nest Box Project can supply a nest box designed especially for Kestrels.

If you’re interested, please contact Project coordinator Patti Reum at pareum@gmail.com. Some of you met her at a Club gathering last March, when several people signed up for nest box consideration. Patti and other members of the all-volunteer “Kestrel Strike Force” can evaluate your site and tell you more about the program. And you can learn more about this beautiful little falcon at http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Kestrel/id.

Conservation Note: Chimney Swifts and International Conservation

I have been especially enjoying Chimney Swifts this fall—generally in small flocks of between 10 and 20 birds. It seems they are everywhere: atop Cold Mountain and Spy Rock, where I have hiked in search of migrating hawks; yesterday over the neighbor’s pasture, along with some Tree Swallows, during a break in the rain; and always zipping around over the mini-cityscape of Lexington. Their distinctive chatter

leads my eye up—up—up—until I find the “flying cigars.” They seem to be dithering on steroids as they zip around the sky hunting for insects.

A few years ago Chris and I travelled up to Staunton, treated ourselves to a take-out picnic, and headed over to the high chimneys of Stuart Hall for a “swift night out”. Sadly, the expected 100’s to 1000’s of expected overnight visitors, on their way to South America, were a no-show that night—and that entire summer, except in small numbers. Back in 2006, on the evening of September 9, members of the Augusta Bird Club counted 34,000 Chimney Swifts entering the chimneys between 7:30 and 8:03 pm. Imagine!!! I don’t know what is more amazing, those numbers entering the giant chimneys in such a short time, or the feat of counting them.



According to Cornell Lab’s [All About Birds](#), Chimney Swifts have been in a long-term range-wide decline, amounting to 65% since 1966. Population status is based on Breeding Bird Surveys (hint: your citizen-science contributions do make a difference). The decline is attributed largely to timber harvest and fewer chimneys, depriving the Swift of both natural and human-made roosting and nesting sites. (Learn more about this species [here](#).)

The Chimney Swift’s IUCN Conservation status is “Near Threatened.” All birds (and many other species) have an IUCN Conservation status. The [IUCN](#) is the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the world’s oldest and largest global environmental organization, founded in 1948. Its work includes efforts to preserve biodiversity, through focusing on need and by influencing policy. IUCN scientists maintain the [Red List of Threatened Species](#), intended as a “Barometer of Life” of all life forms, on a scale from “Least Concern” through “Near Threatened” to “Extinct.” The list currently includes thorough information on about 64,000 species, and its goal of 160,000 species would include currently under-represented taxa like fungi, plants, and invertebrates.

The Red List status of a species can be politically charged, but the hope is that identification of a species’ risky or increasingly risky status will promote conservation efforts to improve its populations. One way that individuals—or, hmmm, bird clubs—might consider helping the Chimney Swifts is by constructing a Chimney Swift Tower. More information on Towers and other efforts to help these star aerialists can be found at www.chimneyswifts.org.

—Laura Neale

The President’s Perch

Fall is often a time for little surprises and, for me, struggles to remember bird songs we usually hear only during spring and fall migration. Last Friday we were hiking the path to the Lexington reservoir when we passed through a grove of trees filled with warblers. They were singing as they moved among the leaves in the crown of the trees, with only quick glances possible through the foliage. It wasn’t a birding hike, so I had no binoculars and little time to try to sort them out; so I left the area feeling a little frustrated and confused by the vaguely familiar sounds that I just couldn’t place.

On our return later in the morning most of the birds were gone, but two were still calling to each other across the trail. This time I stopped and pulled up the Audubon app on my phone. After some trial and error I came to the description of the Hooded Warbler and its weet-a-weet-a-weeteo song—that was it, just as clear as in spring.

The sounds themselves bring wonder, but a better understanding of those sounds adds a lot to the experience, and the tools we can have at our fingertips have opened that richness to lots of us who might never achieve such knowledge on our own. I've tried in the past to use the birdsong CDs, but without some frame of reference I was never able to keep the sounds and the birds straight. Now I have several apps that are built to help put sights and sounds together.

...and the President's pitch: We've been talking about a session at one of our meetings that would be devoted to reviewing some of these apps. Let us know of you think that would be a good idea. We've also been thinking about planning another extended trip—a couple of days in an interesting place, not too far away. Generally that means somewhere along the coast, but we're open to other ideas too. Let us know what you think and we'll start working on the details.

—Bob Biersack, President

The Club newsletter welcomes your submissions! These could be birding observations, thoughts, or travel stories; bird conservation news; photos—or some bird-related surprise. Please send items to alexia@rockbridge.net. Thank you.

—Alexia Smith, Editor



For more information about the Club visit our website at www.rockbridgebirdclub.org

Contact the Club by email at rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com or call Bob Biersack, 540-463-1942, or Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

Join the Club by making out a check for \$15 per household to Rockbridge Bird Club and sending it, along with your address, email address, and phone number, to Betty Besal, 120 Chavis Avenue, Lexington, VA 24450. Thank you.

Club Officers

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