



## September 2016 Newsletter of the

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

### Calendar

Unless otherwise noted, programs are held in the Old Courthouse meeting room, downtown Lexington.

Sat., Sept. 3, 8:00 a.m.—Boxerwood Bird Walk \*

Sat., Sept. 10, 8:00 a.m.—Bird Walk on the Chessie Trail \*

Sat., Sept. 10, 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.—Open House at Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch \*

Weds., Sept. 14, 7:00 p.m.—Program: Dick Rowe \*

Weds., Nov. 9, 7:00 p.m.—Program: Fletcher Smith, of the Center for Conservation Biology, about his research on Whimbrel migration

\*see article below

### Meeting at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, September 14, with Program

The highlight of our September meeting will be a presentation by Dick Rowe, our Club Ornithologist. Dick is Professor of Biology and Director of Research at Virginia Military Institute and coordinates the Christmas Bird Count in our area. He has generously revealed the world of birds to many Club members via his fascinating field trips and inspiring talks. He shares his unique and practiced binocular vision on his Flickr site <https://www.flickr.com/photos/vmibiology>, and our September meeting promises more dazzling close-ups of birdlife both familiar and foreign along with Dick's entertaining eloquence. Come and be inspired!

### Monthly Birding at Boxerwood: September 3, October 1...

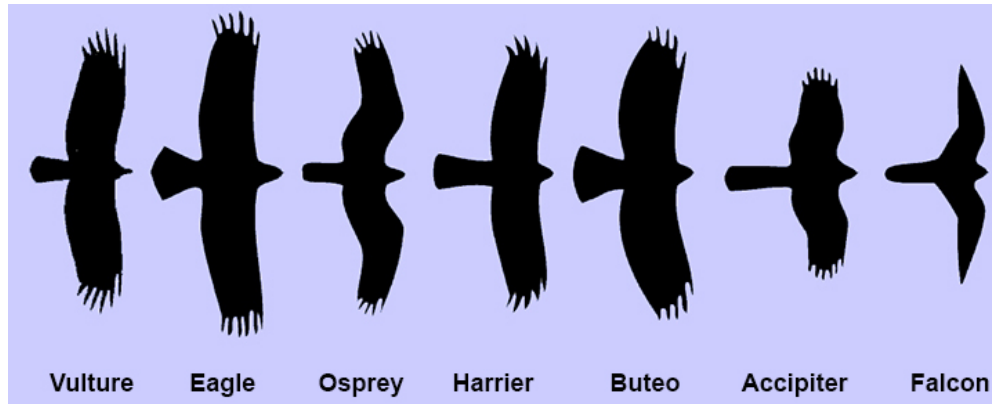
Meet at 8:00 a.m. in the parking lot for the first-Saturday Boxerwood bird walk, lasting about two hours, with Kerry Kilday. If you have questions, or in case of doubtful weather, please call Kerry at (561) 389-9612. Directions are at [www.boxerwood.org](http://www.boxerwood.org).

### Birding the Chessie Trail on Saturday, September 10

Everyone is welcome to join Bob Biersack and Wendy Richards at 8 am on the 10th for a quiet walk on the Chessie Trail, to listen for—and maybe even see—some resident and possible migrating birds. Plan to meet at the Mill Creek gate area on Old Buena Vista Road—one half mile east of the Veterans Bridge over the Maury at the north end of Lexington—for a two- to three-hour walk. The Friends of the Chessie Trail are our co-sponsors. For more information contact Wendy at 463-5214. In the event of heavy rain, the field trip will be canceled.

## Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch Open House, later on September 10

Make a day of it: after birding the Chessie, head for Afton Mountain! You can enjoy the Open House any time between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. on Saturday, September 10 (rain date Sept 11). Says Coordinator Vic Laubach, “we'll have hot dogs, snacks, drinks, mounted raptor exhibits, educational tables, live raptor presentations, and of course the stars of the day: the migrating raptors overhead!” See the Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch [website](#) for directions and lots of information on raptors and the Watch.



## New Field Trip Chair

We're fortunate indeed that Wendy Richards has volunteered to be the Club's Field Trip Chair. That chair has been vacant, leaving the Executive Committee scrambling to keep up with planning outings. Our beloved former Club President, recently retired from her job at W&L, steps forward. Thank you, Wendy!

## Bylaws Change

The Executive Board is proposing a change to the Club's bylaws. The purpose of the change is to make the fiscal year of the Club more accurately reflect our activities; the Club is inactive in the summer and resumes programs in the fall. The existing bylaws and proposed changes (in cross-outs and red ink) are:

*~~The fiscal year of the organization shall be from January 1 to December 31~~  
**September 1 to August 31.***

*~~Anyone joining and paying dues the last four months of any year shall have their membership extended through the following year.~~*

*Members will be reminded of dues at the Annual Meeting in November and in two subsequent notices by mail or email. Members who have not paid their dues by ~~March~~ **July** 15 of any calendar year will be removed from the membership rolls.*

The membership will vote on this proposed change at our November annual meeting. If approved, the change will be retroactive to September 1, 2016.

## So... Please Join or Renew Now

Now's the time to extend your membership into 2017! Household dues are \$15, to cover speaker fees and other expenses; an additional donation will be very welcome and will help the Club reach out to more bird-lovers, contribute to educational projects for kids, and more. Please make out your check to Rockbridge Bird Club and send it, along with your address, email address, and phone number, to Betty Besal, 120 Chavis Avenue, Lexington, VA 24450—or bring your contribution to the meeting.



## One Evening in May

Here's the group that gathered last spring at the Summers's Blue Ridge home, to enjoy wine and cheese—and birdsong. Thank you, Bruce and Nancy, for your generous hospitality.

### Conservation note: OK, what about TNR?

Did you know that every year 2.4 billion birds are killed in this country by outdoor cats, both pets and feral cats, 100 million strong? This is according to a study by scientists from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, [cited in the New York Times](#). Moreover, as [reported by the Wildlife Management Institute](#), cats have already been a direct or indirect factor in the extinction of 33 bird species and are contributing to the drastic declines of many others. Worldwide, the domestic cat is a highly destructive invasive species.

It's possible to keep pet cats indoors to prevent their contribution to this slaughter—but is that humane? We'll save that question for another newsletter.

The bigger problem is the huge number (perhaps 70 million in the U.S.) of feral cats—that is, cats that are descended from pets but have never belonged to anybody. Many animal lovers advocate or practice “trap/neuter/return” (TNR)—where cats are returned to their outdoor “colony,” then fed by volunteers—as a method to maintain the health of these animals while reducing their numbers. TNR once seemed a promising and humane procedure, but is evidently ineffective in reducing feral cat populations, according to sources that to me appear credible (for example, the [Wildlife Society](#) and [American Bird Conservancy](#) websites). National groups advocating TNR may rely on a few “success stories” that represent exceptional circumstances or have been discredited.

So, what to do?

I thought it would be interesting to see what PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, [has to say](#) about the feral-cat dilemma. As we know from local experience, these folks will go to some length in support of animal rights to life and well-being. Here's how PETA views the feral cat's place in our human-altered world:

Cats are not native wildlife and do not fit into the predator-prey ecosystem. Their hunting instincts exist no matter how well fed they are. They terrorize, maim, and kill countless native birds and other small wild animals, who are



struggling to survive existing challenges (such as development in their habitats) and aren't equipped to deal with such predators.

Moreover, among homeless cats—whether in TNR colonies or not—PETA's experience shows:

Highly contagious diseases are common, as are infected puncture wounds, broken bones, urinary tract infections, brain damage, internal injuries, attacks by other animals or cruel humans, automobile accidents, and terrible living conditions like freezing or stifling temperatures, scrounging for food, and being considered a “nuisance...”

Supporting a TNR colony is conscionable, in PETA's view, only if the feral cats are “isolated from roads, people, and other animals and located in an area where they do not have access to wildlife and where the weather is temperate,” and then only with constant attention to their health and wellbeing. An alternative is to trap, neuter, and find homes for the cats. Both approaches are extremely challenging tasks. PETA's conclusion:

Because of the huge number of feral cats and the severe shortage of good homes, the difficulty of socialization, and the dangers lurking where most feral cats live, it may be necessary and the most compassionate choice to euthanize feral cats.

I find it extremely difficult to advocate the killing of any animal, even for the sake of the birds we all love and whose loss we mourn. But I think it's useful to consider that even from a cat perspective, TNR isn't helpful. And you can find plenty of reason for concern from the bird point of view at the American Bird Conservancy and other websites. My hope is that as we become better informed and encourage others to get informed, we who love animals of all kinds can agree on what to do about feral cats.

—Alexia Smith



*Gray Catbird  
[perched...]  
by Dick Rowe*

## **The President's Perch**

We've entered the silent season. It's one of those transitions that probably happens slowly but seems abrupt – I woke up one day and wondered what happened to the birds. For most of the spring and summer we're called to life by the Phoebe and

Towhees, often beginning to sing before sunrise and extending pretty continuously through the day.

Then, suddenly (though probably not really), it seems they're just gone. Not actually gone, for the most part, but no longer singing and much harder to find in the foliage around the house. While earlier they were thick along the fences near the house finding bugs to bring back to the nest, now they seem solitary and remote, and it's almost a surprise to find one flipping its tail on a tree branch.

For us, they've been replaced by an invasion of Catbirds. They seem to be everywhere, crying when they're bothered by a dog or a person, or just when they're calling to each other. It feels like a coordinated changing of the guard – some elaborate migration pattern with one species replacing another.

More likely, though, it's about the food. . . There are still plenty of bugs, if time spent trying to do anything in the garden is any indication. And the area is still thick with Indigo Buntings, who don't seem to be making much of a dent (perhaps because they've moved on to the buckwheat seed). What has changed, though, is the ripening of different kinds of food. In our case it seems to be especially focused on an old apple tree in the barnyard that brings edible fruit only every two or three years. This is one of those years, and the apples are dropping or being pulled by Blue Jays, and that seems to have drawn the Catbirds as well. I'm reminded, though, that free association isn't science (correlation isn't causation) and apples aren't part of the normal diet of a Catbird. Is it just coincidence, or have the efforts of the other birds led this group to have a peck or two as well? I'm reminded that ornithology is, at least in part, a behavioral science, and animal behavior doesn't always follow the rules. More observation is always a good idea.



Photo by Sharon Littley, August 6, 2016

The search for food has intensified across the board. By all accounts, if you want to meet fellow birders these days one of the best places is the sugar aisle at the grocery, where they are stocking up for their Hummingbird feeders. The stories of multiple feeders being replenished each day are confirmed by the photo from Sharon Littley, who found every station occupied at one of her feeders.

Even in the heat of these days, the race is on to build strength and stamina for what is to come.

—Bob Biersack

### **Have you checked out the Rockbridge Bird Club Facebook page?**

If you're on Facebook, please like us and share our posts so we can spread the word about what we are up to. Also, whether or not you're on Facebook, we would love to share any photos of birds and bird outings that you have. Please send them to Becky McKenzie at [beckymckenzie128@gmail.com](mailto:beckymckenzie128@gmail.com), or post them directly to Facebook. If you have any questions, please contact Becky through either email or at 540-461-0419. Thanks!



For more information about the Club, visit our website at [www.rockbridgebirdclub.org](http://www.rockbridgebirdclub.org) and find us on Facebook.

Contact the Club by email at [rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com](mailto: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 or more 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**

President, Bob Biersack  
Vice President, Laura Neale  
Secretary, Alexia Smith  
Treasurer, Betty Besal  
Program Chair, Sarah Burleson

Field Trip Chair, Wendy Richards  
Publicity Chair, Bonnie Bernstein  
Membership Chair, Adrienne Bodie  
Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe

Newsletter edited by Alexia Smith. Logo by Jennifer Cox.