



December 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., Dec. 17—Christmas Bird Count * and potluck *

Sat., Jan. 7, 8:00 a.m.—Boxerwood Birdwalk *

Weds., Feb. 8, 7:00 p.m.—Program: Jerry Via, “A New Look at Migration”

Weds., Apr. 12, 7:00 p.m.—Program, subject TBA

*see article below

I hope you love birds... It is economical. It saves going to heaven.
(Emily Dickinson, in an 1885 letter to a friend)

Monthly Birding at Boxerwood: January 7, 2017

The next first-Saturday bird walk will be at [Boxerwood](#), starting at 8:00 a.m. on January 7. For more information about these walks, please call Kerry at (561) 389-9612. And please see page 8 for a report on the December 3 walk.

Christmas Bird Count on December 17—a note from Dick Rowe

The Lexington area CBC will be held on Saturday 17 Dec. This will be our 80th consecutive count (in 1936 no count was held) and overall our 91st count. If you'd like to participate in the counting, please let me know at RoweRA@vmi.edu. You don't have to be an insane birder (it is helpful but not necessary) to assist with the count.

Our count circle is centered on Big Spring, with a 7.5 mile radius. It extends roughly to Decatur Road north of Lexington, the dam at Lake Merriweather on the northwest, Lake Robertson on the west, the intersection of Kyger Hill and Collierstown Road on the south, and to just east of I-81 and Rt 60. All counting is done inside the circle. As a participant, you can cover an area on your own or be a member of a team/group covering an area (for those of you who are new to CBC or are not confident of your bird ID skills this is a good way to participate), or you can count birds at your home bird feeder. If you'd like to cover a particular area, let me know (including who will be with you and where you'll count). If you'd like to join a team, let me know and I'll put you in contact with a “team leader.” If you'd like to do a feeder count, let me know and I'll send you the rules for the feeder count.

—Dick Rowe

...and *everybody's* welcome at the potluck afterwards! (next page)



You might see a Chipping Sparrow on the Christmas Bird Count. Photo by Dick Rowe

**Calling Partridges, Turtle Doves & French Hens –
– also Chipping Sparrows & Green-winged Teals**

Rockbridge Bird Club Holiday Potluck

Please join us for a potluck dinner on Saturday, December 17, beginning around 5:00 at the Boxerwood Lodge (963 Ross Road, Lexington). We'll have some time to socialize around the fireplace before sitting down to a potluck dinner at 6:00. Bring whatever dish you like. The Club will provide wine, beer, and other beverages.

During dinner, Dick Rowe will give a summary report on our annual Christmas Bird Count (CBC) that happened that day. You don't have to participate in the CBC to attend the potluck. Consider coming just to catch up with fellow birders, get the latest scoop on the count, and maybe do a little late-afternoon birding of your own in the Garden. And if you're out counting all day, don't feel you have to provide any food.

A new feature of our gathering this year will be a bird-themed gift exchange. Perhaps you have an avian-related item not being used at your house. It doesn't have to be a new item. Wrap it up and bring it along to exchange. You might take home a fabulous item! We'll open our gifts as we enjoy our usual enticing assortment of desserts.

Please contact Betty Besal if you have any questions. If you're interested in helping with set-up or clean-up, let her know that, too. Her email is bbesal5@gmail.com and phone is 540.460.6738/

We look forward to seeing all of you!



Photo by Dick Rowe of Green-winged Teals, another possible CBC sighting.

Annual Meeting Report: new officers, treasurer's report, bylaws change

At the Club's November 9 meeting, officers for 2017-18 were elected unanimously. Alexia Smith was elected President and Bob Biersack Secretary; Laura Neale and Betty Besal will continue as Vice President and Treasurer, respectively.

Betty Besal presented the annual Treasurer's report, as follows:

Income (September 1, 2015 to August 31, 2016): \$ 820.00

Expenses (September 1, 2015 to August 31, 2016): \$ 788.83

Checking Account Balance – September 1, 2015: \$ 2223.51

Checking Account Balance -- August 31, 2016: \$ 2254.68

Number of Memberships 2016: 46 household memberships

Income Details (amounts rounded to nearest dollar)

Dues	\$ 645	78%
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Donations	\$ 175	21%
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Expense Details (amounts rounded to nearest dollar)

Speaker Costs	\$ 434	55%
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(includes honoraria, travel expenses, meals)

Donations*	\$ 200	25%
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*(to Virginia Society of Ornithology/ VSO
& American Bird Conservancy/ABC)*

Other miscellaneous expenses	\$ 80	10%
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(Hillel house room rental, beverages)

Dues for memberships (VSO & ABC)	\$ 60	8%
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* The VSO Donation was in lieu of honoraria for speakers Sergio Harding & Ashley Peele; ABC donation was in support of ABC's monitoring of the Rocky Forge Industrial Wind facility.

Members present also unanimously approved a change to the Club bylaws, changing our fiscal year from the calendar year to September 1 to August 31, to sync with our activity cycle. The change was retroactive to September 1, 2016.

So 2016-17 Dues are Due

If you haven't yet, please join or renew now! Annual dues are \$15 per household, and many members contribute extra to support speaker fees, education, and conservation. 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. Thank you.

2016 Bird Seed & Suet Sale

Thanks to more than 50 customers who participated in the Rockbridge Bird Club's 2016 Seed & Suet Sale, the club, in cooperation with Rockbridge Farmers Co-op, sold 3,825 pounds of bird seed and 216 pounds of suet, raising \$980 for Boxerwood. As in past years, proceeds from the sale go to support conservation of the nature center's diverse bird habitats.

This winter is expected to be a cold one, so folks who feed birds may find themselves running out of supplies well before the spring migration brings more hungry birds our way. The Bird Club will offer a second opportunity to order seed in early February. Information about the mid-winter sale will be sent in January.

Do you recognize this bird? ID next page. Photo by Dick Rowe



The President's Perch

Usually these perches are focused on the act of birding. Generally they end up being about things I've seen during the month, or the process of seeing. Trying to work through field marks or noting the changes of seasons based on the comings and goings of the birds are big parts of this activity for me, and just getting out in the woods and the fields to learn about what's around me is the main reason I keep at this, maybe even getting a little better at it with time.

There's another part of the process, though, that I haven't talked about much. One big element in the science of birding is the maintenance and analysis of data tracking numbers and movements of species over time. It's kind of surprising that I haven't spent much time on this, actually, because this was kind of activity a big part of my "real" work for many years. I spent most of thirty years sifting through vast volumes of data looking for patterns, trends and anomalies that would help our understanding of the sources and importance of campaign money in American elections. The process of sifting and sorting and, as one of my mentors once put it, just rolling around in the data is pretty much the same for birding, with the advent of the Internet and access to databases on migration, breeding, etc. I was reminded this month that having conversations with databases really can be fun, and it helps us identify subtle changes that might be overlooked without "good data."



Broad-winged hawks, here and on previous page. Photos by Dick Rowe.

Every day in the fall, for example, I get an email with a table of counts from the Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch. Many of us have stopped by the parking lot in Afton to see the watching and counting, and I've always been impressed with the commitment and skill of the folks who staff the site so faithfully each day. So here's an abbreviated list of some species and counts for this year as the counting season heads to the finish;

Broad-winged hawk	26,257
Sharp-shinned hawk	1,516
Red-tailed hawk	931
Osprey	373
Coopers hawk	326
Bald Eagle	269
American Kestrel	167
Red-shouldered Hawk	157
Total	30,275

So the first striking thing about this list is that 87% of the raptors they see are Broad-winged Hawks. Is there something unique about the Afton passage that attracts these birds? Or is the search for lower altitude crossings from west to east commonly dominated by these birds headed from the Midwest and Canada to warmer winter climates?

The Internet makes it easy to check these questions by looking at some of the other Hawkwatch sites nearby (there are actually 300 sites in North America) to compare the percentages. Turns out that Harvey's Knob, near Roanoke, is showing 3,829 Broad-winged out of a total of 5,221 raptors counted so far this year. That's 73% of the total. At Snicker's Gap in Northern Virginia there were 11,345 Broad-winged out of 12,614 all together, which comes to 90% up there. So it seems that throughout the state the movement through the mountains is primarily Broad-wings.

The other important element in these data is time: continued data collection using the same methods in the same place over many years also allows some interesting comparisons. Turns out the totals can vary pretty widely from year to year, and they don't generally suggest either an increase or a decline in total raptor populations/movement. This year's total at Rockfish Gap is pretty big by historical standards. Last year they counted only 13,822 altogether (with most of the difference being Broad-wings), but in 2014 there were more than 24,000 birds counted, and recent years have seen as many as 35,000, in 2010.



Bald Eagle. Photo by Dick Rowe

Within the totals are some interesting patterns, though. I was interested in Eagle populations – would they confirm our general understanding of growing numbers of, especially, Bald Eagles? The answer seems to be yes, with the count of Bald Eagles passing 100 for the first time at Rockfish Gap in 2010 and generally growing from there, with 269 seen this year and counts in the mid 200's for the last three years. Increased counts were also reported at the two other locations I checked – since about 2000.

The numbers are not so encouraging for Golden Eagles – 19 counted this year, which is the same as last and pretty consistent going back to 2012, with the exception of 2013 when 40 passed by. At least there doesn't appear to be a meaningful decline.

All of this information, and orders of magnitude more, can be found at <http://hawkcount.org>, and there are often separate websites for each watch site. Similar information comes from breeding bird surveys, the currently ongoing Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas, projects like FeederWatch and NestWatch, and the upcoming Christmas Bird Count. Sometimes it's good to remind ourselves why these efforts are so important – they give us a much richer understanding of what's happening in our environment and a better focus for conservation efforts – oh, and they're a lot of fun, too.

—Bob Biersack

Bird Note: Broad-winged Hawk

Inspired by Bob's "Perch," I went in search of more information about Broad-winged Hawks, on [All About Birds](#). They're a woodland species, breeding in large deciduous or mixed forests throughout the eastern United States and southern Canada. They usually hunt from perches rather than on the wing, and they usually nest far from areas of human disturbance. All this makes them not easy to see while they're in residence here in Rockbridge County.

During their compressed fall migration period, however, Broad-wings move through our area in great numbers, as Bob notes, and they're a marvelous spectacle seen from local HawkWatch sites. You can find a wealth of information about Broadwing migration on the [Hawk Mountain website](#). Here are a few gleanings:

All continental populations of Broad-winged Hawks are migratory—it's one of only five North American raptors that are "complete migrants." Unlike most North American raptors, they form flocks during migration, and in autumn the majority pass a given HawkWatch site during a period of only about two weeks.

To reduce energy costs, Broadwings use both mountain updrafts and thermals to soar upward, circling up in "kettles" of hundreds or even thousands of individuals, then gliding on to the next kettling opportunity. But since thermal soaring is their primary migration strategy, they don't exhibit strong "ridge adherence." And they'll even make use of strong thermals formed by manmade features such as cities.

Reliance on thermals is the reason for Broad-winged Hawks' early and compressed fall migration. They need to leave their nesting grounds as soon as possible in order to migrate when thermal activity is most predictable.

How are Broadwing populations faring? According to [All About Birds](#), their breeding habitat increased in the northeastern U.S. as the region became reforested in the 20th century, but their preference for breeding in large forests away from human activity means that this benefit is likely offset by increasing human development. Migration numbers dropped in the east in the 1990s, possibly due to population decline—or perhaps simply because of a change in migration patterns. All About Birds notes that "the largest threat to this species is habitat destruction, particularly within its wintering range. Hunting was a common practice in the early twentieth century during breeding and migration, and it continues today on the wintering grounds." Here is yet another reminder of our hemisphere's interconnectedness and of the importance of international conservation efforts, by such groups as the [American Bird Conservancy](#).

—Alexia Smith

Field Trip Reports: A Citizen Science outing

On November 12th eleven of us gathered at Bonnie Bernstein & Hank Dobin's lovely home to explore opportunities to participate in Project Feeder Watch. We also shared our stories of bird life and nature related activities. It was a beautiful morning to wander around enjoying the birds, the many native plantings, and the incredible view of the Blue Ridge mountains. We were thrilled to be checked out by three Red-tailed Hawks that sailed overhead. Many thanks to Bonnie and Hank for hosting us. The homemade goodies were also much appreciated.

— Wendy Richards

...and a First-Saturday Bird Walk at Boxerwood

Seven birders enjoyed a clear crisp morning at Boxerwood on December 3. The Red Breasted Nuthatches which have been seen for several months now, were first heard and then spotted almost as soon as we gathered at the Parking area. Others were later seen down by the Lodge. Highlight of the morning was an excellent views of a single Fox Sparrow patiently waiting on a branch for all binoculars to spot it surrounded by a huge flock of White Throated Sparrows, the high count bird of the day. Also, a circling Sharp-Shinned Hawk was spotted in the field, giving a nice opportunity to check out the key ID features.

— Kerry Kilday



For more information about the Club, visit our website at www.rockbridgebirdclub.org and find us on Facebook.

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 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.

Share your bird experiences on Facebook & in the Newsletter

You can post photos of birds and bird outings directly to the Rockbridge Bird Club Facebook page, or send them to Becky McKenzie, beckymckenzie128@gmail.com, for posting. For the newsletter, send items to the editor at alexia@rockbridge.net.

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

Website managed by Bob Biersack

Facebook page managed by Becky McKenzie