



**January 2017 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.

Sun., Jan. 8, 8:00 a.m.—Boxerwood Bird Walk (note change of day) \*

Sat., Jan. 28, 8:00 a.m.—Field Trip to Lake Moomaw \*

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

Be grateful for luck. Pay the thunder no mind – listen to the birds. And don't hate nobody.

— [Eubie Blake](#) (ragtime pianist & composer, 1887-1983)

**Monthly Birding at Boxerwood: postponed to Sunday, January 8**

With snow predicted for Saturday, this month's walk will be on Sunday. Meet Kerry Kilday at 8:00 a.m. in the parking lot for an outing of about two hours. If you have questions please call Kerry at (561) 389-9612. Directions: <http://boxerwood.org>

**Lake Moomaw Field Trip January 28**

Please join us for a field trip to Lake Moomaw in Bath County on Saturday, January 28th, as we search for ducks, raptors, and other winter birds. Our day-long adventure will begin at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot at 8:00 am. From there we'll carpool via Route 64 west to Covington and head north, stopping at a few spots along the Jackson River. At Lake Moomaw we'll visit different viewing areas and, if time permits, we'll stop at the Bath Pump Storage Lakes and possibly hit the southern end of Highland County.

Bring a lunch and binoculars, and dress for the weather, including sturdy footwear. We'll send out additional information closer to the date. Co-leaders will be Laura Neale and Wendy Richards. If weather is unfavorable, the trip will be postponed to Sunday, January 29. For more information, contact Wendy at 463-5214 or [richardsw@wlu.edu](mailto:richardsw@wlu.edu).

**A good time was had... Post-CBC Holiday Potluck on December 17**

Once again, Boxerwood was the welcoming venue for the Club's holiday potluck. A toasty fire warmed guests, many of whom had spent the chilly day traversing the County for the Christmas Bird Count (CBC). After refreshments and mingling, we sat down to the usual scrumptious fare. Thanks to many who provided the wonderful

dishes! After dinner, Dick Rowe, CBC coordinator, ran through the species checklist while counters chimed in with what birds they had seen that day. In spite of the last-minute change of the count day (which somewhat limited count participants) and the cold and cloudy weather, the species count of 74 was about average for our Count.

During dessert we had a bird-themed gift exchange. An assortment of lovely surprises delighted participants—bird feeders, scarves, and decorated knickknacks were among the offerings. Don't forget to save your treasures for next year's presents!

Many thanks to Aileen Spurgeon, Bonnie Bernstein, and Kathy Morikawa, who helped with set-up and clean-up, and to Wendy Richards, who brought extra gifts so no one went home without a prize. Hope to see all our members at next year's celebration!

—Betty Besal



Hermit Thrush, one of our winter birds. Photo by Dick Rowe

### **CBC Miscellany – Count Week vs. Count Day**

The Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is a snapshot—a one-day count that provides reams of data about the status of bird populations. When viewed over time, the data reveal trends in bird numbers and presence. To make the data statistically significant, certain rules are enforced. Some of the rules concern specifically WHEN the count occurs. The CBC website distinguishes between “count day” and “count week” and directs CBC compilers roughly as follows (for more detail see the [website](#)):

- Count week is defined as from 3 days before to 3 days after your official count day. Birds seen during those six days but NOT on your official count day are recorded on your checklist as "cw." Count week sightings do not count toward either your species total or your number of individuals on count day.
- It is not a requirement of the CBC to go out and observe birds during count week, but scouting time ahead of the count day can be an opportunity to notice these other birds [possibly helpful for count day, whether this year or next].



The examples given on the CBC website illuminate this protocol:

- Example 1: If you reported 11 Great Blue Herons on your official count day... you should enter "11" as the number for Great Blue Heron on your checklist. But if you did NOT see Great Blue Heron on your official count day, and did see it one day before your official count day, then you would record a "cw" on your CBC checklist for Great Blue Heron.
- Example 2: If you found 11 Great Blue Herons during the count week but only 4 on count day, the number to include in your official checklist tally is 4—the number seen on count day.

Dick Rowe, our coordinator/compiler for the Rockbridge CBC circle (15 miles in diameter and centered at Big Spring) noted that in this year's count, a Great Horned Owl was heard during count week, but not on our official count day of December 17. So the notation "cw" was added next to that species. On the other hand, advance scouting during count week ascertained the continued presence of the Ross's Goose, so it could possibly be located on our count day and become part of the census. (It was.)

In next month's newsletter, we'll discuss some of the emerging trends from the Rockbridge CBC data.

—Betty Besal



*Snow Goose, left, and Ross's Goose. Photo by Dick Rowe.*

How can you identify a Ross's Goose when no Snow Goose is handy for size comparison? In the Ross's, the edge of the base of the bill, alongside the face, is straight—not curved as in the Snow Goose—and the base of the bill may be greenish, as in this case. Also, the Ross's Goose doesn't have the black "grin patch" lining the bill (black "lips") that you can just see on the Snow Goose here.

## Bob's Perch

We're always more focused on the surprising or unusual, not just among the birds we see but pretty much everywhere. The common becomes mundane, and thus ignored, as we seek out something new and shiny. Counting chickadees and juncos and white-throated sparrows is ok, but it doesn't compare with something new and different.

This winter the exciting find for me has been the small group of red-breasted nuthatches that have settled in (more or less) around the house. For the more knowledgeable this is no surprise, since we're a little bit higher than town with lots of peaks and ridges around and more and more of the mature conifers these birds need for food and shelter. For me, though, it's a first, as I've never seen one here during the four years plus since we moved to the farm.

It's also another example of an adaptive behavior: movement based on the availability of food. As Arthur Cleveland Bent described it in 1948: "As autumn draws near, those of us who live near the Atlantic seaboard to the south of the Canadian forests are on the alert to detect the earliest sign that the red-breasted nuthatches have left their northern homes and are on their way to visit us. For in any year they may move southward in fall, or they may elect to remain in the north through the winter, their movements depending, apparently, on the state of the cone crop." So it seems cone production may be down in the north this year, since sightings are much more common around here now than we're used to.



Red-breasted Nuthatch. Photo by Dick Rowe.

If you have a chance to spend a little time with these Bent volumes on North American birds, from the early 20th century, you really should. They show the power of careful observation among large numbers of people – in those days captured mostly through written correspondence. There is a segment on Red-breasted-Nuthatch feeding



habits, for example, describing what nuts they prefer and how they eat (they don't hold food with their feet as chickadees do but wedge it into the bark of trees or into holes made by sapsuckers) that is a precursor to the FeederWatch and eBird data that inform us today. While we gain in volume and efficiency in data collection, we lose the richness of the prose, and I guess I'm old enough to feel the loss.

Sometimes it's the lack of food in their usual range that drives birds to different places; sometimes it's the abundance of food that gives us much higher numbers of birds then forced to spread wider – for instance, the surge of snowy owls we had a couple of winters ago caused by a population explosion among arctic lemmings. So we notice the changes in behavior that come from unusual events... but this coming year I'm going to try to focus more on the common – trying to learn about and better appreciate the things that are routine and consistent and that we all share, in birds and maybe beyond.

— Bob Biersack

*Note: Fortunately for his readers, the Club's just-retired president Bob Biersack will continue writing his "Perch" for the newsletter, alliteration be doggoned. The new president hasn't yet decided whether to seek her own perch.* — Alexia Smith, editor and... president

## Indoor time

"What are you up to these days?" I ask a friend who's retired. Let's say it's summer: she responds, "oh, projects, projects" (the results show in her beautiful house and garden). But if I ask her at this time of year, she may well tell me what books she's reading or what series she's watching online.

If you, too, find more time in winter for reading, perhaps you'll follow Bob's suggestion and get acquainted with Arthur Cleveland Bent's Life Histories of North American Birds. Born in 1866, Bent got interested in birds as a boy and remained a dedicated amateur ornithologist throughout his long life. In 1910 he began work on his Life Histories, drawing on published literature and the contributions of over 800 correspondents. You'll savor the narratives from an earlier era, when people took time to observe carefully and at length and to write up the whole story (the Breeding Bird Atlas project). The work eventually came to twenty-one volumes, the final two finished by colleagues after Bent's death in 1954. They were published, from 1919 to 1968, as Bulletins of the U.S. National Museum (predecessor to the Smithsonian Institution).

The easiest access to Bent's work is the online selection at [www.birdsbybent.com](http://www.birdsbybent.com), where you'll find about 100 of his species accounts (out of the many hundreds included in all the volumes), along with some straight Bent info. Or you can download a pdf scan of any of twenty volumes (Jays, Crows, & Titmice are missing, alas) from the [Smithsonian Libraries](http://SmithsonianLibraries.org). Or you can hunt around on Amazon or AbeBooks and find, for example, the 1964 Dover paperback edition of Life Histories of North American Thrushes, Kinglets, and Their Allies and own an actual book for \$2.48 plus shipping.

Then you may want to verify what you've read with updated information. You've probably discovered the species accounts (and much more) on the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [All About Birds](http://AllAboutBirds.org). (Sure enough, the Red-breasted Nuthatch is described here as "moving southward in great numbers in years when cone production is poor on their breeding grounds" –making it an "irruptive species.") To go deeper into current knowledge and research, subscribe to the Lab's [Birds of North America](http://Birds of North America) for \$42 a year; from the home page, you can sample some species accounts for free.

— Alexia Smith



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.

### **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](mailto:beckymckenzie128@gmail.com), for posting. For the newsletter, send items to the editor at [alexia@rockbridge.net](mailto:alexia@rockbridge.net).

Thank you!

### **Club Officers**

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Vice President, Laura Neale  
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Treasurer, Betty Besal  
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Field Trip Chair, Wendy Richards  
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Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe

Newsletter edited by Alexia Smith. Logo by Jennifer Cox.

Website managed by Bob Biersack

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