



## May 2017 Newsletter

of the

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

### Calendar

Sat., May 6, 8:00 a.m.—Bird Walk at Boxerwood \*

Sat., May 13th—6:30 a.m.—Field Trip to Apple Orchard Mountain with Paul & Lock Cabe \*

Sat., May 27—VSO [Field Trip](#) to Piney Grove Preserve

Sat., June 3, 8:00 a.m.—Bird Walk at Boxerwood

Sun., June 11, 5:00 p.m.—Potluck Picnic at Boxerwood \*

\*see article below

When birds burp, it must taste like bugs.

—Bill Watterson, b. 1958, cartoonist & author of “Calvin & Hobbes”

### Monthly Birding at Boxerwood: May 6...

Meet at 8:00 a.m. in the parking lot for the first-Saturday Boxerwood bird walk, lasting about two hours, with Kerry Kilday. Beginning birders are always welcome. 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).

### Apple Orchard Mountain Trip on Saturday, May 13

Meet at Lexington Food Lion parking lot at 6:30 a.m. to carpool; alternatively, meet the group at 7:30 a.m. at the Sunset Fields pull-off on the Blue Ridge Parkway (mile marker 78.4). From there, we'll walk the access road to the top of Apple Orchard Mountain, about two miles in all, up and back. Our guides will be W&L biology professor Paul Cabe, who gives a well-known field ornithology course, and his son, middle school student Lock, who is excellent at spotting and identifying birds and also alert to salamanders and other small creatures. Possible bird species include Rose-breasted Grosbeaks and an array of warblers: Cerulean, Redstart, Canada, Black-throated Blue, Black & White, Black-throated Green.

### Potluck Picnic at Boxerwood on Sunday, June 11

We'll round out the spring season with a potluck at Boxerwood at 5:00 p.m. on June 11, drinks and tableware provided by the Club. If you can help set up or clean up, please email [rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com](mailto:rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com). Meanwhile, everybody save the date—more info to come!

## Brushy Hills Birds-&Others Walk April 29: eye-&ear-witness report

A group of fifteen, including father-and-son guides Paul and Lock Cabe, walked Brushy Hills trails on Saturday morning, listening to birds singing and calling and occasionally managing to see one amidst the precocious leafing-out of the woods. Lock and the other two young folks in the group found plenty else to look at as well, close at hand, including several red efts and two garter snakes. And we all took time to admire the wild flowers, including two species of like-wow native orchids ([Yellow Lady Slipper](#) and [Showy Orchis](#)) and the strange and wonderful flower of our native [Wild Ginger](#). We ran—or rather walked—way overtime!



*Corinna & Sam Allen and Paul & Lock Cabe, on the Turtle Trail in Brushy Hills.  
Photo by Wendy Richards.*

Here's the bird list Paul reported to eBird (28 species): 1 Turkey Vulture, 4 Mourning Dove, 1 Ruby-throated Hummingbird, 3 Downy Woodpecker, 2 Red-bellied Woodpecker, 2 Pileated Woodpecker, 1 Great Crested Flycatcher, 4 Red-eyed Vireo, 12 Blue Jay, 2 Common Raven, 4 Carolina Chickadee, 2 Tufted Titmouse, 2 White-breasted Nuthatch, 2 Carolina Wren, 6 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, 8 Wood Thrush, 1 Gray Catbird, 2 Ovenbird, 2 Worm-eating Warbler, 2 Black-and-white Warbler, 1 American Redstart, 1 Cerulean Warbler, 1 Field Sparrow, 2 White-throated Sparrow, 3 Eastern Towhee, 9 Scarlet Tanager—many singing, 4 Brown-headed Cowbird, and 2 American Goldfinch.

Most of the birds were making their expected sounds, but the two Ravens were raising quite an odd ruckus together, making us wonder what was up. We were left with the wonderment.

—Alexia Smith

*(See another photo from this occasion at the very end of this newsletter)*



## When Goldfinches Burp...

Most seed-eating birds—such as cardinals, finches, and sparrows—feed insects to their young, in order to provide them with the protein they need to grow fast. But American Goldfinches stick with seeds for the whole family. “Goldfinches are among the strictest vegetarians in the bird world,” according to the All About Birds [species account](#).

In sync with their diet, Goldfinches breed later than most North American birds, waiting until June or July, when the seeds they prefer are abundant—those of certain members of the Asteraceae family, such as sunflowers, thistles, and asters, and of particular grasses and trees. Thistles and many of their kin have hairs attached to their seeds to help the seeds disperse with the wind (picture a dandelion seed head), and Goldfinches use those downy materials to line their nests! So the Asteraceae provide both food and bedding for young Goldfinches.



*Male American Goldfinch on a thistle. Photo by Fredric D. Nisenholz, from [Birds&Blooms](#)*

This species' late nesting time is connected with another distinctive trait: other finches molt body feathers once a year, in late summer, but the American Goldfinch has a second body-molt, in late winter. Birds of North America [experts speculate](#) that “the physiological effects of spring molt may prohibit early nesting.” (I couldn't help wondering how one would untangle causes and effects, but I suppose students of evolution have their ways.)

And here's another dimension to the seed-eating lifestyle, reported on All About Birds: “When Brown-headed Cowbirds lay eggs in an American Goldfinch nest, the cowbird egg may hatch but the nestling seldom survives longer than three days. The cowbird chick simply can't survive on the all-seed diet that goldfinches feed their young.” So a seed diet minimizes the Cowbird hazard, too!

However they evolved, the Goldfinch's various special traits all fit together to form a special way of life. And when Goldfinches burp... it must taste like seeds.

—Alexia Smith

(Information from [Birds of North America](#) and [All About Birds](#))



*Here's a bird we hope to see on Apple Orchard Mountain on May 13:  
a Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Photo by Dick Rowe*

## **Bob's Perch**

One of the pleasures of birding is simply spending time in areas that are mostly natural. Even walking along Woods Creek or the Chessie Trail gives one the calming effects of slower movement and a (somewhat) less human-centered environment.

I sometimes find that looking for birds during migration can become something different – a desire to see the many different species that are here for just a short time becomes a “need” which can make the search feel more “desperate,” and a really good day in the woods can seem disappointing if I don't see as many as I'd hoped.

This week five Club members got a rare opportunity to spend a night and a day birding an area of the County that is generally inaccessible – the platter-shaped top of Short Hills. It's a unique space, west and a little north of Natural Bridge, with ridges on the east and west sides of a more level area about 2,600 feet high, perhaps a half mile wide and nearly ten miles long, with a creek running from southwest to northeast in its center. There are thousands of acres of mostly undisturbed landscape, which we reached after nearly an hour slipping and bouncing along about five miles of switchbacks on a jeep track that rivals the roughest roads I've seen in places like Belize and India.

A place like this becomes mystical and mysterious because of its size and the fact that so few people get there – you know you're alone with nature. At the same time, the owner, who kindly took us to the top and was genuinely happy to have visitors who shared his love of the forest and its creatures, could also point out the remains of earlier settlements, even in this most remote of places.

An evening of building clouds—accompanied by the drumming of a couple of Ruffed Grouse in the distance—turned to a series of showers that kept us tent-bound



and, for some, bailing and searching for the higher ground within the tent. But the night was also punctuated with the snorts of deer when they found us in what likely was their bedroom, and eventually the nearby calls of a Great Horned and a Barred Owl.

The lists we compiled on Thursday afternoon and Friday morning included the usual suspects (lots of Tufted Titmouse and Chickadees, Eastern Towhees, and various Woodpeckers, along with newly arrived Scarlet Tanagers, Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, and Blue-headed and Red-eyed Vireos) along with several, but not a multitude, of the traveling warblers we're so focused on these days. There were lots of Ovenbirds and Worm-eating Warblers and American Redstarts, along with Black-and-whites, and one lone Pine Warbler we saw as we were driving out on Friday afternoon.



*Worm-eating Warbler. Photo by Dick Rowe*

Sometimes we assume that these most isolated places must be teeming with the most spectacular examples of the spring migration. The fact that we didn't find that on this one occasion doesn't mean it doesn't happen, but it has served to remind me once again that the reason I'm looking is not exclusively about what I might see. Rather, it's the full experience that surrounds the search that offers the real joy.

— Bob Biersack



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 Alexia Smith, 540-463-4010, or Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

(cont'd. next page)

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, Alexia Smith  
Vice President, Laura Neale  
Secretary, Bob Biersack  
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](#)



Wood Thrush nest along the Turtle Trail in Brushy Hills — nest ID by Paul Cabe, photo by David Rosher. The surveyor's tape was recycled from its use as a marker on Ailanthus trees, in the Friends of Brushy Hills project to control invasive plant species.