



December 2017 Newsletter

of the

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

Calendar

Unless otherwise noted, program meetings are held at 7 pm in the Old Courthouse meeting room, in downtown Lexington. Field trips are half day, and the meeting place is the Lexington Food Lion parking lot.

Sun., Dec 17—Christmas Bird Count and Holiday Potluck *

**see article below*

"Hear! Hear!" screamed the jay from a neighboring tree, where I had heard a tittering for some time, "winter has a concentrated and nutty kernel, if you know where to look for it."
— Henry David Thoreau

Huge thanks to Kerry Kilday for initiating the first-Saturday walks at Boxerwood and leading them for these past three years! **Kerry is bringing his tenure to a close** as he and Melinda plan upcoming travels. His walks have been full of sightings, learnings & delight, and they've resulted in an extensive Boxerwood bird checklist. We'll continue to go birding at Boxerwood — with grateful memories of Saturday mornings with Kerry.

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

The Lexington area CBC will be held on Sunday 17 Dec. This will be our 81st consecutive count (in 1936 no count was held) and overall our 92nd count. Last year, we counted 5,573 individual birds and 74 species. 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)

**Calling Partridges, Turtle Doves & French Hens –
– also Golden-crowned Kinglets & Hooded Mergansers**

Rockbridge Bird Club Holiday Potluck

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

During dinner, Dick Rowe will give a summary report on how the Christmas Bird Count (CBC) went that day. You don't have to participate in the CBC to attend the potluck. Come just to catch up with fellow birders and to hear about the day's birds. And if, on the other hand, you're out counting all day, don't feel you have to provide any food.

In the spirit of the season, we'll again have a gift exchange. If you have a bird-related item or two not in use at your house, whether new or old, wrap it up and bring it along to add to the festive heap! Those who wish can choose a gift, & we'll all enjoy the unwrapping at dessert time.

Please contact Alexia Smith if you have any questions: alexia@rockbridge.net or 540-463-4010. If you can help with set-up or clean-up, let Alexia know that, too.

We look forward to seeing all of you!



Hooded Merganser. Photo by Dick Rowe

Bird Note: Blue Jays

Thoreau's Jay says "winter has a concentrated and nutty kernel." That made me wonder how much Blue Jays actually depend on "kernels" for food, especially in winter. Well, apparently a lot: from October to March, about 2/3 of a Jay's diet consists of hard mast — mostly acorns, but also beechnuts, chestnuts, hickory nuts, and hazelnuts. *

Moreover, Blue Jays cache enormous numbers of acorns. In fact, "their fondness for acorns and their accuracy in selecting and burying acorns that have not been infested with weevils are credited with spreading oak trees after the last glacial period" (All About Birds). Squirrels, after all, bury acorns close to the parent oak, while a Blue Jay may fly up to several kilometers to bury his or hers. And the rate of acorn dispersal by Blue Jays and the rate of oaks' spread north apparently match up.

Blue Jays can carry food in their "gular pouch," the throat and upper esophagus. They may thus carry up to 5 acorns at a time: 2 or 3 in the pouch, another in the mouth, and one more in the tip of the bill. In one study, six birds with radio transmitters each cached 3,000-5,000 acorns during one autumn season.

It seems, however, that the Jay cannot live by mast alone, perhaps because tannins interfere with protein digestion. Much of the rest of its diet (about 1/5 over the course of the year) is composed of a diverse array of arthropods, mostly insects, which may inhibit the action of tannins. It occurred to me that a weevil-larva-infested acorn would make a square meal for a Jay, if eaten on the spot before the larva got too greedy; but, interestingly, Jays avoid them altogether. Their long-term interests are better served, I suppose, by avoiding those acorns altogether, in favor of acorns that can survive caching.

In addition to a taste for acorns, Blue Jays have an extensive vocal array and a complex social system, both as yet poorly understood by scientists. So I hereby refer you to an extended discourse on the language and relationships of Jays by Jim Baker, the main character in Mark Twain's sketch ["What Stumped the Blue Jays"](#). Says Jim: "You may call a jay a bird. Well, so he is, in a measure — because he's got feathers on him, and don't belong to no church, perhaps; but otherwise he is just as much a human as you be."

—Alexia Smith

* Information in this note was gleaned from Blue Jay accounts on two websites: [Birds of North America](#) and [All About Birds](#), both from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Photo by Dick Rowe.



2017 Annual Report: three windows on the Club's year

First and foremost —

1. Thanks to Volunteers

We've been very fortunate again this year in our field trip leaders, including Dick Rowe, Kerry Kilday, Paul & Lock Cabe, Don Holmes, and Alan Lerner (of the Augusta Bird Club), as well as Club officers Bob Biersack, Laura Neale, and Wendy Richards. Heartfelt thanks to all!

I'm sure everyone is grateful to Club members who helped get kids interested in birds this year. Bonnie Bernstein, Anne Henderson, and Aileen Spurgeon invented a "Go Birding" game and took it to the Earth Day Celebration in Hopkins Green. Bonnie also organized both the "Birds for Thirds" program at Central Elementary, in which Aileen Spurgeon helped out, and the ongoing Bluebird Conservation Project, with help at the nest-box workshop from Betty Besal, Bob Biersack, Bruce Bytnar, Phyllis Fevrier, Kerry Kilday, and Wendy & Steve Richards.

We owe yet more thanks to Bonnie, for again conducting the annual Bird Seed Sale benefitting Boxerwood.

Advance thanks to you who volunteer to help at our annual holiday potluck! We're grateful to Betty Besal for organizing this event last year — and to helpers whose names we neglected to note back in 2016; to you and any others we've inadvertently omitted, thank you for your anonymous contribution to birds and birding.

Finally, thank you Sharon and Jack Littlely, Aileen and Larry Spurgeon, and Glenda and Jerry Jackson for refreshments. Your contribution made our meetings more fun.

—Alexia Smith, President

2. Treasurer's Report

Income (September 1, 2016 to August 31, 2017):	\$ 1020.00
Expenses (September 1, 2016 to August 31,2017):	\$ 614.18
Difference:	\$ 405.82

Checking Account Balance – September 1, 2016:	\$ 2254.68
Checking Account Balance -- August 31, 2017:	\$ 2660.50
Difference:	\$ 405.82

Number of Memberships 2017: 53 household memberships

Income Details (Amounts Rounded to nearest dollar)

Dues	\$ 645.00	78%
Donations	\$ 175.00	21%

Expense Details (Amounts Rounded to nearest dollar)

Speaker Costs (includes honoraria, travel expenses, meals)	\$ 416.00	68%
Other miscellaneous expenses (potluck beverages, meeting refreshments, office supplies)	\$ 97.00	16%
Memberships & Donations* (VSO, ABC)	\$ 85.00	14%

* Club purchased a copy of Katie Fallon's Vultures book and donated it to the Rockbridge Regional Library.

—Betty Besal, Treasurer

3. Conservation Initiatives

Our Club is a member of the [American Bird Conservancy](#) (ABC), the pre-eminent organization for Western Hemisphere bird conservation.

Early in the year, we endorsed ABC's "[Together for Birds](#)" petition, urging the President & Congress to support the Endangered Species Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Environmental Protection Agency, and land management for birds and people. The petition was addressed to President Trump, Senators, and Representatives; it was endorsed by 424 organizations and signed by more than 24,000 individuals.

In early June we signed on to an ABC [letter](#) urging the Federal Communications Commission to keep in place the National Environmental Policy Act protocols for siting new communications towers, which ensure environmental analyses that help protect at-risk species. As of early November, the FCC had not weakened the rules — good news so far.

In September, we signed on to a [letter](#) opposing attempts to gut the Greater Sage Grouse conservation plans that were launched in 2015, the result of five years of negotiations among dozens of stake-holders. This letter was addressed to Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke as well as to members of Congress. A September 28 [New York Times article](#) summing up what's at stake notes that the regulatory process to change these plans will take years, so this is an ongoing fight.

What issues in bird conservation do *you* consider most pressing? Please let us know by emailing the Club at rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com.

—Laura Neale, Conservation Chair, and Alexia Smith, President

End report. Onwards to the Bird Count and the New Year!



Golden-crowned Kinglet. Photo by Dick Rowe

Bob's Perch:

We spent Thanksgiving morning this year walking through the wetland at Huntley Meadows, a 1,500 acre park about a mile west of the Potomac River just south of the Beltway in Fairfax. It's usually a great place to see ducks and shorebirds, but we were late getting started and it was windy and cold, so the birds were few and far between when we arrived.

Most of the morning birders were leaving, actually, with their scopes and long-lens cameras in tow. We heard about a sighting of the Red-Headed Woodpecker who is apparently a resident; but by the time we were on the boardwalk there wasn't much in the trees (a Downy Woodpecker here and there along with the usual Juncos and Chickadees) or in the water (a few Mallards and one Great Blue Heron).

It's still a pleasant place to be, even in the cold, and when the trail turned back into the woods out of the wind there was a burst of activity among the branches. Several small birds were moving quickly in small spots of denser foliage – hard to get the glasses on long enough to ID. We were with a friend who is in a Master Naturalist class now, and he was a little disappointed that we weren't helping him much when small flashes of color appeared on the crowns of these Kinglets: both the crimson slash on a Ruby-crowned and the electric orange/yellow of the Golden-crowned, almost like flames when the sun hits them just right.

There were other birds moving among the bigger branches – larger and less colorful but active. After a while it was clear they were Brown Creepers, a group of three or four working the trunks and branches – higher than I've seen them before, but I couldn't think of (or find later) anything else they might have been.

There was nothing really special or unusual in these encounters, but they made what seemed at first a little disappointing into a very pleasant trip. Birding is pretty special even without rare sightings or huge counts of species when you happen upon a few small but distinctive birds right where they belong.

— *Bob Biersack*



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.

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

(continued on next page)

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



*Can you ID this pair?
Found in the
Courthouse Meeting
Room ladies restroom.
If they're yours, contact
Lori Oliver
LOliver@wlu.edu
540-458-8740*



*Yellow-rumped Warbler.
Photo by Dick Rowe*