



January 2018 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.

Weds., February 14, 7 p.m.— Program: Dan Bieker on Virginia's endangered species, birds and others *

Weds., April 11, 7 p.m.— Program: TBA

*see article below

And now we welcome the new year, full of things that have never been.

— Rainer Maria Rilke (German-language poet, 1875-1926)

**2018: a new bird? a bird doing something you've never seen?
May the new year bring you many wonderful surprises!**

... and be sure to mark your 2018 calendar:

February 14 — program about endangered species

Dan Bieker, local naturalist especially known for his ornithology course at Piedmont Virginia Community College, will talk about endangered species in our state — including, of course, endangered bird species. Look for more information in the February newsletter, but be sure meanwhile to save the date: Wednesday, February 14 at 7 p.m.

Christmas Bird Count report: Bald Eagles and other highlights

The 92nd Lexington-area Christmas Bird Count took place on Sunday, December 17, a cold day with overcast skies and, in the afternoon, rain and sleet. Nevertheless, a total of 80 species and 12,777 individual birds were identified. The number of species is a tie for the highest for our Count; 80 were also recorded in 2013. This year's total number of individuals was more than last year's count of 5,573 individuals and well below the record of 33,900 in 1976. Over the past 10 years, an average of 10,983 individuals and 75 species have been counted.

This year's event was distinguished by record high counts for Bald Eagles, Common Mergansers, and Hooded Mergansers. Sixteen Bald Eagles were seen on count day, 15 of them at Lake Merriweather, where the group included adults and immature eagles of different ages. A record number of Common Mergansers, 170, were seen on Lake Merriweather and two at Big Spring, the tenth time they've been seen on the Count. Lake Merriweather also yielded a count of 262 Hooded Mergansers.



Common Merganser. Photo by Dick Rowe

Several other unusual birds were seen: Northern Shoveler, Ruddy Duck, Common Goldeneye, and Gray Catbird.

Since the first Lexington Area Christmas Bird Count, a cumulative total of 129 species have been identified on the specified count day. In general, about 65 of the 129 species are regularly seen in the County during the winter. The other species are winter migrants that stop through the area and sometimes over-winter in small groups or individuals that are “wandering” through the area.

The Lexington area Christmas Bird Counts were begun by Postmaster M. G. Lewis and Dr. J. J. Murray, pastor of the Lexington Presbyterian Church. In more recent times, it was coordinated for over 35 years by Dr. Bob Paxton, native Lexingtonian and now retired Columbia University professor.

The Christmas Bird Count is directed by the National Audubon Society, and each Count is scheduled for a single day during the month of December. Volunteer participants try to count all birds within a 15-mile diameter circle. The value of these counts is that a “snapshot” of species and individuals in a given area is taken each year, and trends in populations can be identified for an area or for the country overall. Since 1974, the Lexington Bird Count Circle has been centered at Big Spring pond on U.S. 60, and thus we have 40+ years of data for birds in the count area.

You can find more numbers at the end of this newsletter — a listing of all the species seen and how many individuals of each.

*—Dick Rowe
Lexington Christmas Bird Count Coordinator*



Hermit Thrush, one of the species seen on the Christmas Bird Count.

Photo by Dick Rowe

Post-Count Potluck held December 17

Thirty-plus folks gathered at Boxerwood Lodge at the end of Count day to share food and drink and company. Dick Rowe ran down the official Christmas Bird Count list and collected a few more sightings from those present. It was a festive time, complete with a fire in the fireplace, which was especially cheerful after such a cold, grey day!

Two among our number got surprise thank-you gifts. In thanks for his leading the first-Saturday Boxerwood bird walks, Boxerwood Executive Levy Schroeder presented Kerry Kilday with a lovely children's book about a grandfather introducing his grandchild to bird watching (yes, Kerry's a grandfather, and a doting one). Then, on behalf of the Bird Club, Alexia Smith gave him a hand-blown glass globe with feathers inside, illustrated below — except that it hadn't arrived yet from its maker in Asheville, so Kerry got a couple of chocolate globes as a place-holder! The Club wanted to recognize Kerry for initiating and leading three years of monthly Boxerwood walks, developing a Boxerwood bird list, and leading other memorable outings, too.

The Club made a glass-globe gift to Dick Rowe as well, with chocolate stand-ins, in thanks for his leading many outings, sharing his immense knowledge of area birds and their habitats, providing excellent programs for public meetings, initiating us into his research, generously sharing his photographs (which are in almost every newsletter) — and giving all-around support to the Bird Club since its beginning (or re-start) over six years ago. Oh, and — for organizing the Christmas Bird Count.

Special potluck thanks are due to Bonnie Bernstein and Phyllis Fevrier for organizing and set-up. Thanks also to volunteers Carol Karsch and Bruce and Nancy Summers, who came early and stayed late, and to everybody who stayed after to help clean up!



*Glass globes by Kyle Keeler of Visionary Glass Arts in Asheville,
delivered post-potluck to Dick and Kerry*

Bob's Perch: winter encounters

Two nights ago I stepped out in the evening to look for the dog as she finished her last meanderings of the day. I was pleasantly surprised by the call of a Great Horned Owl. I shouldn't really say surprised, since we're lucky to have them nearby, and it isn't unusual to hear one well after sunset or very early in the morning. The surprise (irritation?) came more from the fact that this was two or three days after the Christmas Bird Count, and I had failed to hear anything remotely like an owl early that morning.

After standing near the door for a few minutes I actually *was* surprised, though, to hear a second Great Horned responding to the first, from quite a bit farther away. This I haven't heard often, but it seems these two were likely mates, confirming their territory. Information from [Cool Green Science](#) talks about the timing of this mating behavior carrying into the winter months. They could be setting up a nest any time now.

I thought this little sighting would be the focus of my piece this month, but winter days have their own ideas about what might get your attention next, and this Christmas Eve morning brought an extra-special gift. I was in front of the house, collecting some "yard art" – big metal butterflies that will last longer if they spend some time out of the weather – when I heard the clucking of Turkeys on the hill behind the barn. I stopped for a minute, thinking I had bothered them, and waited for them to move further up from the cedars and pines into the more mature forest behind; but they weren't actually going anywhere. I was headed toward the barn, so I kept going till I got inside, thinking that would calm them down, but it didn't. They just carried on clucking, and I noticed other, smaller birds (the usual Cardinals, Titmice, Goldfinches, etc.) moving into the trees nearby, and that also seemed a little odd.

A moment later, as I stood near the barn door looking up the hill, out from the cedars flew an immature Bald Eagle. It must have been a fourth-year, because the head

was mostly white but the tail wasn't completely white yet, and there were white splotches on the underside of the wings. I'm pretty sure about this because I got a good look as the bird flew straight for me and turned maybe fifty feet away, heading back over the hill toward the north.

We know there are several nests near the Maury and along South Buffalo Creek, so you can see Eagles flying or perched in trees occasionally, often being harassed by crows as they cruise along the water. This one had drifted some distance from the river, though, and it seems they're subject to harassment from other creatures too, including this flock of Turkeys. I guess it's tough being at the top of the food chain.

Bald Eagles have made a nice recovery in their numbers in this region over the years. The count at the Hawk Watch in Afton was well over 300 this year, a record that surpassed the previous high, from the year before. Hopefully these kinds of encounters will be more commonplace, and the excitement of a sighting will become more like the simple pleasure of hearing a couple of owls defining their space or a flock of Turkeys passing through.

—Bob Biersack



Bald eagles at Lake Merriweather, photographed on the Christmas Bird Count by Ann C. Olson

2017 Christmas Bird Count names and numbers

First, here are the human participants: John and Sarah Burleson; Paul, Lock, and Han Cabe; Henry Eichelberger; Kerry Kilday and Melinda Robinson; Laura Neale, Chris Wise, and Lida Wise; Paige Ellestad; Janet Hughes; Sue LaRue; Bob Biersack; Joyce Cambron and Chris Baroody; Susie Lynch; Phyllis Fevrier; Carol Karsch; Jerry and Glenda Jackson; John Pancake and Ann Olson; George Tolley; Barbara, Lucy, and Dick Rowe; Don Holmes; Scott Dransfield; George Tolley; Tom Oxendine; Kit Huffman; Kathy Morikawa; David Tilson; Jerry and Connie Therrien; James Lambert; and Diana and David Hopkins.

This year's complete bird count was as follows: pied-billed grebe 18; great blue heron 15; black vulture 48; turkey vulture 89; Canada goose 352; green-winged teal 10; American black duck 24; mallard 207; northern shoveler 1; gadwall 58; ring-necked duck 4; hooded merganser 262; common merganser 172; common goldeneye 1; ruddy duck 1; bald eagle 16; northern harrier 4; sharp-shinned hawk 4; Cooper's hawk 1; red-shouldered hawk 9; red-tailed hawk 32; American kestrel 19; merlin, 1; wild turkey 2; American coot 1; killdeer 6; Wilson's snipe 1; ring-billed gull 1; rock pigeon 70; mourning dove 409; barn owl 2; eastern screech-owl 18; great horned owl 1; barred owl 1; belted kingfisher 15.



Merlin, a species seen on the Christmas Bird Count (just one individual). Photo by Dick Rowe

Also, red-bellied woodpecker 65; yellow-bellied sapsucker 26; downy woodpecker 59; hairy woodpecker 16; northern flicker 29; pileated woodpecker 48; eastern phoebe 4; blue jay 242; American crow 745; fish crow 46; common raven 20; black-capped chickadee 8; Carolina chickadee 155; unidentified chickadee species 59; tufted titmouse 182; red-breasted nuthatch 5; white-breasted nuthatch 75; brown creeper 1; Carolina wren 145; winter wren 6; golden-crowned kinglet 52; ruby-crowned kinglet 14.

Also, eastern bluebird 183; hermit thrush 24; American robin 2,679; northern mockingbird 92; European starling 4,140; cedar waxwing 136; yellow-rumped warbler 118; eastern towhee 12; field sparrow 45; fox sparrow 3; song sparrow 100; swamp sparrow 4; white-throated sparrow 372; white-crowned sparrow 55; dark-eyed junco 237; northern cardinal 288; red-winged blackbird 2; eastern meadowlark 16; common grackle 30; purple finch 29; house finch 163; American goldfinch 226; and house sparrow 5.

—Dick Rowe
Lexington Christmas Bird Count Coordinator



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.

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