



February 2018 Newsletter
of the
Rockbridge Bird Club, encouraging
the enjoyment, knowledge, &
conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

Calendar

Please note that program meetings are now held in the Piovano Room of Rockbridge Regional Library, in downtown Lexington.

Weds., Feb. 14, 7:00 p.m.—Program: Dan Bieker on rare birds (& others) of VA *

Sat., Feb 17, 7:30 a.m. carpool—All-day field trip to Reddish Knob *

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

Weds., Apr. 11, 7:00 p.m.—Program

Fri.-Sat., May 18-20—Virginia Society of Ornithology [Annual Meeting](#), Harrisonburg

*see article below

If you take care of birds, you take care of most of the environmental problems in the world.
—Thomas Lovejoy, Biologist and "Godfather of Biodiversity"

Program by Dan Bieker on rarely-seen wildlife in Virginia, February 14

You may have met Dan when he and Patti Reum were installing Kestrel nest boxes all around Rockbridge County. He'll be showing us some of the many fascinating yet rarely observed species of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish that live in Virginia thanks to its varied topography, patches of wilderness, and abundant waterways. Dan is an Assistant Professor of Natural Sciences at Piedmont VA Community College, where he teaches Field Ornithology and Appalachian Ecology.

Please note that the meeting will take place in the **Piovano Room of Rockbridge Regional Library**, in downtown Lexington, a new venue for us. The time is 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday, February 7.

Trip to Reddish Knob in Search of Crossbills, Saturday, February 17

On February 17th we'll venture up into western Rockingham County and to the top of Shenandoah Mountain in search of Red Crossbills, visiting some of the County's birding hotspots en route. Possible destinations, depending upon recent reports, may include the following sites: Silver Lake, described as a "haven for winter waterfowl"; Briery Branch Reservoir; and the Nazarene Church Wetlands.

Heading back south, we'll travel a scenic forest service road that lies along much of Shenandoah Mountain's long ridge, hoping for Ruffed Grouse, Common Ravens, and Black-capped Chickadees. Day's end will find us parked in Swoope awaiting a showing of Short-eared Owls.

Laura Neale will be our leader. As she says, "It's always a fun outing to spend a day with fellow bird lovers and their eyes."



Red Cross-bills (Loxia curvirostra). Photo by Dick Rowe

We'll meet at 7:30 a.m. at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot to carpool. We plan on a pit stop at a country store where food and drink can be purchased before heading up Shenandoah Mountain, but it would probably be a good idea to bring plenty of snacks and water. Dress for cooler temps at high elevation, and bring a sense of adventure. Our expected return time is about 7:30 p.m.

In the event of rain or snow on Saturday, we'll reschedule the trip for the next day—Sunday, February 18. For more information please contact me at 463-5214 or richardsw@wlu.edu. I hope you can join us on this adventure!

—Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair

Birding at Boxerwood: Saturday, March 3

Meet Kerry Kilday in the Boxerwood parking lot at 8:00 a.m. for about two hours of walking in the Gardens. As Kerry notes: "We'll have a chance to welcome some early migrants passing through our region as well as those returning to breed in the nature center's varied habitats." He welcomes inexperienced as well as experienced birders. For more information or in case of doubtful weather, call Kerry at (561) 389-9612.

The Club plans to have bird walks at Boxerwood approximately every quarter.

Conservation Notes: 1. Birds are losing vital legal protection

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act, protecting birds since 1918, has been hit with a double whammy.

One blow was accomplished in December by a Department of the Interior memo reinterpreting enforcement parameters for the Act—to dire effect. Previously, industries whose activities incidentally kill birds, such as longline fisheries that catch and drown seabirds as "bycatch," could be fined. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which

enforces the Act, has long used this fact to induce industry to find alternative operating methods. The new interpretation effectively eliminates this method for protecting bird populations—a huge and devastating change. Bryan Watts of Virginia’s Center for Conservation Biology has written an eloquent description of the why’s and what’s of this attack on the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. I urge you to read it [here](#).



*Two northern gannets (Morus bassanus) tangled in a long-line fishing rig.
Photo by Bryan Watts of the Center for Conservation Biology*

The Act also faces a blow in Congress. House Bill 4239, the SECURE American Energy Act, would open up coasts, offshore waters, and many public lands to energy development—thus vastly increasing possibilities of incidental bird kills. So in November, Representative Liz Cheney added to HR 4239 an amendment that would eliminate industry responsibility for any such “incidental take.”

As our consumption of everything goes up and up and up, our responsibilities as stewards become simultaneously more urgent, and more challenging.

You can take action to protect the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Both the American Bird Conservancy, of which the Rockbridge Bird Club is a member, and the Audubon Society have websites with advocacy pages where one can learn about looming threats to birds. Please follow these links to comment on the need to protect the Act: [American Bird Conservancy page](#) and [Audubon page](#). (Note that one need not be a member to sign up for receiving future action alerts.) Better yet, use these web pages as a guide to write or e-mail personal letters or make calls.

2. Let's help make 2018 the Year of the Bird

A partnership of concerned groups, including National Geographic, Bird Life International, The Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and Audubon, has declared 2018 the Year of the Bird, in an effort to focus the public's—non-birders'?—attention on birds. Birds are especially in need of friends and advocates as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act celebrates its 100th anniversary. Numerous actions by our leaders in Washington have created a series of threats to birds: basically, there is a headlong rush to “deregulate” so that industry is not responsible for itself and also gets to expand into formerly off-limits protected areas. So: National Geographic's January 2018 issue's feature story is “Why Birds Matter.” To start, “They help the environment, but they also help our souls. In 2018 we'll explore the wonder of birds, and why we can't live without them.” In the issue, you will also find some amazing photograph's from Joel Sartore's ongoing effort to create a photo “ark” of all animals. Learn more about how to take positive actions at <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/projects/year-of-the-bird/>.

—Laura Neale, Conservation Chair

Birding Adventures in Southwest Florida - Nov. 15 - Dec. 25, 2017



When my husband Steve cooked up a plan to spend 6 weeks in SW Florida this past November and December, I was a bit concerned. My response was: “But I'll be leaving my yard birds behind!” I felt it was too much to ask a friend to come fill our feeders for that length of time, since that's a daily chore at our house. Steve assured me that the birds would survive and that upon my return they would readily come back to gobble up my offerings. I wasn't totally convinced; but, lured by the opportunity to return to Pine Island, Florida, where many birds like to hang out, some all year long and others to escape Northern winters, I somewhat reluctantly signed on.

Wendy Richards & Great Egret (Ardea alba).

Photo by Steve Richards

I have to admit (a bit guiltily) that once settled into our double-wide with a canal view I was smitten with the opportunity to get to know all the bird species that

frequented our viewshed and even our dock. Eurasian Collared Doves called constantly from the overhead wires. Wood Storks and Ospreys vied for the tallest perch of a Norfolk Island Pine as the Fish Crows gathered to noisily harass them. When the fisherman across the canal was cleaning his catch, the word must have gone out: herons, egrets, pelicans, and gulls all flew in and landed nearby, hoping for some handouts.

To further compensate for leaving the Virginia birds behind, we ventured to many local preserves, parks, and wildlife management areas to hike & bike while birding. We were fortunate to meet the field trip chair of the Caloosa Bird Club, which is made up of birders from Lee and Collier counties. Ken, a generous and excellent birder, invited us on Club field trips to well-known birding meccas like Corkscrew Swamp Audubon Sanctuary and J. N. Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge, as well as to typical birding hangouts such as an airport, a landfill, and a flooded tomato field. One obscure location near Punta Gorda known as Ollie's Pond has a resident population of Black-bellied Whistling Ducks. These colorful and long-necked ducks entertained us with their lively antics, and everyone was surprised to see 3 fuzzy juveniles so late in the season.



Black-bellied Whistling-Duck (Dendrocygna autumnalis). Photo by Steve Richards

When I mentioned to Ken that I would really like to see Burrowing Owls, he got excited. The next day he took us to the nearby city of Cape Coral, which exemplifies suburban sprawl. There, close to houses—many still under construction—live the owls. Steve and I expressed our concern to Ken: “Aren’t they vulnerable in the midst of all this development?” He responded that, to the contrary, people who live around the owls are very proud and protective of them. Ken and other volunteers keep an eye out for

the burrows and, once locating them, mark the perimeter with easily recognizable plastic pipe and put a wooden T-post at the entrance to the burrow.



Florida Burrowing Owl (Athene cunicularia floridana). Photo by Steve Richards

Close to one of the owl colonies, Ken also introduced us to a small declining population (currently four) of Florida Scrub Jays. These charming and curious corvids unfortunately have not fared as well with the encroaching development. This is due to their tendency to stay put in family groups in areas of Florida scrub that are increasingly fragmented.

On Christmas morning, before packing up to leave the next day, we returned to a nearby preserve on Pine Island where we'd been watching a Bald Eagle on a nest. We saw that two adults were perched, each one on the top of a snag, a distance away from the nest in different directions. We set up our scope at the closest point where viewing was allowed. As we focused on the nest the two adult eagles flew towards it, and in a few moments we understood why. A possible predator had flown close to the nest, and mom and dad were in quick pursuit. As we watched, an eaglet raised its head and wings above the nest. That sighting was a wonderful going-away present for us!

We arrived back home just in time for the icy blasts of January, quite a shock after our weeks of wearing shorts and flip-flops! When I got out of the car, I despaired at the lack of bird activity; but once the feeders were back up and filled, my birds did come back. It's nice to be home, but I'm sure glad I got to experience some of the wonderful birding in Florida.

—Wendy Richards

Editor's note: don't miss Steve's photo of "Florida yard birds" at the very end of this newsletter.

Bob's Perch:

The “year of the bird” has gotten off to a slow start, at least for me, as January has been surprisingly quiet around here: just the usual White-throated Sparrows, Juncos, Titmice, and Woodpeckers at the feeders; only White-breasted Nuthatches this year, unlike last year when Red-breasted Nuthatches were also here most of the winter.

As Laura noted above, National Geographic and partners are marking the centennial of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act by declaring 2018 the Year of the Bird. The act was, according to Audubon, one of the first governmental efforts to protect wildlife in general, and migratory birds in particular. The goal is to expand our understanding of the place birds play in the natural world and offer suggestions for action to protect species that are especially vulnerable to habitat loss and climate change.

Some of the tasks (or resolutions) the organizations identify to help people interact with birds include use of the simple new technologies that I keep hoping will substitute for my meager birding skills. They encourage using tools like the [Merlin app](#) to identify birds you see, [eBird](#) to keep track of where you go and what you encounter, and the Cornell Lab's [new learning tools](#) to help with identifying birdsongs.

All of these tools can be really helpful, but in my experience they aren't a substitute for time in the field. For example, I spent this cold morning in the woods looking for birds that don't come to the feeder but might be starting to move around in a different way even as winter hangs on. As I moved along the trail I noticed a hawk circling not far away. There were clouds in the sky so I couldn't see very much color—no bright red that I could see in the tail, and it seemed that the underside of the wings wasn't pure white; but, honestly, it was hard to tell.

Answering the simple questions in Merlin—the size was between a crow and a goose, the colors were mostly brown and white, and the bird was soaring—gives basically a choice of Red-tailed or Red-shouldered Hawk. The program narrows the possibilities by knowing where I was today and factoring in the date. The fact that I didn't see bands in the tail or a dark back edge on the wings in the pictures of Red-shouldered led me to conclude that it must have been a Red-tailed. (The bird's age can be a factor that complicates things here.) I think that's right, but the lighting makes it a little uncertain. It's a pretty simple ID, really, and the program helped me be more confident; but the view through the binoculars doesn't always match the photos in the book or on the phone, so experience still counts.

Finally, the highlight of the walk this morning was also a pretty small and simple thing. As the sun reached the trees on the stream bank, a group of six Bluebirds moved onto branches facing the sun. One at a time, a mix of males and females joined the group, not yet claiming territory as pairs, just seeking some warmth on a cold morning.

—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.

Club Officers

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Steve and Wendy call these "Florida yard birds." Can you identify them?

Photo by Steve Richards.