



March 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., Apr. 11, 7:00 p.m.—Program: Bryan Watts, of the Center for Conservation Biology, on the conservation of Virginia raptors

Sat., Apr. 21, 8:30 a.m.—Spring Bird Walk at Kendal with Kerry Kilday
(rain date Sun., Apr, 22)

Sat., Apr. 28, 7:00 a.m.—Bird Walk in Brushy Hills, led by Paul and Lock Cabe

Sat., May 5—Field trip to Apple Orchard Mountain with Dick Rowe
(rain date Sun., May 6)

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

**see article below*

There is an eagle in me that wants to soar, and there is a hippopotamus in me
that wants to wallow in the mud.

—Carl Sandburg (1878 - 1967)

Field Trip report: Reddish Knob

We delayed our trip till Sunday, February 18, due to weather prospects and were rewarded with an absolutely stellar day for eleven of us to venture to the top of Shenandoah Mountain, a challenging drive in the snow. At just over 4,000 feet, Reddish Knob offers spectacular views in all directions. As we reached the ridge, before making the final push to the top, a pair of Red Crossbills looked down at us from the trees. Then, as if that wasn't exciting enough, an immature Golden Eagle floated above us.

Other highlights of the trip were stops at a heron rookery located northeast of Staunton and two stops in the Dayton area of Rockingham County: Silver Lake, where we were able to easily observe a Long-tailed Duck and a White-winged Scoter, and the Shenandoah Valley Produce Auction, where a dozen Eurasian Collared Doves were hanging out in a huge Osage Orange tree.

Many thanks go to trip leader Laura Neale and list keeper Annie Downing; and to Allen Lerner, who met us in Swoope and—when the hoped-for Short-eared Owls didn't show—kindly took us nearby to see two Tundra Swans as they lifted off for the night, and also an active Bald Eagle's nest. I think it's safe to say that everyone greatly enjoyed the day!

— Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair

Reddish Knob trip species list:

Canada Goose
Mute Swan
Tundra Swan
Mallard
Lesser Scaup
White-winged Scoter
Long-tailed Duck
Bufflehead
Great Blue Heron
Black Vulture
Turkey Vulture
Red-tailed Hawk
Golden Eagle (immature)
American Kestrel

American Coot
Rock Pigeon
Eurasian Collared Dove
Mourning Dove
Belted Kingfisher
Downy Woodpecker
Eastern Phoebe
Blue Jay
American Crow
Common Raven
Black-capped Chickadee
Tufted Titmouse
White-breasted Nuthatch
Carolina Wren

Golden-crowned Kinglet
Eastern Bluebird
American Robin
Northern Mockingbird
European Starling
Song Sparrow
White-throated Sparrow
Dark-eyed Junco
Northern Cardinal
Red-winged Blackbird
Eastern Meadowlark
Red Crossbill
American Goldfinch
House Sparrow



Ten of the eleven trip participants (Wendy Richards took the picture), wearing "we just saw Red Crossbills" smiles

Another side of birding... Atop Reddish Knob, snowy West Virginia mountains drew our attention and binoculars. Photo by Wendy Richards



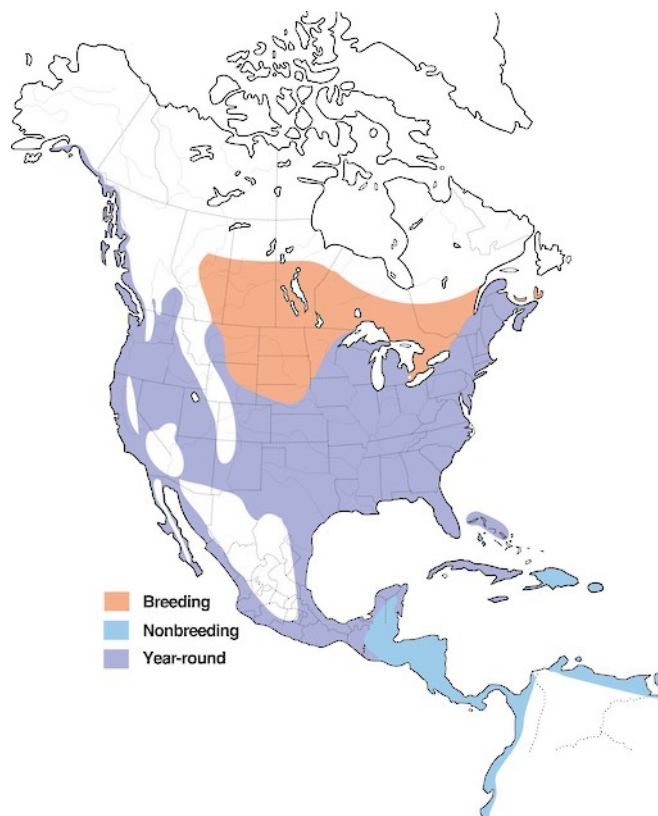
Bird Note: a rookery raises questions

Way across a field, there it was, the Great Blue Heron rookery: 40-some big shaggy nests high in the branches of several sycamore trees, along a horseshoe bend of Christians Creek. Twenty-seven herons were hanging out there, some of them pairs on nests, most of them doing not much. My curiosity piqued, once back home I consulted (as usual) [allaboutbirds](#) and [Birds of North America](#).

Rookery living, I read, helps herons avoid predation, with more eyes and ears on alert—though some Great Blues do nest as single pairs. As breeding season comes on, the male heron typically arrives and settles on a nest, where he then begins courting, pairing up with a new partner each year. He collects sticks from shrubs, trees, the ground, and abandoned nests and presents them to the female. She's the primary builder, weaving a stick platform or adding to an old one, and using finer materials to line a cup within it. The result may be a simple platform 20 inches across, or, eventually, an elaborate structure used over multiple years, 4 feet across and over 3 feet deep.

Surely Christians Creek couldn't feed all those herons and their families? It turns out these birds may travel 2 to 4 miles to feed, and they defend feeding territories from other herons with impressive outstretched-wing threat displays. Moreover, they're not just fisherfolk: they forage in grasslands and farm fields as well. To quote [allaboutbirds](#), "Great Blue Herons eat nearly anything within striking distance, including fish, amphibians, reptiles, small mammals, insects, and other birds."

Though we haven't heard of any Great Blue rookeries here in Rockbridge County, we do see the birds here all year 'round. But are they the same individuals through the seasons?



This map, from *Birds of North America*, shows the Heron's year-round range in purple, breeding-only in red, nonbreeding in blue. Clearly some Great Blues move north to breed and some move south to winter. Who goes where? Christmas Bird Count data are said to show that large numbers winter in the southeast U.S. But arrival and departure dates for various locations are scattered widely. And apparently Pacific coast populations don't migrate at all, though they do disperse after breeding. So I suspect "more research is needed," and I certainly didn't find an answer to the Rockbridge question posed above: maybe our herons are a mix of stay-here's and come-here's.

—Alexia Smith



Great Blue Heron. Photo by Dick Rowe

Bob's Perch: seasonal thoughts

Every season is a combination of continuity and change. The slide from February to March is kind of a bridge, when the winter resident Juncos and White-throated Sparrows hold firm while Phoebes and Towhees start to reappear (or at least make themselves more obvious, since some overwinter here) as they start to sing. This time is especially filled with anticipation – we even have an acronym for it as we keep track of FOS (First Of Season) dates to help us remember when we should see the return of old friends to their breeding grounds and others who just pass through on their way further north.

Nearby birders have recently seen Pine Warblers returning. It's apparently early for them, though they don't travel too far for the winter, so the warmer weather in the east may have encouraged them to start their travels before others who come farther.

This has been a winter without (for me at least) some of the visitors from years past. I haven't seen Pine Siskins or Purple Finches or Red-Breasted Nuthatches, though others have reported some of these. There are reports of American Woodcocks

beginning their amazing mating flights (if you haven't seen this and someone offers the chance, take it!), and of increasing activity in Great Blue Heron rookeries nearby.

Other elements of seasonal change appear as well, colors returning to the Goldfinches and Bluebirds, and the yellow flashes near the beaks of the White-Throated Sparrows becoming more prominent.

The random sightings noted above are mostly from emails I see because I'm signed up for the Shenandoah Valley Birds Listserv. The Virginia Society of Ornithology has information about many of these email services on a [webpage](#). I especially enjoyed a brief discussion on the Listserv this week about being ready for unexpected sightings. It's often the surprise encounters with birds that are the most fun for me.

—*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.

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