



February 2019 Newsletter

of the

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

Calendar

This month's program will meet in the Old Courthouse meeting room, in downtown Lexington, instead of at the Library. Field trips generally meet at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot.

Tues., Feb. 12, 7:30 a.m.—Field trip: all-day trip to Highland County *

Weds., Feb. 13, 7 p.m.—Program: Dr. Daniel Klem, Bird-Window Collisions *

Note: this program will take place in the Old Courthouse meeting room.

Dr. Klem will also speak at a W&L seminar, Thurs., Feb 14, 12:15 p.m.

Sat., Mar. 16, 8 a.m.—Quarterly Boxerwood bird walk

Weds., Apr. 10, 7 p.m.—Program: Maureen Eiger, subject TBA

Sat., May 11—Field trip: Apple Orchard Mountain

*see article below

In search of Golden Eagles: a trip to Highland County

Tuesday, February 12, 7:30 a.m. to approximately 7:30 p.m

Snow interfered with our first attempt to travel to Highland County, so we're trying again. Join us on a day-long trip to Virginia's Little Switzerland! Co-leaders will be Laura Neale and Wendy Richards.

Highland County offers an opportunity to see species that spend the winter at higher altitudes, such as the eastern race of the Golden Eagle. Other species we might see are American Kestrel, Eastern Screech Owl, Common Raven, and Black-capped Chickadee. Time permitting, on our return trip we'll visit either the Swoope area for Short-eared Owls or Lake Moomaw for ducks. Our expected return time is around 7:30 p.m.

We plan to meet at 7:30 a.m. at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot to carpool. We'll make a pit stop at a country store in Bluegrass, where food and drink can be purchased. Bring snacks and water, and dress for colder temps at high elevation. In the event of rain or snow, the trip will be canceled. For more information, contact Wendy at 463-5214 or richardsw@wlu.edu.

What happened here? Continue to next page.



Preventing bird-window collisions: a talk by Dr. Daniel Klem

Wednesday, February 13 at 7:00 p.m., Old Courthouse meeting room

A billion birds are estimated to die each year striking windows in the U.S. alone! Dr. Klem, Professor of Ornithology and Conservation Biology at Muhlenberg College, will talk about his pioneering research on bird-window collisions and preventive solutions.

Birds don't perceive windows as barriers: they see what appears to be an inviting space beyond, as in this photo. Often they strike windows in our homes as they fly to and from feeders.

The problem impacts all bird species, rare or common, and occurs in both residential and urban areas, usually during the daytime.

Come learn, from a leading expert, how to prevent these deaths at your home and work place!



photo courtesy of Dr. Klem

Dr. Klem will also address, at an open seminar at Washington and Lee University, ways to retrofit existing structures and install bird-safe panes with ultraviolet (UV) signals in new construction. The seminar will take place on Thursday, February 14, from 12:15-1:30 in Science Addition Room 214.

The public is welcome at both events.

The Rio Grande: what would The Wall mean for birds?

The Rockbridge Bird Club joined both large national organizations and smaller groups in signing a letter to the Department of Homeland Security to express opposition to construction of a new 33-mile extension of the Border Wall through several preserves and parks along the U.S.-Mexico border in the lower Rio Grande Valley, and in Big Bend National Park. Animals and birds move along and across the many ecosystems that straddle humans' political border. A wall severs life systems. Special landscapes farther west that have been negatively affected include the Sonoran and Chihuahuan deserts and the Sky Islands. Concerned scientists and citizens have for many years been describing the threats and already-occurring negative impacts to animals that are posed by a physical barrier.

The Rio Grande is the border between Texas and Mexico, and construction of a wall in the lower river valley would effectively chop up the few protected areas of natural habitat. As it is, only 5% of non-developed land remains.

Birders and butterfly lovers and naturalists and wildlife lovers who joined forces in a protest march were featured on the cover of the American Birding Association's August issue this year: hundreds of citizens marching to "SAVE THE SANTA ANA WILDLIFE REFUGE." And though that small refuge received a reprieve, by Congressional action, there are many other preserves and refuges at risk.



*Protesting the Wall at the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge.
Photo from the Center for Biological Diversity [website](#)*

I made my first trip ever down to the lower Rio Grande Valley in early November and was surprised in several ways. I was shocked to find an agricultural landscape where I had been expecting desert! The whole area is solidly developed, and the renowned birding destinations are relatively tiny. I thought there would be vast protected areas similar in scale to our neighboring National Forests. But the Rio Grande Valley preserves are sandwiched between the river and the highways. Fitting a wall in between would just crush the wildlife, by which I mean that there is so little non-developed habitat left that the fragmentation created by a wall would devastate what little remains.

I got to walk across the levy in Santa Ana along which the wall was planned to be constructed. It was clear that it would have doomed the refuge. We took a trail to the Rio Grande where we looked down from a bluff to a mighty river moving with a strong current. We got to see a Ringed Kingfisher, the largest kingfisher in North America, who called out its deep "machine-gun rattle" as he flew upriver.

Our guide told us that many people have drowned trying to swim across the river boundary below us.

Ringed Kingfisher
Photo by Ashok Khosla on [Birds of North America](#)
More photos by Khosla:
<https://www.seeingbirds.com>



Attending the renowned Rio Grande Valley Birding Festival, I anticipated ample opportunity to advocate for the birds. However, unless one stopped and specifically asked at one of the "relevant" exhibitors, like a "Friends" group or a birding organization, The Wall was invisible. The guides were all willing to talk quietly about it, and generally shrugged—in dismay? defeat? — even though their number-one priority is wildlife.

600 participants came down to look at birds for this year's 25th festival. At such a gathering of bird-lovers, I was naively expecting a huge welcome banner with advice and guidelines about how to advocate most effectively for wildlife. And much of the area's birding eco-tourism would be severely impacted by the construction of a thirty-some-mile wall extension. But there was not a single mention of The Wall.

So what was my favorite bird? The Great-tailed Grackles! They own Harlingen, Texas! Moving about in huge flocks—in the thousands—their non-stop sounds are perhaps best described as steroidal cacophony. The most surreal example was at one of their roosting sites on a tree alongside a very narrow cut-through road between two huge buildings in a shopping center. Their insanely creative sounds echoed between the walls, and provided a percussive musical experience that filled my soul with wonder.

—Laura Neale

Bob's Perch:

I began my relationship with birds as one way to understand the world around my new home, here in Rockbridge County. Over the years, familiarity with the Titmouse and Chickadee and White-throated Sparrow (and others) has become an important part of the feeling of "home" in winter.

Sometimes we have a chance to experience other places in winter, and once you've noticed the birds at home it's natural to look for them to help define a new place.

This winter we resisted the lure of the tropics and, in January, spent a week in Yellowstone and the Grand Tetons – an ecosystem that is otherworldly in every sense.

Our first new-bird encounter was with Black-billed Magpies, in Bozeman, Montana, where our small-group tour got underway. They're basically crows in long-tailed formalwear, similar in size and behavior, and they're much more commonly seen (at least by us) near towns than in the parks' open lands.



Black-billed Magpie.
Photo by
Aidan G. Coohill,
Macaulay Library.
[allaboutbirds](http://allaboutbirds.org)

The drive toward the park gave a taste of things to come, with small groups of Bison and Elk in the valley along the road. We were joined for a bit by a mature Bald Eagle who came down from one of the ridges and flew along with us for several minutes before heading back toward the mountains.

Yellowstone itself is breathtaking in every sense. We entered the park on snowshoes, on a trail that followed the Madison River. The water moves fast enough to be open here even after very cold nights, so we were able to see some waterfowl – mostly Mallards and the occasional Tundra Swan. (At least they were most likely Tundra Swans, though perhaps some were Trumpeter Swans, which can also spend time here during the winter. Cornell's All About Birds website says the easiest way to distinguish them is size—Trumpeters being much bigger—but I had no frame of reference, and everything is bigger out there.)

There were also several more Bald Eagles perched above the river—it seems their numbers are strong throughout North America. We also saw some Common Mergansers and Common Goldeneyes as we moved toward the Old Faithful Geyser basins.

Other highlights, in terms of birds, were some common residents of the Lodgepole Pine forest—mostly Canada Jays (All About Birds tells me these were Gray Jays till last year) and Mountain Chickadees. These can be hard to see as they move quickly through the pines, but you often hear them, sounding a lot like their eastern relatives.

Beyond the birds, we spent some time one morning with Limpy, a coyote we found sleeping at the base of Old Faithful, who followed us for nearly two miles through the hot springs, mud pots, and other features nearby. And along the Snake River on the

way from Yellowstone to the Tetons we were entertained by a group of four river otters who so distracted us (while riding in a tank-tracked vehicle) that we went off the road and got stuck in the snow drifts. No one was disappointed with the delay, and the otters were unperturbed by our presence.

It was a remarkable week in a landscape whose first European explorer was a member of the Lewis and Clark expedition who stayed behind to explore on his own; others refused for decades to believe his reports of geysers and boiling mudpots. The species that spend time here are able to manage environmental challenges found nowhere else in the world.

—*Bob Biersack*



Photo by Bob Biersack

Please visit the LOST & FOUND on the next page!

LOST at Bird Count Potluck—have you FOUND spoon, lid, or bowl?

* **A large serving spoon**, perhaps 10-12 inches, silver plate (but well-used/worn). The handle is plain with perhaps some sort of pattern/line following the edge. If found, please contact Dick Rowe at rowera@vmi.edu.

* **The matching lid to an 8-inch saucepan, not replaceable, and a 6-inch wooden bowl**. If found, please contact ineale@rockbridge.net.



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 Jan Smith, 564 Big Hill Road, 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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