



May 2019 Newsletter

of the

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

Calendar

This month's program will be held in Kendal Hall, in the Anderson Center of Kendal at Lexington. Field trips generally meet at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot.

Weds., May 8, 7 p.m.—Program on native grasses by John Dickerson, **at Kendal ***

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

**see article below*

All things seem possible in May.

— Edwin Way Teale, American naturalist (1899–1980)

Program on Native Grasses on May 8

John Dickerson will give a program on the history of native grasses and their importance in bird conservation on **Wednesday, May 8, at 7pm in Kendal Hall** (located in the Anderson Center of Kendal at Lexington: see [map](#)). Entitled "A History and Appreciation of North American Native Grass Cover," his talk will chronicle the evolution of our grasslands from before the arrival of Europeans to today's commercial seed production and conservation practices.



John Dickerson field-testing native grasses. Photo provided by John.

John earned two degrees in forest hydrology, then got interested in the study of indigenous plants and their use in solving conservation problems. As a specialist with the USDA and Natural Resources Conservation Service (now retired), he conducted

field tests and managed demonstration projects with native plants, particularly warm-season grasses that help stabilize the soil and provide valuable habitat for ground-nesting birds and other wildlife.

We're grateful to Kendal for hosting us this month and to John for offering to share his knowledge with us.

Field Trip to Apple Orchard Mountain, May 11

Migration is in full swing: don't miss the Club's yearly half-day pilgrimage to Apple Orchard Mountain, in search of warblers and others! Meet at 6:30 a.m. on Saturday, May 11, at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot for carpooling; alternatively, meet the group at 7:30 a.m. at the Sunset Fields pull-off on the Blue Ridge Parkway (mile marker 78.4).

From there, we'll follow the access road on foot to the top of Apple Orchard Mountain, a gradual up-and-back walk of about two miles in all—with frequent stopping and listening. Our leader will be Dick Rowe, Professor of Biology at VMI. For more information, or in case of doubtful weather, contact Wendy Richards at 540-463-5214 or richardsw@wlu.edu



*Male Rose-breasted Grosbeak—migrating through, or perhaps staying on to breed.
Photo by Dick Rowe*

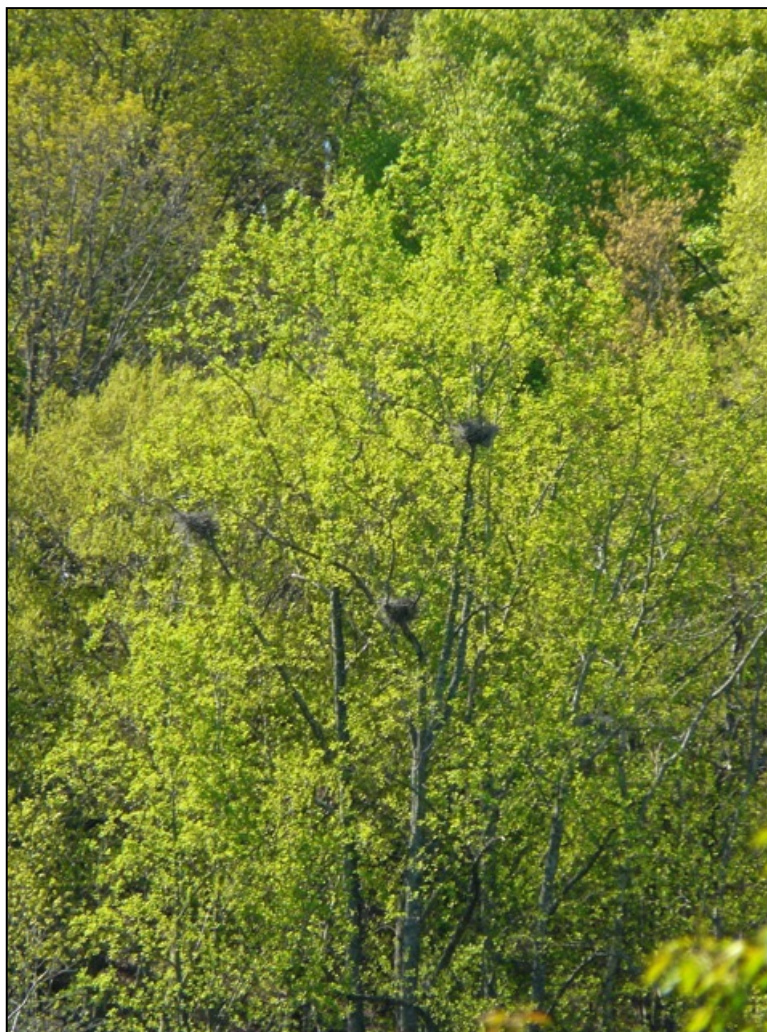
Field Trip Report: the heron rookery

Five of us met on Monday morning, April 22nd, at the Rocketts' farm in SW Rockbridge County, to check out the newly discovered heron rookery. We found four active nests, in a Tulip Poplar tree located on the bank above North Buffalo Creek. The Rocketts have a small farm pond that they recently stocked with fish, which along with the creek, could have been a lure for the herons to set up housekeeping close by.

In addition to the rookery, our group found a nice variety of species hanging around the Rocketts' lovely fields and yard. We witnessed a close encounter of five ravens squabbling with each other. Below is the eBird list that Annie recorded with assistance from others' eyes and ears, as well as a photo. Thanks go to Marty & Kermit for welcoming birders to their farm, and to Annie for keeping the list.

— Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair for the Rockbridge Bird Club

Wild Turkey 1
Mourning Dove 5
Great Blue Heron 2
Black Vulture 5
Turkey Vulture 14
Red-bellied Woodpecker 2
Pileated Woodpecker 1
Eastern Phoebe 1
Blue Jay 3
American Crow 4
Common Raven 5
Tree Swallow 22
Barn Swallow 8
Carolina Chickadee 1
Tufted Titmouse 1
Carolina Wren 1
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher 2
Ruby-crowned Kinglet 1
Eastern Bluebird 4
American Robin 8
Northern Mockingbird 1
European Starling 4
American Goldfinch 2
Chipping Sparrow 6
Field Sparrow 4
White-throated Sparrow 2
Song Sparrow 4
Eastern Towhee 1
Eastern Meadowlark 19
Orchard Oriole 1
Common Grackle 7
Northern Cardinal 6



Small heron rookery. Four nests, activity in all four. Three obvious nests, with one hidden behind leaves on the lower right. Photo by Wendy Richards

Field Trip Report: Brushy Hills, April 27

The Annual Brushy Hills bird walk always satisfies the early-rising humans with a mixed chorus of residents singing for spring territories and migrants newly arrived or en route to breeding grounds. Some of the long-distance birds are so hungry it takes committed searching of the foliage—then to discover a silent surprise: this year, a Black-throated Blue Warbler!



Black-throated Blue Warbler: this one's singing! Photo by Dick Rowe

Here are the 29 species we saw or heard in Brushy Hills: 1 Red-tailed Hawk, 1 Barred Owl, 1 Red-bellied Woodpecker, 1 Pileated Woodpecker, 1 Northern Flicker, 1 Blue-headed Vireo, 1 Red-eyed Vireo, 2 Blue Jay, 1 American Crow, 1 Carolina Chickadee, 1 Tufted Titmouse, 1 Red-breasted Nuthatch, 1 White-breasted Nuthatch, 2 Carolina Wren, 1 Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, 1 Eastern Bluebird, 2 Wood Thrush, 3 Purple Finch, 7 American Goldfinch, 1 Brown-headed Cowbird, 3 Ovenbird, 1 Worm-eating Warbler, 1 Black-and-white Warbler, 1 Northern Parula, 1 Black-throated Blue Warbler, 3 Yellow-rumped Warbler, 3 Black-throated Green Warbler, 1 Scarlet Tanager, and 2 Northern Cardinal.

May thanks to our guides: Paul Cabe, W&L biology professor, and his son Lock.

—Laura Neale

Bob's Perch

Spring comes in layers, and each of our senses is confronted with daily changes as breeders and migrants find their way here. It seems like there are daily additions to the forest and fields around us. For me Spring began slowly, with the earliest migrants about a month ago seemingly coming one at a time. Most days since have included new voices not heard here since last summer and fall. Among the earliest newcomers were Field Sparrows on the edge of the fields and, some days later, Chipping Sparrows, along with Phoebes who have nested on the house for several years. In the forest in the last week or so the Waterthrushes have been joined by Ovenbirds, Wood Thrushes, Worm-eating Warblers, and most recently Scarlet Tanagers now coming fast and furious with several new voices each day.

Even as new species arrive, their behavior moves quickly toward the breeding process. This morning I found two of the Louisiana Waterthrushes interacting with each other along the bank of our stream. It's pretty close to perfect habitat for them, and I'll be looking for a nest on the ground or in the rocks at the water's edge. That might be a different location this year, as all the rain we've had has meant a much greater flow in the last few months.

It feels to me like the pace of change is faster this year than in the past. I've often watched the season's progress through the different altitudes that surround us. It's as if we can look back toward winter by looking up, and there are usually weeks between the arrival of leaves in the tree canopy in the valley and the same weather reaching the peaks. This year Spring's march up the hills has seemed much faster; the size of the leaves (and their ability to hide the birds) seems to change within hours now.

The speed of change this year was brought home to me this week when I noticed a pair of bluebirds using one of the nest boxes. Apparently I hadn't been paying attention, because when I looked in the box there weren't eggs, there were nestlings, and they already had the spots and dark blue wing feathers that mean they've been growing for some time. It's probably been a month (i.e., early April) since the eggs were laid – far earlier than I would have expected.

Maybe it's my aging mind that makes the rush through Spring feel more frantic this year, but I find myself wondering if I'm the only one having trouble with the pace of change.

— Bob Biersack



*In the woods, look down to see another layer of spring life:
Bear Corn (Conopholis americana). Photo by David Rosher*



Found and photographed by Lock Cabe, Paul Cabe's son, on the Brushy Hills bird walk: a moth —formerly a moth—invaded by a *Cordyceps* fungus. *Cordyceps* species parasitize insects, mainly; the fungus first takes over the brain with its thread-like mycelial strands, sometimes directing the host's behavior, and then replaces the host's tissue. Finally, the fungal fruiting bodies emerge (those spikes). Did the fungus first cause the moth to go to a place favorable for dispersing fungal spores??

If you recognize the species, let us know (there are 400 worldwide). Most of the above information comes from Wikipedia.

—Alexia Smith

P.S. For one more *bird* photo, go on to page 7.



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 Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

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Canada Warbler. Photo by Dick Rowe