



November 2019 Newsletter

of the

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

Calendar

Please note our **NEW MEETING DAY: MONDAY**

*The Club's November 11 meeting will be in the basement meeting room of the **Grace Episcopal Church Parish Hall**, on West Washington Street in downtown Lexington. Field trips generally meet at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot.*

- Thurs., Nov. 7, 8 a.m. to midday—Field trip: Augusta Spring Wetlands *
- Mon., Nov. 11, 7 p.m.—Program: "Birding Western Alaska," by Len Smock (note location: **Grace Episcopal Church Parish Hall** basement, in Lexington) *
- Sat., Dec. 21, all day—Christmas Bird Count
- Sat., Dec. 21, 5 to 7 p.m.—Christmas Bird Count Potluck at Boxerwood
- Fri., Jan 31-Sun., Feb. 2—[VSO](#) winter field trip: Outer Banks *
- Jan./Feb.—All-day field trip to Highland County; "on-the-fly" event, date depending on weather forecast
- Mon., Feb. 10, 7 p.m.—Program: local panel discussing Birds for Thirds Program in Rockbridge County
- Mon., Apr. 13, 7 p.m.—Program: "Our Wonderful Wood Warblers," by Bob Schamerhorn

*see article below

Many of the birds Audubon painted are now extinct, and still we go on killing them, more or less casually, with our pesticides and wires and machinery.

— John Burnside (writer, b. March 19, 1955)

Field Trip to Augusta Spring Wetlands Thursday, November 7

Rockbridge Birders are planning a half-day field trip to Augusta County. We'll visit the Augusta Springs Wetlands and walk its 2/3-mile easy loop through meadows, forests, and wetlands. Species we may see include Pied-billed Grebe, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, and a diversity of sparrows.

Meet at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot at 8 a.m. so that we can carpool for the 50-minute drive up to western Augusta County. We'll plan on returning around midday. Bring your binocs! Wear good shoes, and bring water and snacks if needed. Please call Bob Biersack at 703-772-9373 or Laura Neale at 540-460-9237 if you have any questions. Dress WARMLY! TENTATIVE RAIN DATE Nov 12.

—Laura Neale

Len Smock to talk on “Birding in Far West Alaska” Monday, September 11
(note location: Grace Episcopal Church Parish Hall, West Washington St., Lexington)

At our meeting at 7 pm on Monday evening, November 11, Len Smock will take us along on his birding adventures in far west Alaska, from Nome to St. Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea—an area especially rich in bird species. St. Lawrence is so close to Siberia that birders may sight Asian bird species that forage at sea with their North American counterparts – seabirds including auklets, murre, puffins, guillemots, and eiders.

Len will also describe the lifeways of the Yup’ik Native Alaskans on St. Lawrence, and the experience of birding in a centuries-old boneyard of whale, seal, and walrus skeletal remains.

Len is currently a board member of the Virginia Society of Ornithology and President of the Richmond Audubon Society. He’s an Emeritus Professor of Biology at Virginia Commonwealth University, where he was director of VCU’s environmental field station, the Rice Rivers Center, located on the James River.

A **brief Annual Meeting** will precede the program: Jan Smith will give a Treasurer’s report and Laura Neale will report on conservation organizations and initiatives the Club has supported over the past year.



Bluethroat. Photo by Len Smock

A member of the Old World flycatcher family, the Bluethroat is one the few birds that breed in North America (in a small area of Alaska) and winter in Asia.

Virginia Society of Ornithology Winter Field Trip:

the Outer Banks of North Carolina, January 31 - February 2, 2020

Club members who have been on VSO trips rave about them! The destinations and leaders are special, and so is the chance to meet birders from across Virginia.

For this winter trip, birders will gather at the Comfort Inn South Oceanfront in Nags Head, trip headquarters. The hotel is close to 1,000-foot-long Jennette's Pier, which offers close views of ocean birds; last year, species seen from the Pier included Dovekie, Razorbill, Red-breasted Merganser, Horned Grebe, and Northern Gannet. Other destinations for the daily sorties include Lake Mattamuskeet, Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, and the Alligator River, with a variety of waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and land birds. For more information, including reservation details, visit the [VSO homepage](#).

Bob's Perch: State of the Birds

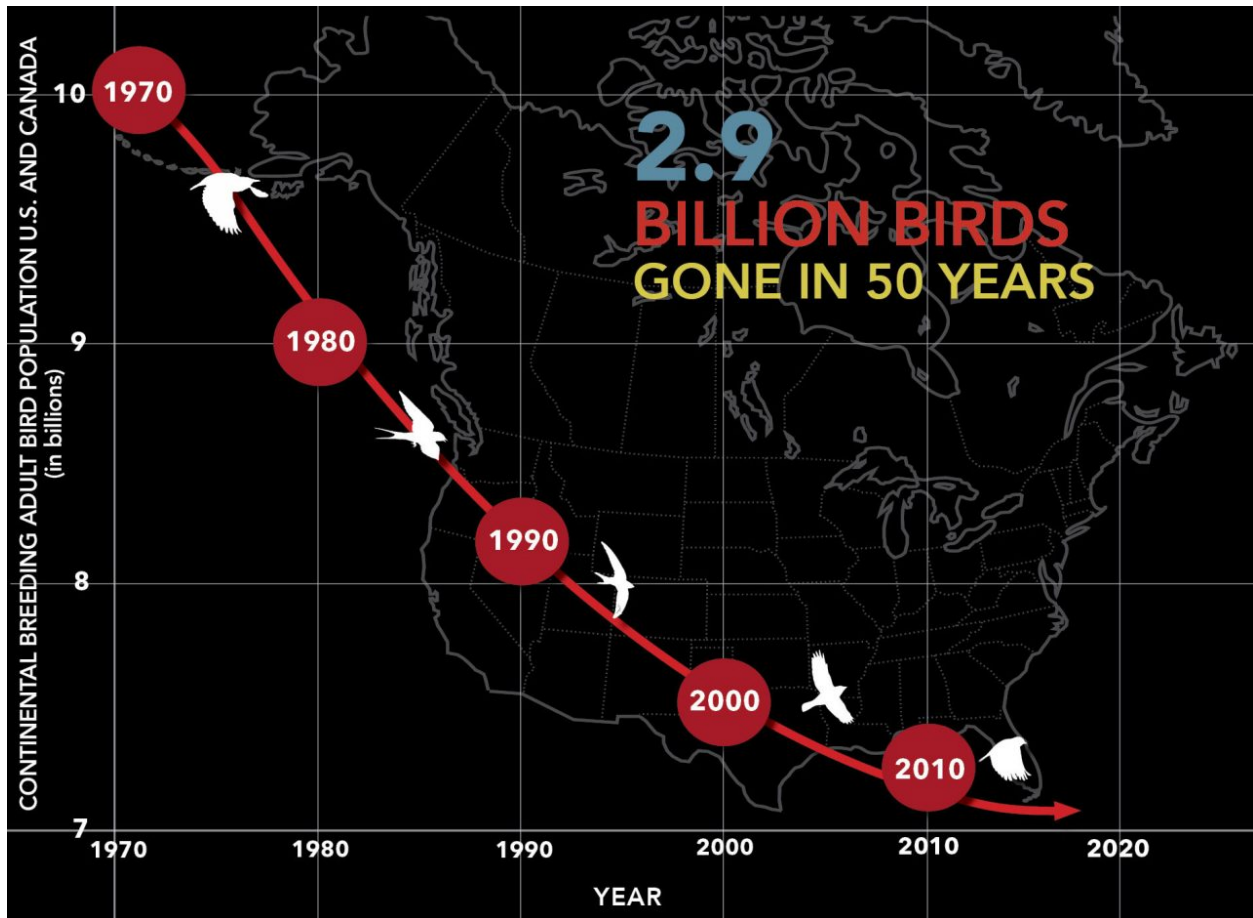
Not long after we moved to Lexington full time, I walked out of the house one fall day and noticed two highly distinctive birds in the maple tree in the yard. They were Robin-size but with thick beaks and bright yellow flashes on their heads. I was new to birding, but a few minutes with a bird guidebook told me that they were Evening Grosbeaks. I knew I hadn't seen them before (at least I never noticed) but I didn't expect the reaction when I asked about them at the next Bird Club meeting. There was a lot of excitement and some dismay that I hadn't reported them quickly or gotten a picture of the birds.

Several people at that meeting could remember seeing these birds in some numbers many years ago, and a quick look at history shows their numbers used to be significantly higher in this part of the country. In [Birds of the Greater Rockbridge County, Virginia, Area](#) Dick Rowe reports that they were included in almost every Christmas Bird Count from 1968 to 1987, with a high count total of 246 in 1975.



Evening Grosbeak. Photo by Céline Bellemare, from the Macaulay Library at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

The 1970s, during which many of us came of age, was also the starting point for the most comprehensive study yet of North American bird population change, published in Science (one of the world's top academic journals) this September. As Gustave Axelson notes in the [current issue of Living Bird](#), the quarterly magazine of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology: "If you were alive in the year 1970, more than one in four birds in the U.S. and Canada has disappeared within your lifetime."



Graphic by Jillian Ditner, from Gustave Axelson's [article](#) in the Autumn 2019 of Living Bird

These declines have occurred to a greater or lesser extent in every type of ecosystem and across the full range of 529 species included in the study. But some species have been declining more rapidly than others. As a group, eastern forest birds have suffered smaller losses than many others, declining by about 17% in the last 50 years. Grassland birds, however, which are also important residents and visitors here, have lost more than 50% of their adult populations during the same period. The forest-dwelling Evening Grosbeak is among the most devastated individual species, with a 90% decline in adult birds. Even some of our more familiar residents are seriously affected: we see a 50% decline in Common Grackles and 40% losses in Eastern Towhees and Savannah Sparrows. There are 618 million fewer Wood-Warblers today than were found just two human generations ago.

Clearly a change of this magnitude has many causes, but all of them—habitat loss, a warming climate, increased populations of domestic cats, collisions with structures, and more—involve the effect of human activity on the earth. There can be no question that we are responsible for this extraordinary population loss.

But the fact that we are to blame also suggests that our actions can help reverse this process. Every step we take to reduce window strikes by installing effective

measures to show birds that windows are barriers will help to change these trends. Keeping our pet cats indoors will also have an impact, as will habitat improvements like using native plants and improving habitats we know birds rely on, avoiding pesticides, reducing use of plastics, and supporting habitat-friendly agricultural practices like purchasing only certified bird-friendly coffee. None of these actions represents sacrifices in our own lifestyles. Rather, they are just informed choices that allow us to make meaningful improvements to the chances of bird survival. When our actions are combined with larger societal changes, like the movement toward renewable energy and to more sustainable food production and development patterns, we can hope that the next generation of citizen scientists will document population growth across the full range of birds with which we share this remarkable continent.

—Bob Biersack



[Stellar's Eider](#). Photo by Len Smock.

This species has a very restricted range, and its populations appear to be declining. It is considered threatened in the United States and rare in Russia.



JOIN THE CLUB OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP!
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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.

Club Officers

President, Laura Neale	Field Trip Chair, Wendy Richards
Vice President, Bob Biersack	Publicity Chair, Bonnie Bernstein
Secretary, Joyce Cambron	Membership Chair, Adrienne Bodie
Treasurer, Jan Smith	Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe
Program Chair needed	

Newsletter edited by Alexia Smith. Logo by Jennifer Cox
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