



February 2020 Newsletter

of the

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

Calendar

Please note NEW MEETING DAY: **Monday** and NEW LOCATION: **Brady Chapel**,
Lexington Presbyterian Church (enter on Main Street between Subway
Sandwich Shop and main church entrance)

Mon., Feb. 10, 7 p.m.—Program: "Bluebirds of Wonder," at Brady Chapel *

Sat., Feb. 15, 9 a.m.—Field Trip: Amherst Lakes with Donna Mateski *

Sat., Feb. 27, 7 p.m.—a talk by Dr. Drew Lanham at Sweet Briar College, Lynchburg *

Sat., Mar. 21, 8 a.m.—Quarterly Morning Birdwalk at Boxerwood, with Kerry Kilday *

Mon., Apr. 13, 7 p.m. —Program: "Our Wonderful Wood Warblers," by Bob
Schamerhorn

*see article below

Birds matter because they give us wings. And because if we save the
birds, we will save the world. —Pepper Trail, USFWS forensic ornithologist

Program on Monday Feb. 10, 7 p.m.

Brady Chapel, Lexington Presbyterian Church (see directions above)

**Bluebirds of Wonder: Cultivating a love of the wild (and of science)
with "Birds for Thirds"**



What can we do at school to help birds? For children in five local elementary schools the answer is: support bluebird conservation trails. Now in its 6th year, the Birds for Thirds program enlists children as scientific nest monitors for bluebirds and other cavity dwellers on their school campuses. With help from community volunteers and their teachers, third graders discover firsthand the drama and pathos of the season while developing a sense of curiosity, empathy, and wonder.

Find out more about this project with a panel presentation and discussion at the February Bird Club meeting. Panelists will describe the project and its findings as well its role in connecting students to nature and its care. The presentation will also include some memorable slides and stories! Panelists include

Boxerwood education director Elise Sheffield; Waddell third-grade teachers Laura Squires, Melissa Rowsey and Mindy Laubscher; and adult volunteers Pete Hamel (U.S. Park Service) and Aileen Spurgeon (Virginia Master Naturalists).

—*Elise Sheffield, Education Director, Boxerwood*

—*Photo: Central student monitoring a nest box using a mirror, by Bonnie Bernstein*

Meeting bonus: Arne Peterson of Bath County, founder of the Virginia Highlands Wood Duck Club, has been instrumental in the placement of 150 Wood Duck boxes in the James River watershed over the past 25 years. He'll spend a few minutes inviting interested persons to get a Wood Duck box on their property.

Upcoming Field Trips

Amherst County Lakes with Donna Mateski—Saturday, Feb. 15th

This is the time of year to go looking for ducks! Three Amherst County lakes will be our goal on this trip of about 6 hours. We're fortunate to have as our leader Donna Mateski, who lives in Amherst County and is knowledgeable about the lakes and the species that frequent them.

We'll meet at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot at 9:00 a.m. and carpool east on Rt. 60 to the Long Mountain Wayside, where we'll rendezvous with Donna. We plan to bird with her for approximately 4 hours, starting back to Lexington around 2:00 p.m. Donna notes: "In four hours we should be able to go to all three lakes—Mill Creek, Stonehouse, and Thrashers Lakes—but we also have some nearby options if waterfowl are not abundant."

Layers of clothing and appropriate footwear for muddy conditions are suggested; also, bring water and snacks. In case of inclement weather, the trip will be held on Sunday, February 23rd. It would be helpful if you let me know you might join us (Wendy, at 463-5214 or richardsw@wlu.edu), but you can also just show up.



Two male Redheads. Photo by Dick Rowe

Boxerwood morning bird walk with Kerry Kilday—Saturday, Mar. 21st

Come out for a Spring Equinox tour of the [Boxerwood](#) Woodland Garden! We'll meet in the parking lot at 8:00 a.m. for a walk of approximately 2 hours.

Kerry started our tradition of Boxerwood bird walks and will return to share his expertise as he guides us through the Garden's diverse and easy-to-navigate trails. As Kerry notes: "By then there will be some early movement of birds with the changing of seasons." He welcomes inexperienced as well as experienced birders.

For more information about either of these field trips, or in case of doubtful weather, contact me at 463-5214 or richardsw@wlu.edu. Hope to see you on an outing!

—Wendy Richards, Field Chair

An evening with Dr. Drew Lanham at Sweet Briar College

Club members Laura Neale and Bob Biersack are both enthusiastic about Lanham's book *The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature* and recommend going over the mountain to hear him speak. He'll be at the Sweet Briar Chapel in Amherst Chapel on Saturday, February 27, from 7 to 9 p.m.

In the words of his sponsor, the Virginia Association for Environmental Education: "in this intimate evening, Dr. Lanham will reflect on his lifelong love of birds and wildlife and the part they play as connectors across time, place and cultures throughout our history." The VAAE's Page Hutchinson describes him as "a widely published author and award-nominated poet, writing about his experiences as a birder, hunter and wild, wandering soul."

Tickets are available to the general public for \$25.00 [here](#). Someone may wish to organize a carpool to this event. If that someone is you, please email the Club and another someone will facilitate!



Drew Lanham

Act Now to Save the Colony!
The Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel (HRBT) Expansion
and the Plight of the Terns' Paved-over Nesting Habitat

Here's how this crisis is described in a nutshell by the [American Bird Conservancy](#) (ABC): "Without immediate action, at least 20,000 migratory birds will be homeless this spring thanks to the Commonwealth of Virginia's decision to pave Hampton Roads' South Island without creating alternative habitat for the state's largest waterbird colony."



*A tern colony similar to this one has thrived on Virginia's South Island for at least 30 years.
Photo by outdoorsman/Shutterstock, from the ABC website*

The Rockbridge Bird Club has responded by submitting e-mail and snail mail comments to the following Virginia leaders: Governor Northam, Secretary of Natural Resources Strickler, Department of Transportation (VDOT) Commissioner Brich, and Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) Executive Director Brown. We urged that the state take immediate action to provide a temporary nesting area for the birds who will soon be returning this year, and that a replacement island be constructed for future years.

In addition, I attended the VDGIF Board Meeting on Thursday, Jan 23, and joined perhaps twenty folks in making public comments (I spoke on my own behalf). Before the public comments, a DGIF director educated new Board members, and everybody else present, about the HRBT permitting process. She said that between the permits and agency timelines, the earliest a replacement island could be constructed—if the money were found—is 7-10 years.

The first speaker to advocate immediate action was Michal Parr, President of [ABC](#). He used slides with maps that highlighted the critical location for this tern colony, and made a powerful argument for Virginia to take urgent measures. Teta Kain, who has given programs for our Club, also stood up to speak: she held a poster and just said, beautifully, "Please, save the birds." A young man who had driven down from Alexandria because he'd seen the action alert on the ABC facebook page pointed out that ABC's 750,000 followers around the nation are interested in how Virginia will respond to the crisis.

(what to do: next page)

Please consider writing personal letters to the [Governor](#), [Secretary of Natural Resources](#) Strickler, [Secretary of Transportation](#) Valentine, and your state legislators. Information can be found at ABC (including a model letter [here](#)) and in a Richmond Times-Dispatch [piece](#) by a former chief of staff to two Virginia Governors. And updates are available on the Save the Birds at Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel [facebook page](#).

—Laura Neale, President and Conservation Chair

Bob's Perch:

The winter edition of *Living Bird*, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's magazine, has a feature on what birding might be like in the future. It's written by two people, Peter Hart and Steve Kelling, who have been instrumental in designing and implementing some of the modern tools many of us are still trying to master as we progress as birders. Their expectations center on two things: more power and knowledge built into the tools we might use; and the ability of those tools to make birding more of a group effort, where we will experience birding jointly with others both locally and around the world. So, for example, we might be using binoculars that are "intelligent" enough to help us with identification automatically as we look at or listen to specific birds. Our phones, which are already important tools for some of us in helping identify and record our sightings, will grow smarter and more autonomous—meaning a connection to the internet might be less important as the phone grows "smarter" on its own.

Beyond physical tools, Hart and Kelling talk about the interconnectedness (is that even a word?) of all of these devices and maybe more. They describe a world in which your bird feeder can communicate on its own, effectively making project Feederwatch an automatic process. Nonetheless, there is still a role for people, and turning some tools like eBird into social networks that help us communicate directly with each other locally and birders everywhere is also a big part of these future expectations. The authors foresee games and competitions that use these tools to keep people (younger people?) engaged in birding activities.

As someone who spent a career developing tools to collect, validate, and summarize big volumes of data, I'm intrigued about the potential this future might offer. There is no question that the ease of creating and



Illustration by Virginia Greene in [Living Bird Magazine](#), January 14, 2020

integrating eBird data into a world-wide database has contributed to greater scientific understanding of population changes and behavioral patterns, shaping our perception of so many species.

I have to admit, though, that I'm conflicted about the impact of these technologies on the experience of birding. Maybe because of my background I find the physical and personal experience of birding to be its most attractive characteristics. Whether in a group or on one's own, the act of observing different birds and their behavior draws one into nature—in a unique way, for me at least. Trying to move from a glimpse of movement in the trees or brush to an identification means careful consideration of what I think I've seen, waiting for another look while always trying to be skeptical about my interpretation and thinking about other possibilities. This often leads me to a frustrating uncertainty about what I've seen, but it also brings me closely in touch with everything around me in a more intense and personal way than I get just walking in the woods or along a stream.

Mentally breaking away to look at my phone and search through even the tools we have today is jarring. It feels like a break with the reality of the experience, and while it often allows me to make an accurate ID or keep better records of the birds I've seen, it feels much more shallow – almost "unfair" compared with the skill and experience that the best of our birders share and that I think makes their experience in the field so much richer.

So will intelligent binoculars and fully integrated apps allow me to be a "better" birder as the years go by? Almost surely yes, but will they really improve the experience of birding? Sort of, because I could never gain the experience I would need to go it alone at this point in my life; but while something is gained, something else is lost, or at least diminished, when we move beyond our individual senses.

—Bob Biersack

Report: Highland County field trip, Friday, January 17

Four of us enjoyed a cold but mostly sunny day as we made the trek to Highland County and back. We weren't able to locate any Golden Eagles, but we saw a good number of Bald Eagles, Red-tailed Hawks, and American Kestrels. We also checked out Mill Run Pond along Rt. 220, where a nice variety of ducks were hanging out.

Here is a list of the 24 species we were able to identify: Bald Eagle 4 (one was a third-year, on the ground eating carrion, and we also saw a nest in a different location); Red-tailed Hawk 7; American Kestrel 10; Canada Goose 100; Common Merganser 6; Hooded Merganser 2; American Wigeon 3; Gadwall 2; Bufflehead 6; Ring-necked Duck 75; American Crow 9; Common Raven 4; Bluejay 8; Eastern Meadowlark 6; Belted Kingfisher 1; Carolina Wren 2; American Goldfinch 5; House Finch 6; Mourning Dove 4; Song Sparrow 1; Rock Dove 9; Dark-eyed Junco 15; Eastern Bluebird 2; Turkey Vulture 2.

—Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair

Report: Christmas Bird Count, Saturday, December 21

The 2019 Christmas Bird Count for the Lexington Count Circle was conducted on Saturday the 21st of December. Count day, which began at 6am for those parties searching for owls, was clear and the temperatures ranged from 25 degrees at 6am to 52 degrees at 5pm. This year marked the 94th Lexington area bird count and the 83rd consecutive count for the area. A total of 79 species and 6,872 individual birds were identified this year on count day.

This year's count was highlighted by the presence of a Virginia Rail at a private pond within the count circle. Virginia Rails are very unusual in the county and this bird represents only the 3rd record of this species and the first ever on the Christmas Bird

Count. In addition to the rail, a number of duck species were seen with an unusually large number of Hooded Mergansers and Common Mergansers. Other ducks seen were Northern Pintail, Red-breasted Merganser, Ruddy Duck, Gadwall, Wood Duck, Mallard, American Black Duck, Northern Shoveler, and Green-winged Teal. Barn Owls, Eastern-Screech Owls, Barred Owls, and Great Horned Owls were also heard or seen during the count.



Virginia Rail. Photo by Dick Rowe

Here are the 2019 Lexington Count participants: John and Sarah Burleson; Barry Kinzie; Bob Epperson; Bonnie Bernstein; Kelly and Henry Lowe; Steve Hodapp; Henry Eichelberger; Kerry Kilday; Melinda Robinson; Laura Neale; Chris Wise; Lane Norris; Kathy Morikawa; Bob Biersak; Rodney Davis; Chris Baroody; Joyce Cambron; Jerry and Glenda Jackson; Barbara, Lucy, and Dick Rowe; Don Holmes; Danny and Susan Hoehne; Scott and Andrea Dransfield; Kit Huffman; George Tolley; Greg Bowyer; Wayne, Julien, Diana, and Amanda Dymacekt.

2019's complete count was as follows: pied-billed grebe 2; great blue heron 11; black vulture 47; turkey vulture 182; Canada goose 378; wood duck 7; green-winged teal 14; American black duck 13; mallard 62; northern pintail 1; northern shoveler 1; gadwall 24; hooded merganser 120; common merganser 86; red-breasted merganser 2; ruddy duck 1; bald eagle 7; sharp-shinned hawk 1; Cooper's hawk 9; unidentified accipiter species 1; red-shouldered hawk 11; red-tailed hawk 31; American kestrel 17; wild turkey 9; Virginia rail 1; killdeer 5; Wilson's snipe 2; rock pigeon 188; mourning dove 494; barn owl 2; eastern screech-owl 12; great horned owl 3; barred owl 1; belted kingfisher 15.

Also, red-headed woodpecker 1; red-bellied woodpecker 68; yellow-bellied sapsucker 34; downy woodpecker 60; hairy woodpecker 10; northern flicker 27; pileated

woodpecker 30; eastern phoebe 6; blue jay 280; American crow 429; fish crow 1; common raven 37; black-capped chickadee 43; Carolina chickadee 131; tufted titmouse 163; red-breasted nuthatch 2; white-breasted nuthatch 49; brown creeper 1; Carolina wren 128; winter wren 4; golden-crowned kinglet 62; ruby-crowned kinglet 15.

Also, eastern bluebird 138; hermit thrush 15; American robin 609; northern mockingbird 60; European starling 1,215; cedar waxwing 129; yellow-rumped warbler 78; eastern towhee 21; field sparrow 49; fox sparrow 2; song sparrow 80; swamp sparrow 10; white-throated sparrow 230; white-crowned sparrow 56; dark-eyed junco 179; northern cardinal 277; red-winged blackbird 127; eastern meadowlark 210; common grackle 22; brown-headed cowbird 1; purple finch 16; house finch 88; American goldfinch 112; and house sparrow 8.

— Dick Rowe, Lexington Count Circle Coordinator

Editor's note: to learn more about the Lexington Count's history and the CBC more broadly, look for a longer version of this article on the Bird Club's [website](#).



JOIN THE CLUB OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP!

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

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