



**March 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: **Murray Hall**,  
Lexington Presbyterian Church (enter on Main Street between the church itself  
and the Subway, and look for the Brady Chapel space on the left)

Sat., Mar. 21, 8 a.m.—Morning Bird Walk at Boxerwood, with Kerry Kilday \*

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

Fri., May 1 - Sun., May 3—Virginia Society of Ornithology [Annual Meeting](#), with field  
trips and speakers, in Williamsburg, VA

Sat., May 9—Half-day field trip to Apple Orchard Mountain with Dick Rowe, meeting  
time TBA

\*see article below

Be like the bluebird who never is blue  
For he knows from his upbringing what singing can do

— Cole Porter, 1891-1964

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

Come out and celebrate the Spring Equinox with a stroll through the diverse  
habitats of Boxerwood Nature Center and Woodland Garden. Celebrating 20 years of  
leadership in environmental education, Boxerwood offers an ideal location to see a nice  
variety of local and seasonal species.

Kerry started our tradition of Boxerwood bird walks and will return to share his  
expertise as he guides us through the garden's 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. Walkers will meet in the  
parking lot at 8 a.m. for a walk of approximately 2 hours.

Boxerwood is at 963 Ross Road, Lexington. For more information or in case of  
doubtful weather, contact me at 463-5214 or [richardsw@wlu.edu](mailto:richardsw@wlu.edu)

—Wendy Richards, Field Chair



Female Eastern Bluebird. Photo by Gordon Dimmig, on the All About Birds website.

### **3 billion birds lost since 1970: are there any hopeful signs?**

This edition of the Newsletter is full of Eastern Bluebirds.

Amid the bad news about the decline of bird numbers in North America, our Bluebird is a bright spot. In the past, this species declined seriously in many areas, due primarily to loss of habitat and loss of nesting sites. During recent decades its population has been increasing again, helped by birdhouses. So we *can* make a difference! See Bonnie's article on page 3 about Bluebird boxes along Woods Creek.

Note that the loss of nesting sites is one of *two* main reasons for the Eastern Bluebird's earlier decline. The other cause is loss of habitat. And loss of habitat is the primary cause overall of decline in bird populations — and of biodiversity loss in general. So we need to take action on habitat as well, doing all we can to sustain the whole web of life — which in turn sustains us. See the conservation action notes on page 5.

— *the editor*

An optimist is someone who figures that if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's the bluebird of happiness.

— Robert Breault, American operatic tenor, b. 1963

### **Field Trip Report: the Amherst Lakes**

On Saturday, February 15th, birders from Amherst County, the Lynchburg Bird Club, and as far away as Chesapeake joined those of us from Rockbridge for a wonderful birding tour of three Amherst Lakes. Donna Mateski, who lives in Amherst County, was a knowledgeable and generous guide to some of her favorite birding spots. Thanks also to Bob Epperson for keeping the bird list and sharing his scope. These lakes and their rural surroundings are not far from Rockbridge, so I encourage birders to head east on Route 60 and check them out.

Here are the 47 species that the group identified: Canada Goose - 151; Mallard - 34; Ring-necked Duck - 4; Bufflehead - 4; Common Merganser - 16; Pied-billed Grebe - 1; Rock Pigeon (Feral Pigeon) - 33; Mourning Dove - 2; Killdeer - 19; Great-blue Heron - 1; Black Vulture - 14; Turkey Vulture - 25; Cooper's Hawk - 1 ("Nice looks at adult seen in long, low flyby" - Bob Epperson); Bald Eagle - 2 (1 adult and 1 immature hanging around a nest site); Red-shouldered Hawk - 2; Red-tailed Hawk - 6; Belted Kingfisher - 1; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker - 4; Red-headed Woodpecker - 4; Red-bellied Woodpecker - 7; Downy Woodpecker - 2; Hairy Woodpecker - 1; Pileated Woodpecker - 4; Northern Flicker - 2; Eastern Phoebe - 2; Bluejay - 1; American Crow - 14; Common Raven - 4; Carolina Chickadee - 6; Tufted Titmouse - 4; Ruby-crowned Kinglet - 1; Winter Wren - 1; Carolina Wren - 6; European Starling - 17; Northern Mockingbird - 2; Eastern Bluebird - 6; American Robin - 65; American Goldfinch - 1; Dark-eyed Junco - 5; White-crowned Sparrow - 6; White-throated Sparrow - 8;; Song Sparrow - 1; Eastern Meadowlark - 2; Red-winged Blackbird - 5; Common Grackle - 8; Yellow-rumped Warbler - 1; Northern Cardinal - 6.

### **Woods Creek Trail Bluebird boxes, a multi-partner endeavor**

Members may recall that in 2013, the Bird Club helped launch the Bluebird Conservation Project, a joint effort with the city of Lexington, local Master Naturalists, and Boxerwood to maintain and monitor nest boxes along the Woods Creek Trail. Club members have continued to steward the trail and to support Boxerwood's Birds for Thirds nest-monitoring program, a spin-off from the original initiative. The program engages third graders from the three local school districts in monitoring nest attempts on bluebird trails established on or near their school grounds.

Nest boxes on older bluebird trails, like the Woods Creek Trail adjacent to Waddell Elementary, are in need of refurbishing. Last month, Bonnie Bernstein and Pete Hamel walked the Woods Creek Trail with staff from Lexington's Public Works to assess the condition and location of boxes installed many years ago by the city. Most are in disrepair and need replacing; others are in locations where vegetation along the riparian buffer has grown dense, no longer offering ideal habitat for cavity-nesting birds.



*Eastern Bluebird nest with eggs, and 11-day-old nestlings (hard to say how many!). Photos by J. Zickefoose, from the Birds of North America website*





During the inspection, Jeff Martone, Director of Public Works, confirmed that his department will cover the cost of materials to construct new nest boxes that Bird Club members Dave Agnor and Steve Richards have offered to build. The director and Celia Clark, the City Arborist, also offered staff assistance in moving several boxes out from under maturing trees and brush, and keeping vegetation low around all the boxes. This work will follow a current project to install new sewer main and manhole structures along Woods Creek that is near completion.



*Pete (center) inspects a bluebird box along the Hamel Woods Creek Trail with Lexington Public Works Director Jeff Martone, and City Arborist Celia Clark.*

Refurbishing of the Woods Creek bluebird trail is expected to be finished before the end of March—just in time for Pete Hamel to resume nest monitoring with a new class of Waddell third graders.

*—article and photo by Bonnie Bernstein*

How readily the bluebirds become our friends and neighbors when we offer them suitable nesting retreats!

*— John Burroughs, American naturalist and nature essayist, 1837–1921*

# 3 billion birds gone from North American since 1970

## Conservation reports and what you can do

### ***Some hopeful news for the tern colony whose nesting island was paved over in the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel (HRBT) expansion***

25,000 Royal Terns and other migratory colony-nesting birds, returning soon to find their South Island nesting sites paved over, may be able to raise their families on other nearby artificial sites. In response to the outcry of many bird-lovers, Governor Northam announced plans for the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) to prepare habitat on another, much smaller island and on up to 59 barges. Uncertainties remain: will this be done in time, and will the birds respond favorably to the rude upheaval of their colonies? For an excellent account of the whole picture, see [Terri Cuthriell's article](#) on page 2 of the Virginia Society of Ornithology's spring newsletter.

For the long term, DGIF and the Army Corps of Engineers will assess the feasibility of creating a large new artificial island. Assessment is just the first step in a long process that will necessitate finding funds and following a complex permitting process.

Laura Neale has submitted public comments to several decision makers, and she travelled to Richmond to speak before the Commonwealth Transportation Board. Laura notes: "Having the privilege of advocating on behalf of the Rockbridge Bird Club has hopefully lent greater weight than personal comments."

WHAT WE CAN ALL DO: Please consider thanking via email the [Governor](#) and [Secretary of Natural Resources](#) Matt Strickler (who oversees DGIF) for these actions. Let's keep them aware that we really care! We'll update you as more action is needed.

### ***Two more actions you can take right now to help birds***

- The Administration has drastically **weakened enforcement of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act**, allowing companies to escape legal responsibility for actions that kill millions of birds every year (see [article](#) at All About Birds). WHAT YOU CAN DO: Click [here](#) to sign a petition asking your representatives to support a bipartisan bill in Congress to strengthen the Act.
- Another proposed Administration rule affecting birds, other living creatures, and their habitats is described here by the American Bird Conservancy:  
"The White House Council on Environmental Quality is proposing to **severely weaken the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** — one of our most important environmental laws. If enacted, these revisions would reduce scientific review of all decisions affecting the environment...[and] would also curtail public involvement by eliminating your ability to provide input on federal projects that impact the environment, wildlife, and the habitats they depend on."

WHAT YOU CAN DO: Click [here](#) to sign an ABC petition to your Congressional representatives, or to comment directly on the proposed rule (the deadline for comment is March 10).

***You'll find contact information for our Congressional representatives on the last page.***

## **Bob's Perch**

I was reminded this week of the discussion we heard last month about the excitement that our third graders bring to monitoring Bluebird boxes during the spring. The emphasis on building proper nest boxes and monitoring breeding behavior has had a major positive impact on Bluebird populations in the eastern U.S. It's one of the great success stories of recent decades even as numbers for so many species have declined



during the same time. We're lucky to have a group of committed teachers and volunteers working to ignite the love of nature in the next generation.



*Male Eastern Bluebird. Photo by Ian Davies, from the Birds of North America website*

My reminder came as the changes that arrive each February showed themselves again. It starts with sound, as more singing from different birds grabs my attention as I'm walking through the pastures and woods. This year it was Song Sparrows that I noticed most, joined by Chickadees and Phoebe and those Bluebirds. You can hear them singing sporadically through the winter but the longer days and more intense sun that comes in February seems to encourage more hopeful sounds from all kinds of creatures.

I've been surprised in the last few days to find lots of singing male Bluebirds further back in the woods than I would expect. I'm sure they've always been there, but it's not where you typically expect to find them. Maybe it's the contrast of their bright blue breeding plumage with the grey and brown background of the forest that gets my attention more. I assume they'll move toward open areas and edges as they look for nesting sites and the trees begin to leaf out.

It's these little surprises amongst the comforting rhythm of seasonal change that keeps me looking forward to spending time outside in this special place

—Bob Biersack

[note: one more Bluebird on the next page]



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](http://www.rockbridgebirdclub.org) and find us on Facebook.

Contact the Club by email at [rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com](mailto:rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com), or call Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

### **Club Officers**

President, Laura Neale  
Vice President, Bob Biersack  
Secretary, Joyce Cambron  
Treasurer, Jan Smith  
Program Chair needed

Field Trip Chair, Wendy Richards  
Publicity Chair, Bonnie Bernstein  
Membership Chair, Alexia Smith  
Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe

Newsletter edited by Alexia Smith. Logo by Jennifer Cox  
Website managed by Bob Biersack  
Facebook page managed by Becky McKenzie

### **Our Congressional Representatives**

#### [Senator Tim Kaine](#)

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(202) 224-4024  
Contact: [www.kaine.senate.gov/contact](http://www.kaine.senate.gov/contact)

#### [Senator Mark R. Warner](#)

703 Hart Senate Office Building Washington DC 20510  
(202) 224-2023  
Contact: [www.warner.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=Contact](http://www.warner.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=Contact)

#### [Representative Ben Cline](#)

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