



April 2020 Newsletter

of the

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

Calendar

NO MEETINGS OR FIELD TRIPS till it's safe to gather again

In the spring I have counted one hundred and thirty-six different kinds of weather inside of four and twenty hours.
– Mark Twain

Bird life goes on, and outdoor human activities are still safe (and permitted in Virginia) as long as we keep 6 feet away from each other!
Bonnie Bernstein brings us news of ongoing activity along the Bluebird trails.

Birds — without the Thirds

Although schools are out and folks are staying in, nest monitoring goes on!

Restoration of the bluebird trail along Woods Creek is very near completion. Thanks to early delivery of a dozen handmade boxes from the workshops of Steve Richards and Dave Agnor, Pete Hamel and Bonnie Bernstein have relocated and replaced all but three of the nest boxes in disrepair. Those remounts are briefly on hold until Public Works completes grading and reseeding an area of buffer along the creek.

Pete also worked with Arne Peterson of the Virginia Highlands Wood Duck Club to install an owl box in a wooded area of the trail in hopes of luring a screech owl.

Quick refurbishing of the bluebird trail was planned in early February to prepare for a seventh year of nest monitoring by Waddell third graders participating in the Boxerwood's Birds for Thirds program – before a pandemic



Dave Agnor holds one of the nest boxes that he constructed for the Woods Creek Trail.

precluded their active participation. The program is co-sponsored by the Rockbridge Bird Club, Alleghany Master Naturalists, and the city of Lexington. Volunteers from these organizations engage young students in monitoring boxes along bluebird trails established at their schools with grants from the Virginia Bluebird Society and Virginia Society of Ornithology.

In past years, monitoring has taken place at Waddell Elementary in the Lexington school division; at Central, Mountain View and Natural Bridge Elementary schools in the Rockbridge division; and at Enderly Heights Elementary in Buena Vista. For the 2020 breeding season, monitoring has resumed at Waddell and Central Elementary schools, where volunteers are continuing to collect data on their own and to devise ways to share their monitoring experiences with students, however vicariously.



Pete Hamel monitors one of the new boxes Steve Richards built for the Woods Creek Trail.



Arne Peterson installs an owl box on the Woods Creek Trail.

Waddell and the Woods Creek Trail

Nesting activity has been unusually early everywhere in Rockbridge this year, and the Woods Creek Trail is no exception. No sooner had boxes gone up than birds began to move in. Pete Hamel, who monitors the Woods Creek boxes and the Waddell Roots & Shoots garden boxes, reports that currently there are two active nests – one chickadee and one Bluebird – but no eggs as of March 27.

Pete is also working to develop virtual activities based on photos from his six previous years monitoring for the Birds for Thirds program. He will also attempt to live-stream a monitoring walk later in the spring for third graders and set up a chat for their questions and answers

Central Elementary Trail

Master Naturalist Aileen Spurgeon has also continued to monitor nest boxes at Central Elementary and a neighboring fraternity headquarters. As she reports, birds in her bailiwick have had a yet earlier start. Aileen discovered the first bluebird egg in a box on the 27th, and photographed four in the nest as of the 29th. A second box equipped with a nest cam has a mossy chickadee nest awaiting eggs.

Central STEM teacher Susan Mahood hopes to be able to activate the nest cam so that third graders, their families, and others who are interested can view live video from the web cam on Boxerwood's BirdSpies webpage, a site dedicated to the Birds for Thirds program.



Aileen Spurgeon photographed this bluebird nest, already well along, at Central Elementary.

More Volunteers Needed!

Fortunately, monitoring is usually a solo activity, and therefore safe in this time of the coronavirus.

In addition to the school trails, volunteers have long monitored in the Boxerwood field, in the backyards of the Kendall community, and on the W&L campus. Bird Club volunteer Janet Hughes will continue to monitor at Boxerwood, uninterrupted. However, construction has disrupted the Kendall monitoring ordinarily organized by Renata Chapman, but the community may establish a new bluebird trail.

Meanwhile, as the person who coordinates nest monitoring in the Rockbridge area, I'm in immediate need of a volunteer or two to resume monitoring on the W&L campus. One of our "regulars" is temporarily quarantining out of the area and another, a graduating senior at Rockbridge High School, will soon be migrating to college.

What's involved? Five nest boxes require monitoring twice a week, about 5 minutes each. A volunteer can drive or walk the short distances between them. Monitors will also be asked to upload data for each nest attempt on Cornell's NestWatch platform, but I'm happy to assist with that as well.

Anyone interested in nest monitoring at W&L should contact me by email (bonnie.bernstein@gmail.com) or by phone (460-9147). I'll cover the additional routes until I can get new volunteers up-to-speed with online and on-trail instruction.

And of course if, as predicted, worse comes to worst and some nests have to go unmonitored this year – no worries! All those bluebirds, chickadees, and other cavity-nesters will go on breeding, blithely indifferent to our concern for their nesting success. Let's just wish them all well.

—Bonnie Bernstein

—photos, except where noted, by Bonnie

Birdlife continues

— and, despite Covid-19, we can still look out windows and walk out doors to see what's going on in the other-than-human world. On my walks in nearby Brushy Hills, I'm happy to sight an occasional *Homo sapiens*, friend or stranger, and exchange vocalizations — though sometimes I have to say "I'm keeping my distance;" six feet apart doesn't come naturally to our sociable species.

In stay-at-home mode, plenty of bird learning and enjoyment are available on line:

- You can click on [American Bird Conservancy](#), scroll down to find the "Bird of the Week," and learn about a choice of birds, from near and far.
- Wendy Richards found a delightful [bird song opera](#).
- All About Birds offers a variety of [live cams](#), so you can watch a Petrel family in Bermuda, boreal birds at a feeder in Ontario, or Ospreys (brooding just now) in Savannah, Georgia — among others.
- Laura Neale points us to the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries [live cam](#) watching the breeding season of a Peregrine Falcon pair nesting in downtown Richmond.
- Also from Laura is the "[Crane Cam](#)" at Rowe Sanctuary in Nebraska, where, courtesy of the Audubon Society, you can see Sandhill Cranes on their winter roost. I can testify that in the daytime you might just stare at water and grass, while the cranes off feeding, away from the river; the recommended times for watching are near sunrise and sunset.

Many live cams post short video-bits of notable past events, such as a pair first bonding, or "first egg" — that one, usually with an exclamation point: "first egg!"

— The editor



Sandhill Crane, Antigone canadensis. Photo, in the Macaulay Library, by Liam Wolff

Bob's Perch

The air is full of headlines declaring that “health-care, the economy, work, play, school” – you can fill in your own aspect of life – will never be the same. The challenges seem to be everywhere. How do we care for ourselves, our families and friends and communities under these new conditions? It sometimes feels overwhelming.

But spend a little time in the woods or fields or just the park and you'll come to see that most of the world is moving to its own rhythm, with changes and challenges and threats and opportunities quite unaffected by odd little cells seeking a new host within which they can reproduce at speed.

I can feel my mind slow and settle as I get further from signs of civilization. On a day that was gray and cold, with little sound or movement from the birds or anything else, I was struck by the sight of a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker swooping into a nearby tree, flaring its wings in a flash of gold and brown that seemed to give off its own light without help from the sun. It was one of those images that reminded me that nature is an artist without peer and that her gallery is always open.



Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (Sphyrapicus varius).
Photo, in the Macauley Library, by Dinu Bandyopadhyay

There is time now to wait and follow the movements and interactions among the birds in ways I normally don't take advantage of enough—like two or three male Bluebirds twisting and spinning in the air as one or two females sit nearby, passing judgment, I presume, on prospective mates. I've also been struck by the chattering of female Carolina Wrens these last few days, and by taking the time to find one this morning I watched as she moved along the ground under some bushes with a male

nearby who seemed to be trying to bring her food. Was that really what was happening? Or am I just looking for hopeful signs and creating them in my own imagination?

Simple things attract my attention now—a bobbing Killdeer in a parking lot, a Kingfisher along a stream, the sound of the first Louisiana Waterthrush returning to our stream and looking for a mate. Great Blue Herons are on their nests just down the road from the Palmer Community Center. The yard is filling with Chipping Sparrows and the pasture with Field Sparrows. Much has changed in the last few months, but much remains that is hopeful in anticipation of new life.

Our forced isolation gives us time to explore the world around us with more patience and appreciation.

—Bob Biersack



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.

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