



## May 2020 Newsletter

of the

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

### Calendar

**Club events will resume when we can safely gather again. Stay well!**

Hear how the birds, on every blooming spray,  
With joyous music wake the dawning day.

—Alexander Pope

### May Day Walk in Brushy Hills Woods—1 May 2020

Regrettably the Bird Club has had to cancel our spring field trips, due to the need to social-distance in this unsettling time of COVID-19. One of our most anticipated trips is the annual Brushy Hills Bird Walk led by the father-and-son team of Paul and Lock Cabe. Their combined expertise and curiosity always enchant us. Feeling the absence of this special event this year, I grabbed my binoculars and took a solitary walk on May Day in the Brushy Hills woods.

The first bird call I heard was the croaking of a Common Raven. Edgar Allen Poe has given Ravens a creepy image, but I love to hear their call and thought it was a good indication that I might have a chance to identify a diversity of species. Ovenbirds were everywhere! I counted 13 and was lucky to see 4. Of these, 2 could have been a pair, as one followed closely behind the other, scampering across the trail and right up the bank. I have never seen a nest of this warbler species but hope to one day. They build their nests on the ground. It's shaped like a rounded earthenware oven, covered with leaves and debris, with a side entrance. So, you guessed it! This unusual nest construction is where they get their name. Heading down towards the end of the trail I saw an Ovenbird just above eye level, sitting on a branch. The bird appeared to tilt its head down and hold me in a meaningful gaze through its bold white eye ring.

I was lucky enough to get good views of three other species on my walk. I'd been hearing a song that sounds to me like swee-swee-swee-sweet, uttered very fast with a down-slurred and abrupt ending, and I was pretty sure it was an American Redstart, a tiny acrobatic warbler that dances through the upper branches of the trees. The male is striking as he bops around, fanning his long black and orange tail. Finally, with patience and determination, I was rewarded with a quick glimpse of this tiny gem of a bird.

The lovely flute-like song of the Wood Thrush seems like the anthem of Brushy Hills to me. I used to hear it's ee-oh-lay lilting from our woods on warm summer evenings, but for whatever reason I haven't heard it as often in recent years. Whenever I walk at



*Wood Thrush (Hylocichla mustelina). Photo by Dick Rowe*

Brushy Hills in mid-spring through mid-summer I hear it. Intent on moving a little faster down the trail, I looked up to an overhanging branch, and there it was, as if to slow me down and remind me to look and listen a little harder.

You've already traveled a good long way with me — but let me describe one more sighting from my May Day walk! I was absorbed by a little patch of non-native weeds that are all too familiar when I heard a faint tapping sound. I looked across the trail at a dead snag with three holes facing me. The bottom two looked like they were just being excavated, and the top one looked weird—until I realized a Pileated Woodpecker was staring out at me. The bird flew out but made no noise (very uncharacteristic) and seemed not to fly very far. I looked at the hole the bird had vacated and saw a gray, downy feather sticking out. As I stood there, the bird came back to the tree. Just then I was distracted by two people approaching along the trail. I'm not sure if the woodpecker went back in the hole, but I didn't see or hear it fly away. I want to go back to check out that hole. I may never see the bird again, but you never know what you're going to see when you take a walk in the woods.

*—Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair*

### **Plants *and* birds in Brushy Hills**

On a recent morning I followed the self-guided Spring Plant Walk in Brushy Hills, a project of the local Virginia Native Plant Society chapter — and found myself following bird sounds as well. You could do the same: go to the Friends of Brushy Hills [website](#) and scroll down to find the downloadable text giving IDs and info for the 50-some plants flagged along the 2-mile loop. There are plants with flowers in different stages, vines, ferns, baby trees — and as for the birds, who knows what you'll see, to echo Wendy! I saw and heard quite a few. You're sure to have a rich spring-woodland experience.

*—Alexia Smith*



*Ovenbird (Seiurus aurocapilla), a member of the Parulidae family, the New World warblers.  
Photo by Dick Rowe*

### **Learn on line about warblers**

The web abounds with opportunities to learn about birds. I recently signed up for some programs offered by northern Virginia resident Bill Young, which were offered through the Duncan Branch of the Alexandria Library and publicized on the va-bird-list-serv. I had hoped to join his warbler classes, offered through the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia — but they filled up within minutes! Fortunately, the warbler classes are now posted on the Society's website, available to all, for free. [Here](#) is where you'll find links to Young's four warbler classes, two on Plumage and Behavior and two on Vocalizations.

—Laura Neale

### **Club conservation donations: a report from the Executive Committee**

Rockbridge area neighbors are coming together to help each other as the huge economic consequences of Covid-19 strike our community. It's gratifying to be a part of this area-wide effort.

We feel it's vital to continue, at the same time, our Club support for organizations helping to conserve birds and their habitats — and helping conserve, by implication, the bigger natural world. We're part of that world, and we want to find it functioning as well as possible as we gradually emerge from our strange solitudes and semi-solititudes!

So, with 2020 household memberships now up to 46 and a bank balance of just over \$3,000 (including \$700 just in 2020 donations and gifts), we decided to make contributions on the Club's behalf to the following organizations, all of particular importance locally and in Virginia:



- \$200 to [Boxerwood](#), our local nature education center and birding venue. Boxerwood's importance to our local human/natural world is enormous, and the organization is losing program and camp revenues this year due to Covid-19.

- \$500 to the [Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas 2](#). Several Club members have contributed huge amounts of time to this effort. This is the last year of data collection; funds are still needed for publishing the results. The VABBA2 will become the foundation for conservation policy in our state and area for years to come.

- \$100 to the [American Bird Conservancy](#), recognizing its invaluable support for bird conservation throughout the Americas, where our birds recognize no political borders, and in particular its critical influence in getting new nesting habitat for the migrating shorebirds whose breeding home island was paved over for the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel project.

- \$100 to the [Center for Conservation Biology](#), based at William and Mary College. Conservation Chair Laura Neale notes: "Both Bryan Watts and Fletcher Smith have made the drive up from the Tidewater area to give excellent programs to our bird club. As we learned, their work is hands-on and in the field, with minimal administrative costs. So they are actually doing the research that drives conservation policy, and without huge bureaucratic lag times."

If some of these organizations are unfamiliar to you, click on a link and see what they're up to. There's plenty to learn and enjoy and support.

—Alexia Smith, for the Executive Committee



*American Redstart (Setophaga ruticilla), also in the Parulidae. Photo by Dick Rowe*

## **Beginnings of new nesting territory for the displaced Tern colony**

You may recall our story about the 25,000 Royal Terns and other migratory colony-nesting birds whose breeding island was paved over in the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel expansion. An outcry from bird lovers led to plans to create new habitat. A Newport News [Daily Press story](#) describes the first stage, in progress: The Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) is transforming the much smaller Rip Raps Island, also called Fort Wool, into possible nesting territory. (You'll also see here the Border Collies hired to deter birds from landing on their old favorite island, now a hazardous construction site.) Further actions, including creating an artificial floating island to expand nesting habitat and drafting a new regulation to protect seabirds in the future, are described on this DGIF [webpage](#).

## **Bob's Perch**

We've lost a lot in these last few months, and one thing we've gotten in return, it seems, is time. Some people have turned that extra time into amazing achievements, both physical and creative. Others, like me, have, rather, drifted along finding new ways to be occupied without necessarily being productive.

Last Friday we went to Brushy Hills to do a little quality control on the virtually guided wild flower walk that Jan and Peggy Dyson Cobb have been offering at various spots this spring. This was more about checking the plants and walking the dog, so I didn't bring any birding gear. It's late April, though, so getting out of the car we were presented with a range of bird song that you couldn't ignore. Almost immediately I heard a Wood Thrush – the first of the year for me, and one of my favorite sounds of spring. This was followed by the persistence of several Ovenbirds also recently arrived, along with the usual Titmouse, Chickadee, and Woodpecker calls we tend to let drift into the background most of the time.



*Scarlet Tanager (Piranga olivacea). Photo by Dick Rowe*

As I started to think about all of these different birds and tried to keep a mental list, I decided to turn the walk into a kind of experimental game. Rather than bemoaning my missing binoculars, I decided to actively avoid looking for the birds. This would be an exclusively aural bird walk. A few steps later a Vireo started singing, another new addition for me this year. The rhythm of the phrases seemed slow and stress-free, which led me to think it was a Blue-headed Vireo. I've had those discussions many times with lots of people over the years, though, so I'm not claiming confidence in that identification. But since I'd already committed to just using sound, I didn't worry about it too much either. A few minutes later came the "chick-burrr" of a Scarlet Tanager along with its raspy sort of Bluebird-sounding song\* – yet another first-of-the-season for me.

There were other familiar songs of Towhees and Cardinals and also lots of sounds I couldn't place. Did I recognize even half of the species I was hearing? Probably not, but even so the whole experience gave me the same pleasure and satisfaction I get when I'm looking for birds with the full complement of senses and tools.

I was still feeling pretty pleased with myself the next day when, walking at home, I was again without binoculars or guides. That Wood Thrush sound was there again. So was the Scarlet Tanager, and this time I stopped and looked into the trees to see if I could find it. There among the young leaves was a bird high in a tree, silhouetted against a white cloud that washed all the color out of the bird. Too far from it to see any other identifying markings, I continued to watch it just the same. A breeze picked up and moved some branches in the background, and when the dark green leaves slipped behind the bird it glowed with a scarlet that I find only in nature. Birding by ear is a good little exercise, but it's only a part of the full experience of the wondrous diversity available around us, when we take the time.

—Bob Biersack

*\* All About Birds describes the Tanager's song this way: "a burry series of 4–5 chirruping phrases with a hurried quality... the sound of a robin with a sore throat" —editor*

❖ Editor's note: one more bird awaits you, on page 7 ❖



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



*Pileated Woodpecker (Dryocopus pileatus). Photo by Dick Rowe.*