



January 2021 Newsletter
of the
Rockbridge Bird Club,
encouraging
the enjoyment, knowledge, &
conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

Calendar

Sat. Jan. 16, 9:30 a.m.—Bird Walk at Glen Maury Park, about 2 hours *
(raindate: Sat., Jan. 23)

February Bird walk — date to be announced

* See article below

Faith is the bird that feels the light when the dawn is still dark.

-- Rabindranath Tagore (Bengali poet, composer, painter, 1861–1941)

Bird Walks for Beginning Birders—and others, too!

Glen Maury Park at 9:30 a.m. on Saturday, January 16

What better way to start 2021 than to spend a couple of morning hours at a local park looking and listening for birds? On Saturday, January 16th, we'll meet at 9:30 a.m. at the Park's main entrance parking area, located off 10th Street, Buena Vista, just west of the Maury River.

We'll break into small groups of 4 or 5, each led by an experienced birder, and explore various areas of the park in search of local winter species. To comply with COVID restrictions, participants will be required to wear masks and socially distance. It isn't an ideal way to bird, but the birds don't care!

Wear warm clothes and sturdy footwear, and bring water and snacks. Planning requires that you **reserve your spot** by contacting me at richardsw@wlu.edu or 463-5214. In the event of inclement weather, this walk will be postponed until the following Saturday, January 23rd.

—Wendy Richards, President & Field Trip Chair

Christmas Bird Count report: Rufous Hummingbird and other highlights

The 2020 Christmas Bird Count for the Lexington Count Circle was conducted on Saturday the 19th of December. This was our 95th CBC, and we found a total of 81 species, a record high, and counted 6,915 birds. In addition, a Peregrine Falcon was seen on count day—but outside of the count circle. Over the past 10 years we've seen an average of 76 species and 10,390 birds.

This year's count was highlighted by the presence of a Rufous Hummingbird, a Long-tailed Duck, an American Tree Sparrow, and a Virginia Rail. The Rufous Hummingbird was reported by John Pancake and Ann Olson. These are a western species that are occasionally seen in Virginia during the fall; several others have been reported in the state this fall. The Long-tailed Duck was discovered by Wendy Richards



Rufous Hummingbird. Photo by Dick Rowe

at Lake Robertson several weeks ago and has since been seen by many birders. Evening Grosbeaks are northern birds that irrupt into southern regions sporadically; this winter they are being reported from many locations in Virginia and were seen at two feeders within the count circle. Evening Grosbeaks were last seen on the Christmas Bird Count in 1993 and have been reported only 27 times since the count began. The American Tree Sparrow, an unusual winter visitor to our area, and the Virginia Rail were both found by Dick and Lucy Rowe at a private pond within the count circle. Neither the Rufous Hummingbird nor the Long-tailed Duck had been seen during any previous CBC.

The Christmas Bird Count is directed nationwide by the National Audubon Society. Each count is scheduled for a single day during the month of December; volunteer participants try to count all birds within a 15-mile-diameter circle. The value of these counts is that a “snapshot” of species and individuals in a given area is taken each year, and trends in populations can be identified for an area or for the country overall. Since 1974, the Lexington Bird Count circle has been centered at the Big Spring pond on U.S. 60, and thus we have 40+ years of data for birds in the count area.

I would like to thank all of the participants this year for their dedication and efforts in counting birds within the count circle. You’ll find their names, along with a complete list of the species seen, at the end of the newsletter.

*—Dick Rowe
Lexington Christmas Bird Count Coordinator*



Long-tailed Duck. Photo by Dick Rowe

How Birds Survive the Winter

Now that we're getting nighttime temperatures in the 20s, do you sometimes wonder how birds get through a winter night, much less a whole winter of nights? And the smaller the bird, the proportionally larger its surface area, through which it loses heat! Of course, a universal heat-saving strategy is to fluff up your feathers; birds *look* fat in winter, but they're actually just insulating themselves.

A 2019 article by Bernd Heinrich in [Living Bird](#) magazine discusses the winter survival strategies of several species that cope with the very cold winters of his home in Maine—and that also winter in our area. Birds have to maintain an elevated body temperature to stay active, he notes, and they must find food to stay warm just when food supplies are reduced. Most birds—each species in its particular way—"follow a simple formula: maximize calories ingested while minimizing calories spent."

Here's just one of Heinrich's stories. Black-Capped Chickadees, he notes, travel in groups to feed, looking for seeds, spiders and their eggs, insects and their pupae. They "appear to pick at just about everything," and when one of them discovers a supply of something edible, others join in. Heinrich caught some Chickadees at a lucky find:

Some caterpillars overwinter in a state of being frozen solid to tree branches. In one instance I found a flock of chickadees feeding on minute caterpillars hidden within the scale-like evergreen leaves of a cedar. Some lucky chickadee had discovered this cache of frozen caterpillars, perhaps with the help of a clue—a blemishing stain on the leaf from the caterpillars' previous munching.

You'll find many more fascinating winter survival facts and stories in [the article](#), with much more about Chickadees and about Golden-crowned Kinglets, woodpeckers,

Ruffed Grouse, and Ravens. The illustrations, by Megan Bishop, are especially beautiful.

—Alexia Smith



Golden-crowned Kinglets; detail of an illustration in Living Bird magazine, by Megan Bishop of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Contact Your Virginia GA Representative to Help Birds

Cats kill birds. It is their very nature.

It's estimated that feral and domestic cats kill 2.4 BILLION birds each year in the US. Cats have not evolved in our ecosystem. Thus our wildlife lacks evolutionary strategies for protecting themselves from cats.

Animals are facing extraordinary impacts from increasing human population, mostly bad, so whenever an opportunity arises for taking action to help animals we should jump on board.

A bill that would legalize the trapping, neutering, and releasing of feral cats will come before the Virginia General Assembly in its upcoming session. Please contact your Representative and ask him to oppose HR 1727. Terri Cuthriell has written a brief and informative article in the VSO winter newsletter about why TNR is bad news for both wildlife and cats. Please go [here](#) (pg 8) to read it.

I hope you will take the few minutes to make this call. Thanks,

—Laura Neale, Conservation Chair

Bob's Perch

I've been thinking a lot lately about trying to observe nature on its own terms. Some of us have a lot more time these days; and this approach begins with taking things slower and allowing the rhythms of the forest to show themselves in their own time. There is a documentary available on Netflix now called "My Octopus Teacher" which, while it isn't about birds, is a fairly dramatic example of how taking time and being open to following unknown paths can lead to pretty magical things.

My latest small "encounter" happened during a slow walk in the woods – not really birding, no binoculars, but trying to be more aware of what's happening around me.

Standing about 50 yards from the top of a steep hill I could see movement above me, two pretty big creatures kind of dancing around and challenging each other. They

were Wild Turkeys, and, while I stopped in order to avoid drawing attention to me, it was clear they weren't concerned about anything but each other. They paced forward and back in unison, except when they occasionally thrust at each other in a chest bump that knocked both backward—where the dance began again. This went on for several minutes, with no obvious winner and no apparent harm done.

I'm guessing this was a pair of young males in a group that spends the winter trying to figure out hierarchies as they get ready for spring. Videos, taken mostly by hunters, and other descriptions of behavior include some fighting among young males, usually involving getting into a tangle and pecking at each other. There was none of that for these two, just dancing and chest bumping - more like a touchdown celebration in football than an effort to show who's boss.

I've often thought it was odd that these birds that are so challenging for hunters (Turkeys can see everything that moves and are wary of any movement) are seen so often by the rest of us. I often see them in groups of five or so, and occasionally flocks of twenty or more have flown over the house, from one ridge-top to the other. According to the Cornell Ornithology Lab, during the last 80 years or so this species has dramatically recovered from earlier threats as large areas of suitable forest habitat have returned in eastern North America.

Eventually I guess I moved enough to be seen, and the two disappeared, along with a few others that were nearby. Just a brief window into a process of social interaction that we don't see often and that we try to understand on its own terms but always, I suppose, through the lens of the human eye. A hopeful example at the start of a year so much in need of hope.

—Bob Biersack



*Wild Turkeys of unknown age & sex — in Texas (they have a [big range!](#))
Photo by Bryan Calk, from the [Macaulay Library](#)*

2020 Christmas Bird Count names and numbers

First, the human participants: John and Sarah Burleson; Rene Hasey; Bonnie Bernstein; Cinder Stanton; Rachel Wolfe; Anne and David Buckner; Henry Eichelberger; Laura Neale; Chris Wise; Wendy and Steve Richards; Lane Norris; Kathy Morikawa; Paul and Lock Cabe; Susie Lynch; John Pancake; Ann Olson; Lisa Connors; Bob Biersack; Jerry and Glenda Jackson; Barbara, Lucy, and Dick Rowe; Danny and Susan

Hoehne; Scott and Andrea Dransfield; Kit Huffman; George Tolley; Lorelei Pisha; Marty Rocket; Wayne, Julian, Diana, and Amanda Dymacek; Harris Wolfe; and the feeder counters at Kendal.

This year's complete bird count was as follows: Pied-billed Grebe 9; Great Blue Heron 17; Black Vulture 92; Turkey Vulture 166; Canada Goose 417; Green-winged Teal 3; American Black Duck 1; Mallard 91; Gadwall 24; Ring-necked Duck 4; Long-tailed Duck 1; Hooded Merganser 85; Common Merganser 79; Bald Eagle 14; Northern Harrier 2; Sharp-shinned Hawk 5; Cooper's Hawk 4; unidentified accipiter species 2; Red-shouldered Hawk 17; Red-tailed Hawk 43; American Kestrel 22; Merlin 1; Wild Turkey 39; Rufous Hummingbird 1; Virginia Rail 1; Killdeer 3; Wilson's Snipe 1; Rock Pigeon 247; Mourning Dove 316; Barn Owl 3; Eastern Screech-Owl 9; Great Horned Owl 1; Barred Owl 1; Belted Kingfisher 17.

Also, Red-bellied Woodpecker 67; Yellow-bellied Sapsucker 32; Downy Woodpecker 62; Hairy Woodpecker 14; Northern Flicker 21; Pileated Woodpecker 31; Eastern Phoebe 15; Blue Jay 381; American Crow 783; Fish Crow 6; Common Raven 19; Black-capped Chickadee 30; Carolina Chickadee 126; chickadee species 18; Tufted Titmouse 155; Red-breasted Nuthatch 11; White-breasted Nuthatch 61; Brown Creeper 8; Carolina Wren 136; Winter Wren 42; Golden-crowned Kinglet 54; Ruby-crowned Kinglet 9.

Also, Eastern Bluebird 211; Hermit Thrush 10; American Robin 105; Northern Mockingbird 81; European Starling 767; Cedar Waxwing 16; Yellow-rumped Warbler 88; Eastern Towhee 18; American Tree Sparrow 1; Field Sparrow 66; Fox Sparrow 11; Savannah Sparrow 5; Chipping Sparrow 9; Song Sparrow 162; Swamp Sparrow 12; White-throated Sparrow 232; White-crowned Sparrow 29; Dark-eyed Junco 253; Northern Cardinal 367; Red-winged Blackbird 212; Eastern Meadowlark 24; Common Grackle 42; Purple Finch 62; House Finch 106; Evening Grosbeak 3; American Goldfinch 192; and House Sparrow 11.

Note: don't miss the photo of the American Tree Sparrow 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 and find us on Facebook.

Contact the Club by email at rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com, or call Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

Club Officers

President, Wendy Richards
Vice President, Bob Biersack
Secretary, Joyce Cambron
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Field Trip Chair, Wendy Richards
Publicity Chair, Bonnie Bernstein
Membership Chair, Alexia Smith
Conservation Chair, Laura Neale
Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe

Newsletter edited by Alexia Smith. Logo by Jennifer Cox
Website managed by Bob Biersack
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American Tree Sparrow. Photo by Dick Rowe