



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

Calendar

Thurs., Feb. 25, at noon—Virtual Event: "Bird Watching: Spring Migrations" with Kenn Kaufman & Pete Myers (see article below)

Bird Walks postponed till further notice!
We'll wait for warmer weather.

"Hear! hear!" screamed the jay from a neighboring tree, where I had heard a tittering for some time, "winter has a concentrated and nutty kernel, if you know where to look for it." — Henry David Thoreau, 1858 journal entry

Virtual event at noon on Thursday, February 25:

Bird Watching: Spring Migrations with Kenn Kaufman

Our Bird Club is excited to co-host a Virginia Festival of the Book virtual presentation by author, artist, naturalist, and conservationist Kenn Kaufman as he discusses his newest book, *A Season on the Wind: Inside the World of Spring Migration*, with ornithologist Pete Meyers.

Kauffman is the go-to expert for many a birder. Some of us use his popular series of field guides. Others know him as the Field Editor for Audubon Magazine who responds to queries from readers who "Ask Kenn" a wide range of bird questions. In his regular Audubon column, "Kenn Kauffman's Notebook," the naturalist explores different avian topics, illustrating each essay with his own sketches. Although his new book, *A Season on the Wind*, focuses on spring migration as observed along the shores of Lake Erie in northern Ohio, the book is highly descriptive of birds that also wing their way over Virginia terrain. Kaufman focuses, too, on broader conservation issues, voicing concern about the impact of climate and technology on migrating birds.

To attend, [click here to register](#) to take part on Zoom, or you can watch the livestream on facebook.com/VaBookFest.

A New Year and A New President

No, this isn't about Joe Biden! It's about the confidence that all of you Bird Club members and friends have invested in me, your new President. I will try to live up to your expectations, and I am humbled. OK...let's forget the rhetoric and drill down to what's really on your Club officers' minds: How are we going to offer meaningful activities as 2021 begins with the pandemic still requiring us all to keep our distance? We welcome your suggestions and ideas on this challenge.

Before launching into ways we might connect, I want to recognize Laura Neale, the Club's outgoing president and continuing Conservation Chair. Laura is seriously committed to the welfare of birds. Her knowledge and appreciation of these wild creatures that share and enhance the natural world around us runs very deep in her psyche. Her conscientious communications about the perils birds face have helped our organization be mindful of the responsibilities that come with being a birder.

Now more than ever we need to do what we can to protect birds. As you probably know, researchers have documented the loss of almost 3 billion birds in North America since 1970 ([see the article](#) on their 2019 paper in the journal Science). How can we help birds in times of stress for them, as well as for us? Here are some ideas your Bird Club leadership suggests:

Learn more about bird behavior, their needs, and the challenges they face. In each newsletter you will find suggestions for webinars, online courses and events. We've provided links to birding resources on our [website](#). There you'll also find a map of hot spots for birding in our area, as well as links to our newsletters. For those of you who follow Facebook, our page is [here](#).



*Outgoing & incoming presidents looking for the Long-tailed Duck at Lake Robertson.
Photo by Anne Henderson*

We've decided to postpone field trips until the weather warms up. Although outdoor events would seem to make sense right now, we've found it difficult to stay social-distanced as the urge to see and share a bird trumps all precaution. Also, imagine trying to point out or even see a bird when your mask makes your eyeglasses fog up in the cold! We urge you to get out and do your own field birding and to participate in citizen science efforts such as Project Feeder Watch, Nest Watch, the Great Backyard Bird Count, and eBird, all described at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Citizen Science [webpage](#). These activities are even more meaningful if you can share them with children.

Speaking from experience, participating in these programs gives me joy as I concentrate on birds and bird activity. Our sightings also contribute data that will help scientists expand what is known about birds, which in turn will inform policies to protect them. I read in the latest edition of *Living Bird* (the Cornell Lab's quarterly journal) that one bright spot of COVID-19 is that people are noticing birds more. My hope is that this increased interest will result in individual efforts to enhance bird-friendly practices and to demand legislation that will insure birds thrive into the future.

—Wendy Richards



Cornell Lab's Project Feeder Watch features a weekly BirdSpotter Photo Contest. Here's a recent People's Choice winner, submitted by Judy Carlson. Find out more about the Contest and the Project by exploring the [Feeder Watch website](#)

Help Virginia help birds!

Please take a few minutes to communicate support for the work of our own wildlife agency in their proposal to protect birds. As described by the American Bird Conservancy:

"A proposed new regulation by Virginia's Department of Wildlife Resources aims to reduce loss of migratory birds from "incidental take" - the unintended but predictable killing of birds by industrial activities. This regulation would govern incidental take under a permitting system based in best management practices for certain industries. It would save birds and provide regulatory certainty for industry. It would also be the first of its kind in the country and set a positive precedent for other states to follow.

"Each year, up to 1.1 billion birds are killed by industrial activities in the U.S. Virginia is taking a much-needed step to reduce these deaths.

"Voice your support for the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources - tell them to approve this new system and protect our migratory birds!"

Please [follow this link](#) to submit a comment through the American Bird Conservancy (and you'll find a link there to the proposal itself). The DWR will accept comments on the proposed regulation **up until 11:59 p.m. on February 22, 2021.**

—Laura Neale, Conservation Chair

Coming to your email inbox soon—

Virginia's own Wildlife Viewing Plan seeks public comment!

New Housing for Bluebirds

The Rockbridge Bird Club is helping to establish a new Bluebird trail on the Skyline Trail at Natural Bridge State Park this month. Ten nest boxes equipped with predator guards will be installed and monitored in cooperation with the local chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists (Alleghany-Highlands, which includes Rockbridge members).

Club members Bonnie Bernstein and Pete Hamel, who spearheaded earlier efforts to blaze, maintain, and monitor nest box trails in Rockbridge County, will install the boxes later this month. Club member Jan Smith, a Virginia Master Naturalist, will monitor the nests and collect data for the Virginia Bluebird Society (VBS) and Cornell's NestWatch program. Both the VBS and Cornell use the data to study trends in the health and abundance of bird populations.

Jan, Pete, and Bonnie walked the Skyline Trail with Park Manager Jim Jones in early December, flagging locations for the boxes. Over the holidays, Jim and his wife built Charles Little-style nest boxes, the model recommended by the VBS for monitoring. The boxes will be outfitted with stovepipe baffles to deter snakes, and cage-like guards in front of the entry holes to deter raccoons and other animals from reaching in.

The happy news: the NBSP Bluebird Trail will be established before early Spring, when Bluebirds and other cavity-nesting birds are scouting the area for nesting sites.

Club members interested in learning more about the NBSP Bluebird Trail or about nest monitoring can contact Bonnie Bernstein (bonnie.bernstein@gmail.com). Bonnie is hoping to train new volunteers to monitor nest boxes on the W&L campus and on the grounds of local schools participating in Boxerwood's Birds for Thirds nest-monitoring program (boxes need to be monitored even if third-graders are unable to assist).

In late Spring, Pete Hamel plans to offer a talk on cavity-nesters and a nest-monitoring demonstration along the new NBSP trail, observing COVID-19 protocols. More information will be shared in the April newsletter. ♦ ♦ ♦

Grooves sawed into the front panel of the nest box provide a fledgling ladder for tree swallow chicks, among several cavity-nesting species that often occupy the boxes and need a toe-hold in order to exit the nest.



A note on Club membership

If you're able to renew or join the Bird Club in this difficult time, look for the JOIN box on page 8 of this newsletter & follow the instructions! Thirty-three households are 2021 members so far, including three new ones. The Club will provide programs again when that becomes possible and will meanwhile use your dues and donations to continue supporting meaningful bird and habitat conservation efforts. Many thanks for giving what you can — for the birds' sake.

—Alexia Smith, Membership Chair



Male American Kestrel. Photo by Michael JD, from the Macauley Library

A Home for a Kestrel

Our farm on Ross Road Extended is now home to an American Kestrel box — itself a hoped-for home for a mother Kestrel and chicks.

The large wooden nesting box, its south-facing entry hole overlooking a sweep of open pasture and old cedar-lined fence rows, was recently provided and installed by Wendy and Steve Richards. They had the idea after seeing my resident Kestrel during the Audubon Christmas Count. "Be sure to look out for the Kestrel on the wire when you first drive in," I'd told Wendy before they came out. Sure enough, on count day, Old Reliable, as I think of him, was perched in his usual spot east of the driveway and about 20 feet off the ground. He was duly noted, one of 14 Kestrels in the 2020 count.

Electricity didn't come to this part of Rockbridge until the 1950s, according to my neighbor who farmed next door most of his life. How the Kestrels managed before the wires came I don't know, but now they take full advantage of the convenience to spy out insects and rodents in the grass below. Kestrels also hunt and eat small birds (the other name for a Kestrel is "sparrow hawk"), and I've noticed my resident Kestrel is keeping a sharp eye on the birdfeeders in the yard. The other day I drove home to find an avian visitor perched on the ground directly beneath a deserted feeder. For a moment I mistook him for a Mourning Dove, but his swift, silent flight and more colorful plumage gave him away.

In offering their Kestrel box, Wendy and Steve explained they hadn't had good luck with the box on their South Buffalo property, either because the terrain wasn't quite

open enough or because the box had been attached to the side of an outbuilding. The box was put up a few years ago as part of the Virginia Society of Ornithology's Kestrel Nest Box Project, an effort to bring back the threatened species by providing more nesting opportunities. Kestrels have lost habitat to housing development and, according to the VSO, to vineyards, also not favorable to Kestrels. More than 450 Kestrel boxes have been installed, many in Highland County. At least 10 boxes have been put up in Rockbridge, though with mixed results, according to Laura Neale, who searched her records recently. Starlings invaded some of the local boxes, and at least one was entered by a black snake, which ate the chicks.



On a sunny morning in January, Wendy and Steve arrived in their vintage green pickup, the cedar Kestrel box and metal mounting pole riding in the bed of the truck. A round metal baffle was attached to the pole to deter snakes. We quickly agreed that the best location would be the new fence line on the ridge overlooking the farm, with several tall trees nearby for perching. Steve chose the thickest of the fence posts as the sturdiest support for the metal pole and box, and he and Wendy hefted the contraption out of the truck and up the short distance to the fence. My job was to take pictures, the best of which is an Iowa Jima-like image of the two of them pushing the heavy box and pole into an upright position.

Before the box went up, Wendy pointed out the printing on the bottom: RKB1, for Rockbridge Kestrel Box 1. The label somehow gave me confidence. The first box to go up should be lucky, even in a new location. As landlord of the box, so to speak, I must report on the results to the project director, including any successful fledglings. I look forward to it.

—Kit Huffman

Editor's note: for information on the American Kestrel's life history and its decline due to habitat loss, felling of standing dead trees suitable for nesting, and pesticides, see [All About Birds](#) and the [American Bird Conservancy](#). The Nest Box Project gives us hope!

Bob's Perch

Watching the feeders on a grey winter day can lead to surprises if you let your eyes drift a bit. We have a large Silver Maple near the house, and this year the tree has been claimed by a Yellow-Bellied Sapsucker—and I mean claimed, in the most literal sense. The tree is between two feeders, and birds often use it as a staging area while waiting for a shot at the sunflower seeds or as a place to land on a branch and work on their latest seed grab. Most of these are of little interest to the Sapsucker as he moves up and down the three large trunks that come together about seven feet above the ground.

Sometimes, however, it isn't a Chickadee or a Titmouse that makes this stop, but rather a White-breasted Nuthatch that tries to land on one of the trunks instead of a smaller branch. When this happens the Sapsucker takes immediate action, moving up or down the trunk to intercept the intruder and let it know that there will be no random searching for food of any kind on this tree.

He has no interest in the feeders himself. He's too busy checking under nearly each piece of bark as he moves up or down or around one of the trunks. He must realize, though, that it's awfully busy most of the day around this tree, and, since there are more competitors than he can handle, his claim is doomed to fail. But still he persists, using lots of energy in fending off competitors all of whom have the unfair advantage of an unlimited food supply just a short flight away.

—Bob Biersack



White-breasted Nuthatch, photo by Gordon Dimmig, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, by Bruce Gates. Both photos from the Macauley Library



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
Treasurer, Jan Smith
Program Chair needed*

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

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