



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

**Calendar**

**Mon., Mar. 8, 7 p.m.**—Jennifer Ackerman's program on Bird Behavior and Intelligence, via Zoom (registration required) \*

**Dates to be decided**—Bird Walks for beginning birders and others \*

\* See article below

Come forth into the light of things,  
Let Nature be your teacher.

— from "The Tables Turned" by William Wordsworth (1770–1850)

**Jennifer Ackerman on Bird Behavior and Intelligence, 7 pm Monday 8 March via Zoom**

Best-selling author Jennifer Ackerman will give a multimedia presentation about how birds talk, work, play, parent, and think—and about the intelligence underlying their behavior. Attendance is limited (our Club is one of *eight* co-sponsoring bird clubs, with Roanoke hosting). So **let us know ASAP** at [rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com](mailto:rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com) if you want to tune in, & we'll send you the Zoom link.

*Jennifer Ackerman  
and friend*



**Another Bird Walk or two for Beginning Birders (& others, too, of course):  
date(s) to be decided, depending on the weather**

With fingers crossed that the fickleness of March will give us a few warm days, we plan to take a more spontaneous approach to offering a walk or walks—by sending out an invitation a few days ahead.

March, April, and May are an exciting time of the bird year in our region. Winter species like White-throated Sparrows and Dark-eyed Juncos are still here while we welcome species returning to our area for the breeding season. These spring months also offer a chance to see birds that pass through our area only in migration.

So keep an eye out for a walk announcement, via email or on our Facebook page! We'll ask all participants to continue to wear masks and practice social distancing. We hope you'll come along, venturing out to celebrate spring birding.

—Wendy Richards

**Natural Bridge State Park's Skyline Trail Welcomes Bluebirds**

Sunday February 21st started out as one of the coldest dawns of this winter. It was 11 degrees at our house. I questioned the sanity of joining the planned effort at Natural Bridge State Park (NBSP) to establish a new bluebird box trail. But it was a blue-sky morning, which has been rather rare of late, and I wanted to witness the completion of this collaborative project that bird club members and Park personnel have spent much time and energy preparing for.



I bundled up and drove to the Park, where I joined 6 other folks at the entrance to the Skyline Trail. It was mid-morning by then, and already the sun was warming us up. The first box went up and was labeled with the official Virginia Bluebird Society sign as NPSP Skyline Trail Box #1. All tools, boxes, baffles, guards and poles were loaded onto a Park truck and driven to the next spot while most of us walked behind. Pound in the pole, attach the snake baffle, position the box for the right orientation, add the raccoon guard, and attach the sign for the passerby to read: this pattern was followed for the placement of each box—like a finely tuned machine! Gloves and hats came off as the temps rose. It was fun to be part of the effort, and I look forward to returning to hike the 1-1/2 mile trail with its great views up and down the Blue Ridge Mountains. Hopefully the birds will want to hang out there, too.

—Wendy Richards



## I'm dreaming of... Bhutan?

Well, no, I'm not planning to *travel* that far anytime soon—and you probably aren't, either. But friends recently tipped me off to Rockjumper Worldwide Birding Adventures, whose [webinars](#) take you on virtual tours; and the tiny Himayalan kingdom of Bhutan is the destination that drew me—a country biologically and culturally diverse, its land 70% unspoiled forest, with about 700 bird species and about 700,000 people. Here's an assortment of birds found in Bhutan, randomly chosen but more or less to scale, from the Cornell Lab's Macaulay Library:



*Clockwise from top left: Darjeeling Woodpecker (photo by Vincent Wang), Beautiful Nuthatch (by Aparajita Datta), Blue Whistling-Thrush (by John Clough), Green-tailed Sunbird (by Natthaphat Chotjuckdikul). All photos from the [Macaulay Library](#)*

You may prefer to take a [virtual trip](#) to Cuba, or Zambia, or Croatia, or Papua New Guinea... No harm in dreaming. And it looks as though actual tours start again in 2022.  
—Alexia Smith

## Conservation updates

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is reviewing and delaying implementation of the devastating 2017 interpretation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA). In this "version," birds would lose protections from "incidental take" where injurious and mortal impacts to birds would be accepted as unavoidable consequences of conducting business. Our club signed on to a letter to the FWS encouraging reinstatement of the long-standing definition of the Act.

Here in Virginia, the Department of Wildlife Resources is working on proposals to protect birds as a state regulation comparable to the long standing interpretation of the MBTA. And in our General Assembly, the proposed Senate Bill 1390 that would have legalized Trap, Neuter, and Release of feral cats crossed over to the House—where it

died in subcommittee. According to a report by the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia, the committee directed that a stakeholder work group be organized "to develop consensus legislation on the treatment of feral cats." Thanks to those who contacted our officials about these two issues!

### **Bob's Perch**

It's snowing again this afternoon (February 26) as the dark and raw cold of winter tries to hang on in the face of earlier dawns and scattered warm days. It's a time for hopeful signs of spring, too, not least of which is the return of some common summer birds that sometimes leave briefly during the winter.

Last week I saw an American Woodcock on an old logging road in the forest. It was a pretty rare sighting for me, and an example of the complexity of the ecosystem of the central and southern Appalachians. Not far west and north of here these birds would be expected to migrate a little south during the winter. In this area, though, some choose stay throughout the year.



*American Woodcock. Photo by Brian Lowry, from the Macaulay Library*

The same is true for the Eastern Towhee, another bird I saw under the feeder today, for the first time in at least a few weeks. We're on the edge of their year-round habitat, so they're not so rare in the winter, but today it still felt like a hopeful sign. I'm often struck by how many times I find that we're on a range-map boundary between breeding and migratory or wintering or year-round territories. The combination of latitude, altitude and unbroken forest cover make this area special.

There is also the changing behavior of some residents as their attention shifts from survival toward breeding. During the warmer days this week Bluebirds have appeared in numbers around our house, with males showing off their bright colors as females inspect the boxes, deciding whether my cleaning efforts were sufficient. Most of these birds don't leave in the winter, but the numbers that appear on a warm day and the brilliance of their feathers always surprise me.



It's generally too early for the real migrants to be arriving, but a number of people have reported seeing Tree Swallows in the last few days. They're often early arrivals, but not usually before March, so they've made a big impression—especially given the snowy weather.

We tend to look for explanations for unusual events, and it's common to assume that early migration is a result of climate change. Climate scientists tell us that these mountains will become a major migratory highway for many different species as the earth warms. The Nature Conservancy considers this region, the Central and Southern Appalachians, to be one of four critical ecosystems (along with the Amazon, Kenya and Borneo) for the protection of biological diversity in a rapidly changing environment.

Those of us who are lucky enough to live here have always known how special these hills and woods really are. The beauty and diversity come with special responsibility though too, and the early signs of spring remind us that our actions, both large and small, need to consider the long term survival of this amazing place.

—Bob Biersack



*Male Eastern Towhee, left (photo by Jack & Holly Bartholmai), and female Eastern Towhee, feeding on the ground as is typical of Towhees (photo by Mark R. Johnson). Both photos from Macaulay 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](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, Wendy Richards  
Vice President, Bob Biersack  
Secretary, Joyce Cambron  
Treasurer, Jan Smith  
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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



*Crow using a tool. Photo courtesy of Jennifer Ackerman*