



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

Calendar

Sat., Mar. 8, 6:30 a.m.—Field trip to Apple Orchard Mountain *

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

* See article below

Little Richard, ordained minister & the "Architect of Rock and Roll" (1932-2020):
I think people who don't believe in God are crazy. How can you say there is no
God when you hear the birds singing these beautiful songs you didn't make?

Field Trip to Apple Orchard Mountain, May 8

Migration is in full swing: don't miss the Club's yearly half-day pilgrimage to Apple Orchard Mountain, in search of warblers and others! Meet at 6:30 a.m. on Saturday, May 8, at the Lexington Food Lion parking lot for caravanning; alternatively, meet the group at 7:30 a.m. at the Sunset Fields pull-off on the Blue Ridge Parkway (mile marker 78.4). From there, we'll follow the access road on foot to the top of Apple Orchard Mountain, a gradual up-and-back walk of about two miles in all—with frequent stopping and listening.

Our leader will be Dick Rowe, Professor of Biology at VMI. This is always a popular walk, where we are treated to the spectacular beauty of migrating birds who are passing through or have returned to our area to breed. Wildflowers are also usually in abundance on the mountain.

No rain date is planned. For more information, or in case of doubtful weather, please contact me at 540-463-5214 or richardsw@wlu.edu.

— Wendy Richards, President

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

When conditions look favorable, we'll put together one of our spur-of-the-moment walks, for an early-morning stroll of a couple hours in a nearby location. Depending on where we go, we might see an Eastern Wood-Pewee, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, a Broad-winged Hawk, a Magnolia Warbler, an Indigo Bunting...

So keep an eye out for a walk announcement, via email or on our Facebook page!



Canada Warbler. We hope to see one on May 8. Photo by Dick Rowe

Brushy Hills bird walk report

A cold morning greeted eleven of us as we formed a circle in the parking area. We listened and heard a few birds, most prominently an Ovenbird, a perky warbler that projects its emphatic song throughout the Eastern Appalachian forest in spring. As we walked we continued to hear them singing, but like most warblers this tiny bird proved impossible to actually see — except by a latecomer to the walk, who took a different trail and met us at a crossroads. She described a thrush-like bird, but instead of a spotted breast it had streaking on its chest and a black crown stripe. How lucky for her to have a one-on-one encounter with this well-camouflaged species!

Another song we kept hearing was that of the Scarlet Tanager, described as sounding like a robin with a sore throat. Time after time this species eluded us until, on the way back, one of us (who excelled at spotting the tiny specks that proved to be birds) saw one perched in the midst of crossing branches and lime green leaves. The bird came in to full view, perched on a branch, turning this way and that for all to see. He even seemed to be modeling his exquisite finery, a brilliant red body with black wings.

I hope I've lured you into joining us on a future walk, because even when it's cold and somewhat dreary—and birds are masters at hiding—you never know what you will see or hear.

The 14 species we saw and heard in Brushy Hills are these: Red-bellied Woodpecker, 3; Hairy Woodpecker, 2; Pileated Woodpecker, 2; Great Crested Flycatcher, 1 (heard wheep call); Blue Jay, 2; American Crow, 1; Carolina Chickadee, 2; Black-capped Chickadee, 1; Tufted Titmouse, 3; Carolina Wren, 1; Ovenbird, 10; Yellow-rumped Warbler, 6; Scarlet Tanager, 4; Northern Cardinal, 1.

—Wendy Richards, President

Hummingbirds: the best homemade nectar to keep them a-zooming and a-zipping

Lots of us enjoy putting out hummingbird feeders to keep these phenomenal little high-energy birds around our homes. The best feeder nectar is a pretty simple recipe: 4 parts water to 1 part granulated sugar; no dyes; and clean the feeder regularly.

A recent online discussion included a contributor's statement that to provide hummingbirds the very best nectar, raw turbinado sugar was the choice. *Not a good idea!* Please read this excerpt from [Hummingbirdspot](#) to see why the best sweetener to use for hummers is good old granulated white sugar:

In 2001 the birds in the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum hummingbird aviary started dying off. Over a period of three months, 25 of 26 hummingbirds consisting of seven different species were dead. Necropsy of these birds revealed the presence of massive amounts of iron in their intestinal and liver cells. These were essentially captive birds being fed a commercial nectar product that had too-high iron levels, resulting in the birds developing iron toxicosis. Now every nectar product is tested for iron levels before being introduced to their current bird population.

Raw, turbinado and organic sugar is made by taking sugar cane and squeezing out the juice. The juice is then evaporated and spun in a turbine (hence the name "turbinado") to produce the sugar crystals. These crystals are a golden color and are rich in vitamins and minerals. This is great for us, but not so great for the hummingbirds. One of the minerals these sugars contain is iron, and hummingbirds have very little tolerance for it. Brown sugar is white sugar that has had molasses added to it. Molasses is rich in iron. Agave nectar also contains iron.

Hummingbirds, being very tiny birds with fast metabolisms, must eat a lot of food to survive. Since they are so small, they are susceptible to excess dietary iron buildup in their system. The oversupply of iron is stored in the liver and is toxic to liver cells. So the refining process which was intended to make sugar white and more attractive has actually removed the iron, making it safer for hummingbirds.

You'll find more about feeding hummingbirds on [this page](#) of the Hummingbird Society website, a source of much more hummer info as well.

—Laura Neale

*Ruby-throated
Hummingbird. Photo
by Bonnie de Grood,
Macaulay Library*





*Rose-breasted Grosbeak. With luck we'll see one on Apple Orchard Mountain.
Photo by Dick Rowe*

Helping Our PALS at Boxerwood

Bird Club members helped to inspire a dozen fledgling birders participating in Boxerwood's Play And Learn Seasons program (PALS), directed by Early Education Coordinator Jess Sullivan.

The children, ages 6-8, have been meeting this spring on Friday mornings at the nature center. The first five sessions focused on birds in Rockbridge, so Jess invited local "experts" – Janet Hughes, Wendy Richardson, Jan Smith, and me – to share what we know and make it fun.

Wendy and I started them off the way birds do – with nesting. We challenged our new PALS to find a nest from Boxerwood's collection that matched our descriptions of a bird, its habitat and preferred building materials. Kids foraged for their own materials and tried their hands at nest building. Hard work...and birds do that with their *beaks*?



That segued into our next visit, when we experimented to see how different birds use different kinds of beaks as tools to catch and prepare food. The kids also learned how to use binoculars to get a closer view of birds at Boxerwood.





Each Friday before we arrived, the PALS had already made the rounds monitoring nest boxes in the field with Janet Hughes, who collects data for the Virginia Bluebird Society.

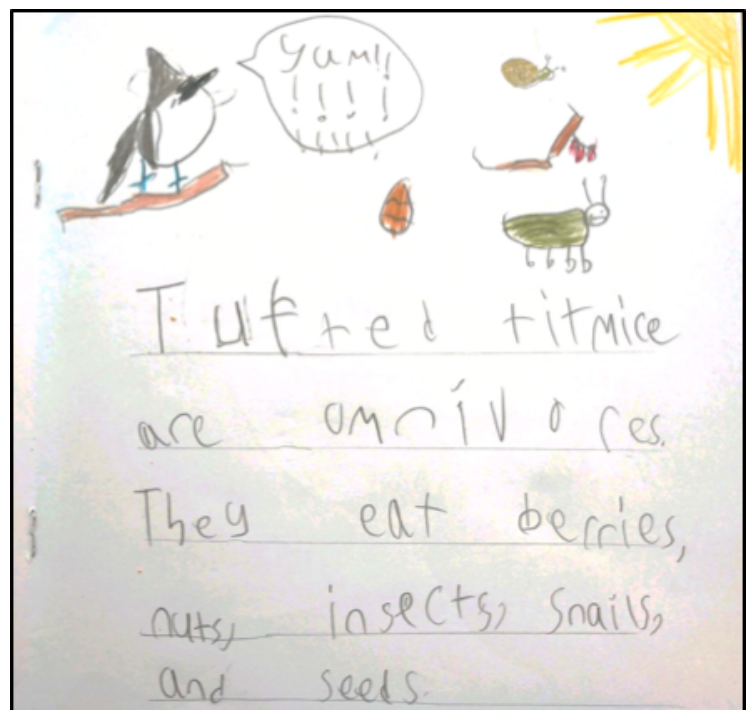
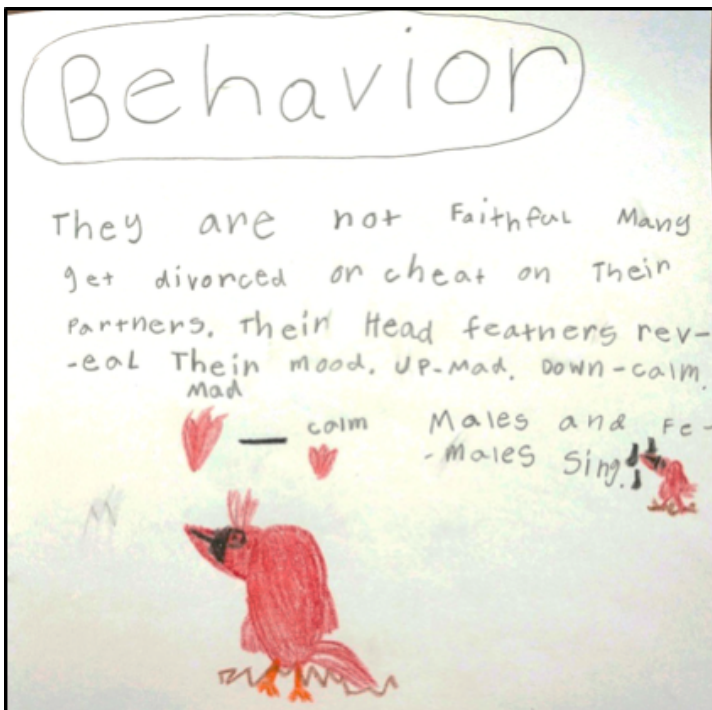


When they noticed boxes that had deteriorated beyond repair, we turned to Dave Agnor, a local woodworker, to create nest box kits so the kids could build replacements. Dave came with his kits, tools, and enthusiasm to help with the construction.

Wendy returned to lead a program on birdsong, with a stopover at the new bird blind that the PALS erected at the edge of the field with Boxerwood gardeners Ben Eland & Scott Mason. The following week, they celebrated Earth Day by helping Jan Smith, the Bird Club's native plant guru, plant Blackhaw, Hazelnut,

Elderberry, Viburnum, Sunflowers, and Coneflowers – a someday feast for the birds.

Happily, birding has continued beyond our visits. The PALS have discovered nests in the boxes they built, and eggs about to hatch! Early on, Jess encouraged each child to choose a favorite bird to research, describe, and illustrate for a soon-to-be-published PALS Field Guide to Birds. Between activities, we were treated to readings of some of their unique contributions.



Examples from the PALS Field Guide to the Birds at Boxerwood

...PALS, cont'd.

During their last birding session, Halestone dancer Mauri Connors showed the PALS how a flock of birds manages to fly together without bumping into one another, moving as one. According to Jess, “These early birding experiences have helped the kids make a strong connection with nature and really come together as a group. It’s been fun to watch them grow in the Boxerwood nest.”

—Bonnie Bernstein

Bob’s Perch

Much of the challenge of birding is simply finding the bird. As I think about my daily interactions, I wonder: what percentage of the birds I hear do I actually see? I’d guess 20%, maybe a little more but not much. Walking through the pasture, I always hear Field Sparrows but almost never see them. The same with Chipping Sparrows and the Louisiana Waterthrushes along the stream—I might actually see one out of every ten I hear. In our woods I’m hearing a Wood Thrush and a Scarlet Tanager and dozens of Ovenbirds, it seems, but I haven’t yet seen any of these in this spot. There are lots of reasons for this, of course; the size of the bird, and the leaves filling in and making them harder to see. Then there’s the fact that I’m usually without my binoculars, so if they aren’t pretty close it’s not going to happen. (How is it that you’re far more likely to encounter especially interesting birds when you don’t have your binocs?)

On the other hand, there are a few moments when seeing a bird isn’t up to you—it’s the bird’s strategic choice to make *sure* you see it. This happened to me a couple of days ago when an American Woodcock popped up near me while I was walking the dog in the woods. We were on an old logging road heading up hill from a small stream when this Woodcock popped out maybe five feet away and fluttered slowly a few feet ahead and to the right. The dog was well ahead, so the bird seemed more concerned about me. It would fly a short distance, acting as though it wasn’t quite right somehow, and then pop up and fly a little further, making enough noise to keep me engaged.

Woodcocks really are beautiful, with little flecks of yellow among different shades of brown, which you see so clearly from this distance.



American Woodcock.

Photo by an anonymous eBirder, from the Macaulay Library

I knew I was in a bad spot (no fool, I), so I moved quickly away—but stopped maybe 50 yards up the hill and looked back. After just a minute or two the bird reappeared, heading back down the road and crossing to the other side, closer to the stream at the bottom. According to the VA Department of Wildlife Resources, they will often make their nests on the ground from early April through mid May in the Virginia mountains, so she was probably leading us away from her nest and didn't need us wandering stupidly through the woods at that particular phase of her life.

It was another reminder that the best strategy for birding may be to let the birds come to you rather than chasing after them. Both can work, but I find the serendipity of waiting and watching and seeing what comes to be more satisfying somehow. I'll be staying away from that road for a couple of weeks; since hatchlings are quite fully developed and begin moving away from the nest almost immediately, they soon become self sufficient—and I'll go back to thinking about the birds I'm not seeing as we walk.

—Bob Biersack

You can learn more about Woodcocks at the [Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources](#) and [All About Birds](#).



*American Woodcock with newly hatched young (how many??).
Photo by Michael J. Hopiak, in Birds of the World*



*Yet another American Woodcock, this one hoping you won't see it.
Photo by Bruce Schuette, 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 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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