



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

**Calendar**

**Sun., Dec 19** — Lexington Area Christmas Bird Count \*

\* See article below

"Heavenly bodies are nests of invisible birds."

— Dejan Stojanovic, Servian poet, born 11 March 1959

**Christmas Bird Count Sunday 19 December**

The CBC is the nation's longest-running citizen science bird project — and it continues in pandemic times, with appropriate safety precautions. Locally, we'll forgo having the post-count tally/potluck hosted by the Club that has become a tradition. Nationally, the CBC/Audubon Society has asked that 1) for groups in the field, appropriate social distancing be maintained, with masks being optional and at the discretion of the group leader, and 2) only members of a "pod" travel together in a car.



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*Ruby-crowned Kinglet: look for this species on the CBC*

As a result, those of you who joined teams in the field last year can do so again, but you'll need to have your own transportation. If you're interested in participating as an in-the-field counter (alone or with a team) or conducting a feeder count, let me know at rowera@vmi.edu. And as we get closer to count day, I'll send out additional information to those who are participating.

—Dick Rowe, Lexington CBC coordinator

### **Steve Richards: If Only We Could Be Inside The Mind Of A Bird**

Wendy and I are currently visiting Southwest Florida, on Pine Island, near Fort Myers. We stay in my sister's double-wide: not fancy, but from here it's only a few miles across Pine Island Sound to the Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge. Although we're not seeing birds in the same numbers as in the past, we've seen most of the species we expected. The double-wide is located on a canal, so we see Brown Pelicans, Ospreys, Bald Eagles, and assorted gulls on a daily basis. Mourning Doves and Eurasian Collared Doves we see in the morning. The occasional Belted Kingfisher wings its way along the canal but doesn't hang around. Mottled Ducks paddle by. And then there are the Fish Crows: more on them later.



*Two visitors across the canal from our residence. Usually we see Ospreys or Wood Storks on this tree; these two eagles were a first.*

We traveled to Florida's east coast for a mini family reunion (Wendy's), and on our way we kept our eyes peeled for a Crested Caracara, a species that is uncommon here but most likely to be seen in the interior grasslands. This quest was inspired by the

November Bird Club Zoom speaker Jonathan Meiburg, whose enthusiasm for observing a species he considers the "southern raven" was contagious. Along the roadsides, usually near large palm trees, we glimpsed small groups of the caracaras. Their pale neck with contrasting black cap and body make them easy to identify. We also saw many pairs of Sandhill Cranes, their gray, sinuous shapes appearing ghost-like against the subtle shades of the grassland we passed through. We went out of our way to travel to Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park, where we were greeted by the song of an Eastern Meadowlark — they were everywhere; and from the road we got a great view of a Northern Bobwhite perched in a shrub. The reunion location was on North Hutchinson Island, near Vero Beach. There we saw many flights of Brown Pelicans heading south, and maybe a dozen Magnificent Frigatebirds. On the beach shorebirds were scarce, but for the most part the weather was terrible anyway, with a near gale blowing inland and at times heavy rain.



*Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. It's considered a "dry" grassland, but when we were there it was wet and about to get wetter.*

Back to Pine Island: one of the treats of birding here is the large number of American White Pelicans that overwinter here. Their soaring, synchronized flight is nothing short of amazing. I've been contrasting that with the Fish Crows, which are also here in great numbers. Their flocks (murders, or mobs?) are, at least from my perspective, completely disorganized. No one crow is leading, and groups fly willy nilly, some landing in trees and others on wires. They're talking all the time, setting up such a ruckus that all other bird sound is blocked out. I wonder how two bird species inhabiting the same environment developed such different modes of behavior. If only we could be inside the mind of a bird.

—Steve Richards, Special Assistant to the President  
—with contributions from Prez Wendy



## Membership: dues reminder

Don't forget to renew your membership for 2022, or join the Club for the first time! And extra donations are always welcome. Your contributions go towards honoraria for our speakers and support for bird conservation. Mail payment to Jan Smith, our Treasurer, at 564 Big Hill Road, Lexington, VA 24450—along with your address, email address, and phone number. Thank you!



*Common Merganser, another possible CBC sighting. Photo by Dick Rowe*

## Bob's Perch

Just as our attention turns toward our bird feeders, the Washington Post, in conjunction with the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, offers us a data-driven ranking of bird species based on their aggressive feeder behavior. (If you have a subscription, you can find the Post story [here](#).) With the Lab's help, the Post used information from nearly 100,000 observations made by many of you and the 30,000 other participants in Cornell's Project FeederWatch program. Since 2016 the program has allowed us to enter observations about interactions – for example, which birds were fussing with others in an effort to dominate the feeder.

While the results are fairly predictable (e.g., size matters) and consistent with what I've seen at my own feeders, there are some surprises and/or anomalies, and these are always more interesting to me. First, the overall North American winner as most feeder-dominant is the Turkey... but while we have lots of Turkeys in the woods around us, I've never seen one show any interest in a bird feeder! Maybe the type of feeder is important – a big platform feeder full of corn near the ground might work for them, I suppose; but at first glance this just seems like some kind of silly data anomaly. Similarly, the bird at the bottom of the North American list is the Brown Creeper; but aren't feeders just about the last place you'd expect to see one, given their reliance on

their perfect tree-like camouflage? Exposing themselves away from their normal habitat would surely make them nervous and prone to flee when just about anything else appeared.

The list that focuses on the northeast U.S. makes more sense, with Crows, Grackles, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, European Starlings, and Blue Jays heading the list while Goldfinches and Chickadees are at the bottom. Here again, though, the data can play some weird tricks. The Post story notes that “(A) small minority of bird rivalries are too complex for a simple ranking. For example, the house finch almost always dominates the purple finch, and the purple finch almost always dominates the dark-eyed junco, but when house finch and junco face off directly, the junco often dominates.”

There are all kinds of other questions raised here. For instance how do we define “dominance?” I’ve just been watching a pair (male and female) of House Finches at a seed feeder near the house. They’re quite comfortable settling in on the feeder, unfazed by the Chickadees and Titmouse that stop quickly to grab a seed. The Finches aren’t aggressive because they don’t need to be, but if a Red-bellied or a Jay or a Crow showed up, they’d find somewhere else to go.

Even with these questions or oddities, it’s great to see the potential that large amounts of good quality data can offer to improve our understanding of species behavior. It allows us to get way beyond the observations we can make ourselves, adding context and a deeper understanding of the things that live around us — which was my goal when I started watching birds more closely.

—Bob Biersack



*Hermit Thrush: a winter resident in the Rockbridge area — keep an eye out in forests.*



## 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

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