



April 2023 Newsletter
of the
Rockbridge Bird Club,
encouraging
the enjoyment, knowledge, &
conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

Calendar

Sat., Apr. 8, 8:00 a.m. — Second-Saturday Birding at Boxerwood *

Mon., Apr. 10, 7:00 p.m. — Program on Golden-winged Warbler research and conservation in Rockbridge County; at Grace Episcopal Church *

Sat., May 6 — Big Spring Day, in the mountains around Peaks of Otter *

Sat., May 13 — Annual trip to Apple Orchard Mountain, details TBA. **Note:** this is our "Second Saturday" outing for May! Back to Boxerwood thereafter.

* see article below

Spring is nature's way of saying, 'Let's party!' —Robin Williams

Second Saturday Birding at Boxerwood, April 8 at 8:00 a.m.

We'll meet in the Nature Center parking lot (963 Ross Road) for a two-hour stroll. **Note the earlier hour; it's spring!** Everybody's welcome, including first-timers and families.

Dress for the weather, wear sturdy footwear, and bring binoculars. In the event of inclement weather, the walk will be cancelled. For more information, contact Second-Saturday coordinator Wendy Richards: 540-319-0318 or richardsw@wlu.edu.

Program, Monday 10 April: Golden-Winged Warbler conservation right here in Rockbridge County

Wildlife biologist Kristin Fuoco will give a presentation on "Private Lands Conservation for the Golden-Winged Warbler and Other Wildlife" at 7:00 p.m. on Monday, April 10, in the Grace Episcopal Church Parish Hall in downtown Lexington.

GWWs have suffered a 66% drop in population since the 1960s. The steep decline is due to several factors: hybridizing with the Blue-Winged Warbler; deforestation in their winter grounds in Central and South America; and loss of suitable habitat in their breeding grounds, including the western Virginia highlands.

Fuoco is the Golden-winged Warbler Conservation Coordinator for the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service. She works with forest landowners to plan and implement land management practices that benefit GWWs and a variety of other species as well. In Virginia, more than 80% of forest habitat is privately owned!



Golden-winged Warbler. Photo by Michael Stubblefield, Macauley Library

Grace Episcopal Church is located at 123 W. Washington Street in Lexington. The Church asks us to use street parking, as space is limited behind the buildings. If, however, you need an alternative to the stairs leading down to the Parish Hall, please contact Alexia Smith at 540-460-0854 or alexia@rockbridge.net for directions.

Big Spring Day 2023: an invitation from two neighboring bird clubs

Big Spring Day returns on Saturday May 6th, 2023! This fun and historic citizen science tradition is a count conducted jointly by the Lynchburg Bird Club and the Roanoke Valley Bird Club. Sixteen groups of birders will cover designated areas within 7.5 miles of the Big Spring in the Peaks of Otter Picnic Area. This will be the 52nd annual count.

Early May in the mountains of Virginia is a wonderful time for spring birding. Migrating birds are heading north from the tropics to their northern breeding grounds. Birds that spend the entire year here in Central VA are setting up breeding territories and pairing up, which makes them more active, vocal, and easier to observe in their bright spring plumages.

Rockbridge Bird Club members are warmly welcomed and encouraged to join us. Several of the current teams bird throughout the afternoon, so you could easily meet up with a group mid-morning. Please contact Donna at mateski@bu.edu or 434-546-3812 and she can match you up with an existing team looking for fresh eyes.

— Donna Mateski de Sanchez, Big Spring Day Coordinator/Compiler

My Favorite Bird by John Pancake

If you are like me, you probably have at least one picture of birds on your walls.

I doubt, however, that you have pictures of starlings on your walls. I do – pictures of lots and lots of starlings on my walls. They are my favorite birds.

When I say this to other birders, they shake their heads. They move away. Please, let me explain. I know I won't convert, but maybe I can get you to view them a little kindlier.

Let's start with the No. 1 objection to the European Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*): They are – horrors! – an invasive species. Yeah, well, if you want to see an invasive critter, look in the mirror. Starlings invaded more than a century ago. Your ancestors only a couple of centuries ago. And although starlings have made life harder for some species (sorry, bluebirds), it's nothing compared to what humans have done. So maybe we don't have room to talk.

And starlings are fun to watch. They are supremely adaptable. If you take the time to look at these birds, you'll see them dumpster-diving like house sparrows and grain-gulping like blackbirds and lawn-gleaning like robins. I have seen them flycatching over a pond after an insect hatch. They eat snails, millipedes, spiders, worms, beetles, flies, crickets, wasps, bees, harvestmen, frogs, woodlice, salamanders, olives, oats, wheat, barley, maize, apples, pears, a wide range of berries (including those of poison ivy) and the occasional tiny crab. They can even slide their bills into flowers and drink nectar like hummingbirds.

Starlings are smart, too. They can even talk. Shakespeare mentions a talking starling in Henry IV, Part 1. That caused Eugene Schieffelin, a slightly off-center New Yorker, to import two flocks of the birds and release them in 1890 and '91. It was a thing back then: Eugene wanted to introduce the birds mentioned by the bard to North America. Legend has it that all of today's starlings are descendants of those birds. Like a lot of legends, this one may not be 100 percent true. (There were probably other releases.) Still, getting a trans-Atlantic lift from Shakespeare is a pretty neat trick.

Starlings are also beautiful. The striking iridescent green plumage, the elegant speckling, the bold yellow bill, the reddish-brown legs, the dark, glittering eye all appeal to me.



European Starling, *Sturnus vulgaris*. Photo by Denis Neukomm, from the [Macaulay Library](#)

And they are mysterious. If you have ever watched a cloud of inky starlings animate a gray, fall sky with squirming, twisting, turning, magical vortexes of whirring black, you must have wondered how they manage to coordinate those tightly bunched maneuvers without crashing into each other. These “murmurations” are less common now because the North American starling population has declined. It’s too bad. I could watch these protean acrobatics for hours.

There you have it: an endlessly fascinating and gorgeous bird with a rich history and considerable mystery. And full of behavioral tricks.

I say this tough, canny survivor of a bird should be honored, perhaps even on a state flag.

I’m thinking New Jersey.



Starling Murmuration. Photo by Søren Solkaer.



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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