



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

**Calendar**

**Sat., June 10, 8:00 a.m.** — Second Saturday at Boxerwood: last of the season, to resume in September \*

\* [see article below](#)

Some birds are poets and sing all summer.  
— Henry David Thoreau, journal, July 5, 1852

**Second Saturday Birding at Boxerwood, June 10 at 8:00 a.m.**

Once again we'll meet in the Nature Center parking lot (963 Ross Road) for a two-hour stroll — the last Second Saturday this season, to resume in the fall. As always, everybody's welcome, including first-timers and families.

Dress for the weather, wear sturdy footwear, and bring binoculars. In the event of heavy rain, the walk will be cancelled. For more information, please call Bob Biersack at 703-772-9373.

**Report on a Field Trip to Private Property, Saturday 20 May**

Many of you know Mike Pelton, a world-renowned bear expert who chose to retire in our area. In addition to holding this distinction, Mike is a true naturalist with an interest in many things wild — as I found out on a visit to his place in northern Rockbridge. He and his wife Tamra Willis recently invited Club members to their farm, and a small group of us were able to accept and to walk their trails and marvel at a place that has been devoted to attracting nature's abundance and variety.

We started a little late for the early morning songsters, but we still heard and saw plenty of species that flourish in all the wonderful habitat that Mike and Tamra have developed over the twenty years they have lived there. They have prioritized land use practices that benefit birds and other wildlife. Some examples are the establishment of fields of both warm- and cool-weather grasses, plantings of native trees and shrubs, removal of invasive plants, and construction of nest boxes and brush piles.

The Bird Club expresses gratitude to this dynamic couple for inviting us to spend a few hours checking out their amazing place!

On the next page are the 41 birds we identified while there. Thanks to Laura Neale for compiling the list.

— Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair

## May 20 Field Trip sightings

Wild Turkey 1	Blue Jay 3	American Goldfinch 6
Yellow-billed Cuckoo 1	American Crow 5	Chipping Sparrow 1
Ruby-throated Hummingbird 1	Carolina Chickadee 4	Field Sparrow 1
Turkey Vulture 3	Tufted Titmouse 5	Song Sparrow 1
Red-tailed Hawk 2	Tree Swallow 3	Eastern Towhee 4
Red-bellied Woodpecker 4	White-breasted Nuthatch 2	Orchard Oriole 1
Downy Woodpecker 2	House Wren 4	Red-winged Blackbird 1
Pileated Woodpecker 4	Carolina Wren 4	Brown-headed Cowbird 1
Northern Flicker 1	Gray Catbird 2	Ovenbird 6
Eastern Wood-Pewee 4	Northern Mockingbird 1	Louisiana Waterthrush 2
Eastern Phoebe 6	Eastern Bluebird 2	Scarlet Tanager 5
Great Crested Flycatcher 2	Wood Thrush 4	Northern Cardinal 1
Red-eyed Vireo 12	American Robin 1	Rose-breasted Grosbeak 1
	House Finch 2	Indigo Bunting 7



*Chipping Sparrow, a species seen on the Pelton-Willis farm — and a possible sighting at Boxerwood on June 10. Photo by Dick Rowe*

## Birding the Border

**by John Pancake, with photos by Ann Olson**

A few months ago, I mentioned to my wife that I had always dreamed of birding in Southeastern Arizona. It was the main place in North America with lots of cool birds that I had never seen.

Ann: Let's go. (Typical.)

And we did. I found a nine-day bird tour and signed us up. Our next move was to interrogate Steve and Wendy Richards, who've spent winters there. What's it going to be like in May? "Hot," Steve said. "You know it's going to be hot, right? *Hot hot.*"

It's also a hotspot for birds. That corner of the state holds species you aren't likely to see anywhere else in the United States. A lot of Mexican birds have a tiny toehold there. The variety of niches is wide, deep, and high: several kinds of desert, and above the desert floor rise 9,000-foot mountains cut by steep canyons. The high-altitude micro habitats are called Arizona's sky islands.

The trip began in Tucson. We flew in a day early to get our bearings, rented a car, and did a little exploring. Right away we saw birds neither of us had ever seen before: Bell's Vireo and Abert's Towhee, both dusky drabsters.

The tour started the next afternoon, May 12. Our guide, Chris Benesh of [Field Guides](#), was a tan fellow with a white beard and a wide smile that made him look a little like a cheerful Ernest Hemmingway. Chris knows sky islands the way Dick Rowe knows the Parkway. He also has an inordinate fondness for scorpions, which he would highlight on our nocturnal forays.

This was a small tour, just two other birders: Jan, a writer from Toronto, and Dika, a retired woman from Santa Barbara. The first afternoon, we went up into Box Canyon, in the Santa Rita Mountains southeast of Tucson. Rugged and steep, it is home to the rare Five-striped Sparrow, a handsome fellow who was very shy until he wasn't. Chris coaxed him onto a twig 30 feet from the road. He posed for minutes.



*Five-striped Sparrow*

That evening, we ate on a patio overlooking a pond where Lesser Nighthawks wheeled and whirled and a Greater Roadrunner darted by.

Over the next 10 days, Chris took us through wooded ravines, mountain passes, scrub-oak forests, deserts and river bottoms. We saw a dozen species of hummingbirds, including White-eared, Violet-crowned, Lucifer's, Berylline, Costa's, and Rivoli's. The Rivoli's, a lunker of a hummer with a dark green back, purple crown, and iridescent turquoise throat, is three times the size of our Ruby-throateds. I overheard

one visiting birder refer to it as the Ravioli Hummingbird, which is the way I will always think of it.

Arizona is also awash in kingbirds and flycatchers, many of them in the brown flit variety. We saw 20 of them, and, thanks to Chris, got so we could keep most of them separate. There were also some gorgeous and gaudy birds—the Painted Redstart, the Red-faced Warbler, and the Varied Bunting.



*Another gorgeous and gaudy bird:  
the Vermillion Flycatcher*

Perhaps the stealthiest was the Montezuma Quail, a clown-faced skulker who finally emerged near the end of the trip after we detected its call. (It's a descending whistle that [sounds like a falling bomb.](#))

The Elegant Trogon ranks as one of Arizona's celebrity birds. It can be elusive, but we tracked it down in Cave Creek Canyon. Splashed with an iridescent green breast, white breast band and red belly, the male trogon gives away his hiding place with a guttural *kwoik, kwoik, kwoik, kwoik, kwoik*. When we got close to the bird's retreat, he hopped up on a branch in front of us and gave us stunning looks.

Days later we watched a drama unfold in Miller Canyon, near the border. We hiked up a rocky creek bed in search of the Flame-colored Tanager. Normally, the males are orange-red with dark wings, but the first-year male at this nest was mostly lemon yellow, like the female, with just a little red on the breast. The birds are rare in the States. We could just make out the female on a nest high in a sycamore.

Suddenly, a Mexican Jay chased the female off the nest and another swooped in and slurped up the eggs. The tanagers went crazy but could do nothing. Hard to watch. We even shouted to try to interrupt them. After the jays departed, the tanagers returned. We watched as they tossed out the blue eggshells. Maybe they'll renest.

By the end of the trip, we'd also seen a lot of the Border Patrol, especially near Nogales, as our trip coincided with predictions of a flood of immigrants. Our discoveries on the last day were Gilded Flickers and Cactus Wrens, perched on top of saguaro cactus blossoms, surveying the arid landscape like royalty. Our tally was 188 species (we heard a 189th, the Mexican Whip-poor-will). Fifty-eight were new ones for me.

The biggest surprise was the weather. Instead of cloudless skies and punishing heat, the days were mild with puffy clouds and a smattering of rain. Clouds in May! This astonished the locals. We even had two bursts of hail. The locals took pictures. The last day, however, was a scorcher: 97 degrees and a cloudless sky. That was a good thing. It restored our faith in Steve Richards.





*Cactus Wren*

### **New Executive Committee Members-at-Large: Welcome Kip Brooks and John Maluski!**

The Club is fortunate indeed that Kip and John have joined the Committee and jumped right in to our activities. Here's a brief introduction to each:

***As a child, in Michigan, Kip noticed a Flicker*** outside the window one day: "so beautiful!" she remembers thinking. A naturalist book helped her identify that Flicker and other birds around her home.

Flash forward to 2003: family ties in Bath County brought her to Lexington, where she raised her two sons, now "launched." Her childhood love of birds rekindled during the pandemic, when like others she found more time to be outdoors and started feeding birds. "Crucially," she says, "I finally bought a pair of good binoculars!"

Now retired from jobs she held to support the family, Kip is doing part-time work she loves: massage therapy. And, fortunately for the Club, she brings her ideas, energy, and infectious enthusiasm to our Executive Committee.

***John is originally from West Virginia and has had an interest in birds*** his whole life — just "backyard" bird watching, until he retired to Florida in 2015 and got involved with the Palm Coast Audubon Society. There he took part in field trips, lectures, and several Christmas Bird Counts, and he eventually became one of the group's board members.

John and his wife Susan came to the Lexington area in January, 2022, to be closer to family: a drive of 1 to 7 hours to reach any family member is far better than the old 14-hour minimum. "Finding the friendly people of the Rockbridge Birding Club was a great bonus," he says. "I'm looking forward to continuing my growth in birding knowledge with my new birding family."



Yellow-billed Cuckoo, a species sometimes seen at Boxerwood. Photo by Dick Rowe



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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|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
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| Vice President (vacant)          | Bonnie Bernstein, Publicity Chair |
| Joyce Cambron, Secretary         | Alexia Smith, Membership Chair    |
| Jan Smith, Treasurer             | Kip Brooks, Member-at-large       |
| Program Chair (vacant)           | John Maluski, Member-at-large     |
| Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair | Dick Rowe, Club Ornithologist     |

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