



December 2015 Newsletter

of the Rockbridge Bird Club, encouraging the
enjoyment, knowledge, and conservation of
birds in the Rockbridge Area.

Calendar

Unless otherwise noted, program meetings are held at 7 pm in the Old Courthouse meeting room, in downtown Lexington.

2015

Sat. Dec 19, all day—Christmas Bird Count*

Sat. Dec 19 5:30 p.m.—potluck supper at Boxerwood, everybody welcome *

2016

Weds. Feb. 10, 7:00 p.m. – Program by award-winning photographer Bob Schamerhorn

Weds. Apr. 13, 7:00 p.m. -- Program by VDGIF bird conservation biologist Sergio Harding

* *See article below*

Field Trips and Programs

Christmas Bird Count & Potluck Supper on Saturday, December 19th

To count in the Rockbridge CBC, sign up with Dick Rowe at RoweRA@vmi.edu.

Here is Dick's message about plans:

If you would like to participate in the counting, please let me know. You don't have to be an insane birder (it is helpful but not necessary) to assist with the Count. In general, our Count circle is centered on Big Spring and forms a circle with a 7.5-mile radius. All counting is done inside the circle. As a participant, you can cover an area inside the circle, be a member of a team/group covering an area (for those of you who are new to CBC or are not confident of your bird ID skills this is a good way to participate), or count birds at your home bird feeder. If you'd like to cover a particular area or the area you've done in past years, let me know (who will be with you and where you will count). If you'd like to join a team, let me know and I'll put you in contact with a "team leader." If you'd like to do a feeder count, let me know and I'll send you the feeder-count rules.

—Dick Rowe



*Look for White-crowned Sparrows on Count day!
Photo by Dick Rowe*

Everyone is welcome at the Christmas Bird Count potluck—family, too!

Here's a message from coordinator Bob Biersack:

Please join us for a potluck dinner on Saturday, December 20th, beginning at 5:30 at Boxerwood's Munger Lodge. You don't have to participate in the CBC to attend the potluck. Come just to catch up with fellow bird-lovers, hear about the Count, and celebrate the solstice season! And if you're out counting all day, don't feel you have to bring food.

The Club will provide drinks and place settings. To help us plan quantities, please let me know if you're coming, and how many you are. And if you can help with set-up and clean-up, let me know that, too, at janandbob@verizon.net or 540.463.1942.

Note that this year we won't be using Boxerwood during the day as we did last year. So just come along for a festive supper!

—Bob Biersack

Conservation Note: Ducks and Stamps

One of the excitements of late fall and winter is the arrival of “ducks”—actually an unpredictable assortment of migratory waterfowl. Water birds are a bit exotic for us in our mountainous habitat, but there are a few, and sadly only a very few, public locations where the birds show up—usually as a result of some dramatic weather system elsewhere. Very special visitors include Tundra Swans a-calling, exhausted Scoters, and a sea duck formerly known as Oldsquaw and renamed Long-tail Duck.

If you would like a visual review of some of our winter visitors to Rockbridge County, go to Dick Rowe's [VMI flicker site](#)¹ and enjoy his great photos of Ruddy Ducks, Gadwalls, American Widgeons, Ring-necked Ducks, Pied-billed Grebes, Lesser Scaup, Canvasbacks, Hooded Mergansers and more. (GREAT NAMES, aren't they!)

Though Mallards and Wood Ducks often hang around here in the summer to breed, most of the ducks rely on vast wetland areas found to the north and west. The short summer season of long days that drives all living things in the North Country to hurry up and reproduce offers the same advantages to waterfowl that our mid-latitudes offer to neotropical migrants—lots of good food/nutrition to raise their ducklings.

Though many ducks summer in Canada, the Midwestern region is famous for its vast wetlands and huge numbers of waterfowl. Unfortunately, many of these lands are under threat due



Another Christmas Bird Count possibility: a Ruddy Duck. Photo by Dick Rowe

to the expansion of corn production. When I visited North Dakota in June of 2014, some of the



refuge officials with whom I spoke were distressed about the rapid loss of habitat. Upon asking what a regular person can do to help out, the answer is always the same: purchase a Federal Duck Stamp!

The duck stamp was established in 1934 in order to fund the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, and has protected 6 ½ million acres and helped fund the creation of over 300 National Wildlife Refuges. 98 cents of every dollar is spent on purchase of land or conservation easements. Artists compete to win the Duck Stamp contest. All duck hunters must purchase a Federal Duck Stamp issued

during the current year. Lots of birders purchase duck stamps, also, on a yearly basis. You could buy one for somebody as a Christmas present! Just head on over to the Lexington or Buena Vista Post Office. It's a surefire way to help.

—Laura Neale

Are you on the local birding listserve?

Did you know you can receive email reports of local bird sightings by joining the Rockbridge Birds listserve? You can also post your own sightings for others to see. To join, please contact Dick Rowe at RoweRA@vmi.edu.

Owl Night Out

We set off in late afternoon, stopping along the way for supper, in order to get to Highland Retreat Camp in northern Rockingham County in time to see the first ones of the evening -- if indeed any had been found. And when we arrived at the brightly-lit room in the camp building, sure enough, a tiny Northern Saw-whet Owl, wearing a newly-attached band on its leg, was being passed gently from hand to visitor's hand. Our Rockbridge group of eleven joined several other bird-lovers in childlike excitement and wonder at the owl's beautiful plumage and needle-sharp talons, his calm and alert manner, his seeming patience with his human admirers.

Our host was Dr. Clair Mellinger, Professor Emeritus of biology at Eastern Mennonite University, who was spending every November evening till about midnight, whenever weather was favorable, netting and banding Saw-whets. His helpers include "Zig" (Dr. Charles Ziegenfus, of James Madison University) and a rotating crew of Zig's JMU ornithology students, five of whom were on hand that evening. Clair's banding station is one of dozens in eastern North America, collecting data useful for beginning to understand Saw-whet migration patterns.

A group of us hiked about a half mile uphill in the dark with Clair for the evening's second visit to the nets. No new owls. But back at the station, our little male owl was retired to a special owl holding-box and *another* Saw-whet was brought out. It looked huge! That's because *it* was a *she*, and a female might be an entire inch bigger than a male. Clair and Zig showed us how to measure an owl (its wing chord, actually). Then they turned off the lights and shone a black light on the underside of Ms. Owl's wings, whereupon the wing feathers turned pink! We learned that a first-year owl's feathers, brand-new, all look quite pink. In later years, as the owl replaces those



feathers a few at a time (symmetrically on the two wings), the pink fades from the older, worn feathers, and this provides a way to distinguish older owls from young ones.

Finally, we participated in the release ceremony: we all went outdoors as two among us carried the owls and set them down on a picnic table, where, unbothered by our presence, they just—stayed put. It seems they need to re-acustom their eyes to the dark. After a while the female stretched her wings—how long they are, for such a small bird!—and flew soundlessly to a nearby tree; very soon the male did the same. Amazing as it was to actually hold these wonderful creatures in hand, it was most heart-satisfying of all to see them return to their own night world.

—Alexia Smith

Here's the male Northern Saw-whet Owl we met, in a photo by Melinda Robinson.

And here's Clair's blog entry, with photos, about the evening of our visit:

<https://highlandretreatowls.wordpress.com/2015/11/17/weve-reached-35-banded-owls-that-is/>

The President's Perch

We're about to make Rockbridge much more hospitable for American Kestrels, as Patti Reum brings to our area her program of installing nest boxes. As I was getting ready to help with installation, I thought I'd spend some time learning more about this pretty little falcon.

Last year the Rockbridge Regional Library put the full set of Arthur Cleveland Bent's "Life Histories of North American Birds" in one of their book sales, and I was able to get them all. The series was originally published in the 1930's, so I thought I'd get an early-twentieth-century picture of these birds. But as I checked the index, the only reference to Kestrels described accidental sightings of European Kestrels in Massachusetts. I was pretty sure the American species didn't appear from nowhere in the last 80 years—and, of course, it turned out to be just a question of names.

Until the 1980's the American Kestrel was known as the Sparrow Hawk. According to the Bent account, "our bird received its common name through the misconception of our English forefathers [naturally] who, primarily pioneers, failed to note its close relationship to their kestrel and misnamed it the sparrow hawk after the British bird of that name." The British sparrowhawk is an accipiter, like our Cooper's Hawk; the American and British Kestrels are both members of the nearly-worldwide *Falco* genus, in the falcon family.

The Bent life histories do indeed come from an earlier era of bird research—and of language style. The Kestrel account includes, for example, the observations of a Miss Sherman in 1913, who noted that when the nestlings she was closely observing reached 16 days old,

a marked difference was observed in behavior of the males and females. When a finger or a stick was pointed into the nest all opened their mouths; the males did little more

than this as they hugged the farthest side of the nest, but the females, springing to the center of the nest, every feather on their heads standing out seemingly at right angles, wings spread, mouths open and squawking, were ready to claw and bite. . . .

Many of the Bent life histories, including the Kestrel account, are on line [here](#). They're fun to read.

While in Bent's day the Kestrel was considered common, today its populations are declining in the U.S. as open spaces shrink throughout the country. Kestrels typically nest in old woodpecker holes or other openings, best if they're in or bordering large open pastures, as the bird's prey is primarily bugs and small mammals found in open areas, and their flying skills are best suited to those areas as well. Hopefully, with the help of the nest box project, we'll be able to keep the open areas we have and make them attractive to these amazing little birds of prey.

—Bob Biersack, President
with contributions by Alexia Smith

1 If you have access problems go to Dick Rowe's VMI flicker site at www.flickr.com/photos/vmibiology/collections/72157625985785907



The Club newsletter welcomes your submissions! These could be birding observations, thoughts, or travel stories; bird conservation news; photos—or some bird-related surprise. Please send items to alexia@rockbridge.net. Thank you.

—Alexia Smith, Editor

For more information about the Club visit our website at www.rockbridgebirdclub.org

Contact the Club by email at rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com or call Bob Biersack, 540-463-1942, or Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

Join the Club by making out a check for \$15 per household to Rockbridge Bird Club and sending it, along with your address, email address, and phone number, to Betty Besal, 120 Chavis Avenue, Lexington, VA 24450. Thank you.

Club Officers

President, Bob Biersack
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Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe

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