



January 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. Informal gatherings are held in the Munger Lodge at Boxerwood, on Ross Road unless otherwise noted.

Saturday, Jan. 3rd, 8:00-10:00 am - Boxerwood Bird Walk *

Wednesday, January 14th, 5:00-7:00pm – informal gathering *

Saturday, January 31st, 7:30 am – Highland County field trip*

Wednesday, Feb. 11th, 7 pm - Program: Katie Fallon, "Cerulean Warblers"

Wednesday, March 11th, 5:00-7:00 pm – Informal gathering

Wednesday, April 8th, 7 pm – Program: Sergio Harding, bird conservation biologist with the Virginia Dept. of Game & Inland Fisheries

Wednesday, May 13th, 5:00-7:00 pm – Second Annual Spring Picnic at Boxerwood

* *See article below*

* **Field Trips and Informal Gatherings**

* **Boxerwood Bird Walk Saturday on January 3**

Meet Kerry Kilday at 8 a.m. in the Boxerwood parking lot for a walk of about two hours in the Garden's varied habitats. If you have questions, or in case of doubtful weather, please call Kerry at (561) 389-9612. And for driving directions, see <http://boxerwood.org/visit/index.asp>.

* **Informal Gathering at Boxerwood on Wednesday, January 14**

We'll gather at 5:00 p.m. at Boxerwood's Munger Lodge for conversation, with a light supper provided by the Club (suggested donation \$5). And here's an idea for discussion: might the Club establish a small demonstration area of native plantings for birds, in a public place where folks could watch it develop? Bring your ideas, including possible locations! To find Boxerwood, see <http://boxerwood.org/visit/index.asp>.

*** Field Trip to Highland County on Saturday, January 31**

Pattie Reum has offered to lead our club on a field trip in Highland County in search of winter raptors- specifically Bald Eagles, Golden Eagles, and/or Rough-legged Hawks. Our plan is to make a day trip, returning via Swoope in search of Short-eared Owls. Please meet at the Lexington Food Lion at 7:30 am, and bring warm clothes and warming-up-type snacks and drinks. We'll plan on purchasing lunch at the country store in Blue Grass. For more details please call Laura Neale at 540-261-1909. Folks are welcome to contact Patti and arrange to stay in her rental cottage in New Hampden: www.eagleanniescottage.com. She offers discounts to birders!

VSO winter field trip to Virginia Beach: A Report by Laura Neale

Over the years I have enjoyed participating in VSO field trips to Chincoteague and the Outer Banks, but have always been too cowardly to brave the cityscape of Virginia Beach. However, hanging out on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel during a December Nor'easter serves as a unique not-on-a-rocking-and-pitching-sea-vessel spot for seeing some water birds that winter in these southern waters. VSO leader Lee Adams generously leads trips on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, for a triple-destination long weekend in December.

I headed down to the beach early on Friday morning to meet the group at the Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge. It is just over the border in North Carolina, and feels like it is a million miles from Virginia Beach. While eating my picnic lunch I watched a Northern Harrier cruising over the marshes. An "Open Roads Day" (held periodically on the Refuge) allowed us to drive the dike and trail system for special viewing opportunities. Listening to the sounds of a flock of Tundra Swans and the always-wonderful quacking of ducks was especially gratifying. At dusk we watched from an observatory platform as large skeins of Snow Geese came in for the night.

The next morning all gathered at the offices of the Bridge-Tunnel, or CBBT, to meet the off-duty security guards with whom Lee had made arrangements to chaperone our group. Since 9/11, Islands 2, 3 and 4 along the CBBT have been closed to visitors except by pre-

arrangement. (In the past birders could head out to these islands on spontaneous trips—during and after big weather fronts, for example.) Our caravan was led by one officer and tailed by another.

Our first stop began with a super surprise: a River Otter! It moved up and down the rocky breakwater, mostly in the water, but popped out and chirruped—probably for its young,



Figure a - Otter. Photo by Diane Lepkowski

according to a marine mammalogist on the field trip. From all the islands we saw distant strings of Scoters traveling low to the water. When I asked a knowledgeable participant how she was able to ID such distant ducks, she suggested: “Scoters look as if somebody chopped off their head and put it back on not quite right.”

At Island 3 all were captivated by an eider swimming and feeding very close by. After extensive scoping and discussion, it was determined to be a female Common Eider.

The rocks along Island 4 were being used by what seemed at first to be about five Purple Sandpipers, and soon became an unusually large number of 11! Beautiful little birds, they walk, sometimes slide, up and down the slippery rocks foraging for bits of animal and vegetable. I could have watched them all day, but staying on one of the off-limits islands is not an option. Our day was mild and calm and overcast and, though comfortable, not as productive as a miserably cold and windy day might have been. We also saw a few Gannets, lots of Double-crested Cormorants, a Red-throated Loon, a Long-tailed Duck, and a Harbor Seal.



Figure b – Common Eider Photo by Diane Lepkowski

Many in the group headed over to the Eastern Shore in search of more birds. I opted to hang around the scenic overlook just south of the Eastern Shore. I was mesmerized by a flock of about 15 Red-breasted Mergansers. They seemed to be priming for courtship—jerking their heads and necks about in a foolish way, and generally acting in an attention-garnering manner. They had mine! Common Loons, Buffleheads, and a distant flock of Brants—pointed out to me by Bob Ake—gathered on the shore of Fisherman’s Island, completed my trip to the CBBT.



Figure c – Purple Sandpiper Photo by Diane Lepkowski

I almost forgot—seagulls. There are plenty of opportunities to study seagulls at the beach. Every lamppost along the bridge was crowned with a Greater Black-backed Gull. We also saw Herring and Ring-billed Gulls, and watched a dazzling and extended chase by one gull intent on thieving a large prize from another. Many gulls are dead on the bridge. It must be a major impact when a vehicle collides with one of these large birds.

My Sunday plan for taking the tram trip at False Cape State Park had to be nixed, to my disappointment. I was looking forward to this special excursion to the barrier island and a dose of ocean sprays and more birds. But I look forward to trying again, and I invite anybody who is interested to join me next year. And if you want to learn water birds, another great VSO field trip is coming up in February, down to the Outer Banks. [Check http://www.virginiabirds.net/](http://www.virginiabirds.net/) for details.

The President's Perch: Learning the Seasons by Bob Biersack

I originally joined the bird club because I wanted to understand what was going on around me. As we got ready to move from the city to the farm, I was looking forward to seeing daily changes in the landscape and creatures that would surround us.

It has turned out very much as I hoped, with lots of interesting sights and sounds and changes, big and small. We recently had an example of one of the big ones, as a winter storm moved through the area in early December just as the waterfowl were traveling toward their winter homes on the coast. Clouds and fog forced them to find a place to settle in and wait for the weather to pass, and one of those places was Willow Lake, in the northern part of the county.

We've come to know Willow Lake because it's one of Dick Rowe's favorite sites for ducks and other waterfowl, so there have been a number of club outings that included a stop there. (I think it was my first time there a few years ago when, because I didn't know any better, I spotted a Bald Eagle in one of the willow trees while everyone else was focused on the ducks. . .)

So email reports had started to swirl about the number of ducks and the different varieties, including some that were fairly unusual. The next morning, as the weather was starting to clear, I grabbed my guides (Sibley and Crossley, because I knew the car would be near) and headed out. When I arrived and drove to the far end of the lake, I stared in amazement. There were hundreds, many hundreds of ducks moving in big clusters all across the lake. My binocs are only 8-power, so it can be hard to distinguish birds from a great distance; so I was having some trouble identifying who-all was out there. There were clearly lots of Hooded Mergansers and even more Redheads, and big groups I was having trouble with.

After I retreated to the car, out of the wind, to try to find them in the guides, another car arrived and two people jumped out with scopes at the ready and started scanning just in front of me. Not one to miss a learning opportunity, I got out and wandered over, saying something like "pretty amazing huh?" One of the new arrivals looked toward the other and said something like "nothing here" – and the other, to my amazement, agreed. Then they decided to split the counting duties, one counting Ruddys (the ones I was trying to identify) and the other counting Redheads. The totals came to about 300 Ruddys and about 200 Redheads. Oh, and there were a number of Scaup and some Pied-Billed Grebes, to say nothing of the Canada Geese and the Greater White Fronted Goose who had been hanging with them for several days by that point.

Their disappointment came from their hope for unusual species – there had been a Long-tailed Duck seen the day before; but for me the whole scene was pretty special just as it

was. It's come to be an example for me of the different perspectives we can have even as we agree that this kind of experience is pretty special. I think (hope) I'll always be able to see the remarkable things around me, even when they might seem almost common.

\$\$\$\$\$ Renew Your Membership Now for 2015 ! \$\$\$\$\$

The year is fast coming to a close and the Club is accepting membership renewals for 2015. We hope you will mail your dues of \$15 per household to our Treasurer, Betty Besal, at 120 Chavis Ave, Lexington, VA 24450.

--Adrienne Hall-Bodie, Membership Chair



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

Secretary, Alexia Smith

Program Chair, Sarah Burleson

Publicity Chair, Bonnie Bernstein

Membership Chair, Adrienne Bodie

Vice President, Laura Neale

Treasurer, Betty Besal

Field Trip Chair, Vacant

Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe

Newsletter edited by Alexia Smith & produced by Jan Smith. Please send feedback & news items to alexia@rockbridge.net