



March 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, and informal gatherings are held in the Munger Lodge at Boxerwood, on Ross Road.

Saturday, Mar. 7th, 8 am – Field Trip: Boxerwood Nature Center*

Monday, Mar. 9th, 4:30 pm – Program at Kendal: Bluebird Ecology by Pete Hamel*

Tuesday, Mar. 10th, 7 pm - Friends of Chessie Trail, program about birds on the Trail, Piovano Room of the Rockbridge County Main Library*

Wednesday, Mar. 11th, 5:00-7:00 pm – Informal gathering with brief presentation about Kestrel nesting boxes*

Wednesday, April 8th, 7 pm – Program: Bluebird Ecology by Pete Hamel

Friday-Sunday, May 8th-10th - Virginia Society for Ornithology Annual Meeting, at Wintergreen Resort*

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

* *See article below*

* **Field Trips and Programs**

* **Boxerwood Bird Walk on Saturday, March 7th**

The monthly first-Saturday bird walks continue: meet Kerry Kilday in the Boxerwood parking lot at 8:00 a.m. for a couple of morning hours strolling through the Gardens. To find Boxerwood, go to www.boxerwood.org.

* **Bluebird talk March 9th at Kendal**

Blue Ridge Parkway ranger Pete Hamel will talk and show slides about bluebird ecology at 4:30 on Monday, March 9th, in the Kendal Hall auditorium, public welcome. His subject is the Eastern Bluebird, its range and habitat, behavior, and life cycle, and the protocols for monitoring bluebirds and other cavity nesters during the breeding season. This talk kicks off year two of the Bluebird Conservation Project, sponsored by our Club and the Master Naturalists. You have

two chances to learn all about bluebirds and the Project, as Pete will also be making this presentation at our April 8th meeting.

*** “Birds of the Chessie Trail”
program on Tuesday, March
10th**

Club Ornithologist Dick Rowe will address a meeting of the Friends of the Chessie Trail at 7:00 p.m. in the Piovano Room at the Rockbridge Regional Library in Lexington. He'll talk about and show what birds you might see on the Trail in winter, and as winter gives way to spring: natives that over-winter, migratory species passing through, and those returning from warmer climes. The public is invited to attend. For more information please go to

www.friendsofthechessietrail.org or contact Lisa Tracy at lisatracybooks@gmail.com.



Yellow-throated Warbler photographed on the Chessie Trail by Dick Rowe

*** Food, chat & American Kestrels! Informal gathering on Wednesday,
March 11th, at Boxerwood**

As usual, we'll gather at Boxerwood's Munger Lodge at 5 p.m. for a light supper of sandwiches and drinks (suggested donation \$5). But this month we can also look forward to a short presentation on the American Kestrel Nesting Box Project, by Patti Reum of Highland

Looking for a home?

American Kestrel, photo by Dick Rowe



County, Conservation Chair of the Virginia Society of Ornithology. The Kestrel, according to Patti, “has shown population decreases because of loss of grassland habitat, loss of nesting cavities and use of insecticides and pesticides on agricultural fields”; the Project’s goal is to “provide nesting boxes in suitable habitat where Kestrels are found, throughout Virginia.”

Patti initiated “The Golden Chase” program that tracked a Golden Eagle for four years, and earlier she coordinated a program to determine populations of Golden-winged Warblers in Highland and

Bath Counties over a four-year period. Many of you know her as the friendly and knowledgeable leader of our field trips to Highland County.

*** VSO Annual Meeting, May 8 – 10th at Wintergreen Resort**

This annual gathering includes field trips, exhibits, scientific paper sessions, and a chance to meet birders from across the state—all happening close by this year. A special treat will be the keynote address by Scott Weidensaul, internationally known author, naturalist, and conservationist, whose book Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere With Migratory Birds

was a Pulitzer Prize nominee. He'll be talking about Project SNOWstorm, the effort to track and learn more about snowy owls.

Registration is due April 30, but the deadline is April 8 for lodging at Wintergreen at the special VSO rates. More information: <http://www.virginiabirds.net/VSO-Annual-Meeting.html>

Conservation Note: Why Plant Natives?

Native plants in your garden help birds and other living beings, including humans

What will you be planting in your garden this spring? Many of our non-native garden plants are favorites partly because they're "not bothered by pests," or they "thrive anywhere." But that's just the problem! They don't support life (or not much); and many can outcompete the native plants that do support life.

But wait, I'm thinking; I've planted privet and nandina especially so that birds can have the berries, and butterfly bush to feed the butterflies. Ah, but there's far more to think of: both birds and butterflies must make sure that their young have enough food to eat. And almost all songbirds, including those that eat seeds and berries as adults, feed insects to their babies, to give them the protein they need for rapid growth. As for butterflies, their caterpillar young need leaves to eat, sometimes the leaves of a particular native species—and those caterpillars in turn provide food for birds.

Thus native plants are critical to the entire local cycle of life. A non-native plant with few or no "pests," on the other hand, is a dead end. It interrupts the food web, taking in nutrients but not passing them on to local wildlife. Moreover, seeds from the non-native plants in our gardens can be carried by birds or animals or our own feet or vehicles to natural areas, where they get a start along a road or trail or in a forest opening and then proceed to take over more and more territory, a "slow-motion explosion."

As Doug Tallamy demonstrates in his book *Bringing Nature Home*, native plants support hugely more insect life—and more variety of species—than non-natives. For example, a crape myrtle supports only three species of native caterpillar, while a member of the serviceberry genus can feed 119 species, and our native oaks 518!* And while we may equate "living in the country" with plenty of food for wildlife, in fact those fescue pastures are not native and offer little sustenance.

Tallamy is a professor of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware and the pre-eminent expert on the benefits to local ecosystems of gardening with native plants. His studies have shown, for example, that even a modest increase in native plant cover "significantly increases the number and species of breeding birds, including birds of conservation concern."*

And that's just birds! Tallamy argues that gardeners can play a key role in sustaining biodiversity overall. In turn, he says, "it is biodiversity that generates oxygen and clean water; that creates topsoil out of rock and buffers extreme weather events like droughts and floods;



The native deciduous holly or "possumhaw" (*Ilex decidua*), providing berries for a Northern Cardinal and beauty in a winter garden. Photo by Steve Richards.

and that recycles the mountains of garbage we create every day.”* In other words, biodiversity is necessary for planetary life-support systems—on which human life, too, depends.

Biodiversity can’t thrive in scarce and scattered “open space,” tatters of a once-whole fabric now almost entirely converted to strictly-human uses. Help lies in our gardens, if we can weave them back into the web of life by growing more native plants.

—Alexia Smith, alexia@rockbridge.net, for the Rockbridge Bird Club

* From the Tallamy website www.bringingnaturehome.net. My education on this topic comes from Tallamy’s book, website, and talks; any errors are mine. *Bringing Nature Home* is readable and mind-opening, and beautifully illustrated besides. —AS

The President’s Perch

There has been much excitement in the Valley lately about the discovery of two Smith’s Longspurs at the regional airport near Weyers Cave. These birds are pretty far from home, which in the winter ranges from north-central Texas through most of Oklahoma and Arkansas and a bit of southern Kansas. They move through a narrow part of the Midwest in the spring to breed in far northern Canada and Alaska.

I don’t think of myself as generally inclined to charge off very far at word of an unusual sighting (though I did make a couple of failed attempts last winter to see the Snowy Owl just south of Harrisonburg). I’m still trying to understand our local residents better—identifying calls and noticing changes in behavior and plumage as they move through the year. And then there are the migrants and summer residents, where the challenge is to remember the sights and sounds from one year to the next (though some, like the Wood Thrush and the Louisiana Water thrush, are pretty hard to forget).

It’s hard not to get excited about new discoveries, though, and I expect I might have made the trip to Weyers Cave if I hadn’t been filling my days with the sights and sounds of a whole new range of birds as a group of us wandered the jungles and highlands and beaches of Belize for several days last month. There will be far more details to come as the lists are merged with photographs, etc., but suffice it to say it was an amazing birding experience, seeing so many exotic (for us) species in their native habitat.

I suppose the rarest are the ones who leave the strongest impressions—the Orange-breasted Falcon perched proudly in a tree on a high spot in the Mountain Pine Ridge region and the amazing, almost haunting sight of a pair of Scarlet Macaws flying silently together down the Macaw River in the early morning light—one of perhaps 30 pairs remaining in this part of their natural home. It was also great to see some old friends in their winter residences, including some Black-and-white Warblers like the one that we carry with us as the mascot of the Club. They seemed quite happy circling the trunks of small trees on the edge of the rainforest. Hopefully they will take their time resting up and gaining strength for the long flight back here this year, as we don’t seem to be releasing from the grip of winter anytime soon.

—Bob Biersack, Club President

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

The Club is still 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