



April 2017 Newsletter

of the

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

Calendar

Unless otherwise noted, programs are held in the Old Courthouse meeting room, downtown Lexington.

Sat., Apr. 1, 8:00 a.m.—Bird Walk at Boxerwood *

Weds., Apr. 5, 7:00 p.m.—Program: Katie Fallon on vultures *

Sat., Apr. 22, time TBA—Field Trip to Blue Ridge Parkway with Dick Rowe *

Sat., April 29th, 7:00 a.m.—Brushy Hills Bird Walk with Paul & Lock Cabe *

Fri.-Sun., May 5-7—VSO Annual Meeting in Richmond

Sat., May 6, 8:00 a.m.—Bird Walk at Boxerwood

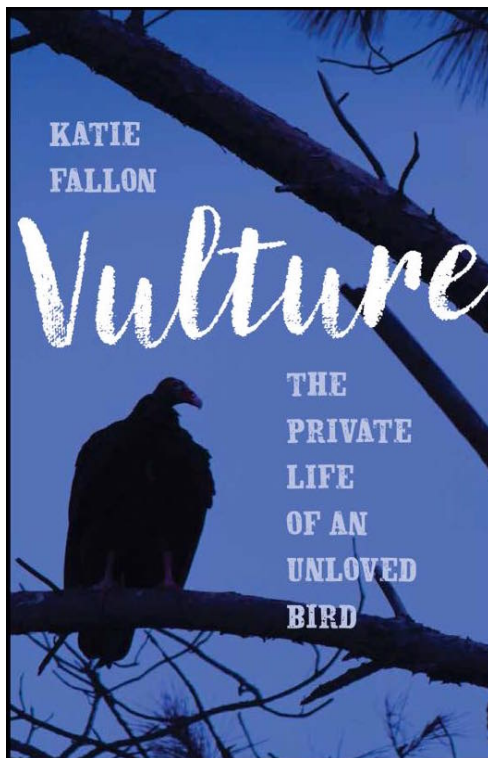
Sat., May 13th—Field Trip to Apple Orchard Mountain with Paul & Lock Cabe

Sat., May 27—VSO [Field Trip](#) to Piney Grove Preserve

*see article below

The evidence is overwhelming that birds are dinosaurs.

—[Robert T. Bakker](#), American paleontologist, b. 1945



Program on Vultures Wednesday, April 5, at 7:00 pm

Nature writer Katie Fallon will give a presentation on Turkey Vultures—their feeding and roosting habits, their migratory behaviors, and common misconceptions about them, as well as the role that vultures in general play in healthy ecosystems. She'll have copies of her new book, Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird.

Many will remember Katie's very engaging talk for the Club about Cerulean Warblers, the subject of her earlier book, Cerulean Blues: A Personal Search for a Vanishing Songbird. Katie is one of the founders of the Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia, a nonprofit dedicating to conserving the region's wild birds through research, education, and rehabilitation. Her first word was "bird."



Black-and-White Warbler, by Dick Rowe

Spring Field Trips

Spring is here, bringing a wave of migrating birds through our area. Some species will stay and breed here, others will be here for only a short time and then move on to their breeding areas in the North. During this concentration of bird movement through our area, you'll have five opportunities (see calendar on page 1) to join knowledgeable guides in the field. We are so fortunate to have as trip leaders Kerry Kilday, Dick Rowe, and Paul and Lock Cabe, expert birders who are also great teachers. Put these Saturday morning dates on your calendar: April 1, 22, and 29 and May 6 and 13 — and we'll send you reminders and more details later. I look forward to birding with you this Spring!

— Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair

Monthly Birding at Boxerwood: April 1, May 6...

Meet at 8:00 a.m. in the parking lot for the first-Saturday Boxerwood bird walk, lasting about two hours, with Kerry Kilday. If you have questions, or in case of doubtful weather, please call Kerry at (561) 389-9612. Directions are at www.boxerwood.org.

Blue Ridge Parkway trip with Dick Rowe, Saturday, April 22

Our Club Ornithologist (also Professor of Biology at VMI) will lead us to some of his favorite spots on the Parkway, where he keeps a close eye on spring arrivals. In Dick's territory, he can often lead us to particular singing warblers of his acquaintance. More later on when and where to meet.

Dick's photos on the next page show two species we might see on our trip with him: Blue-eyed Vireo and Black-throated Warbler.



18th Annual Bird Walk in Brushy Hills, Saturday, April 29

Guided by Paul Cabe, W&L Professor of Biology, and his son Lock, age 13 and founder of the Rockbridge Kids' Bird Club, we'll be listening and looking for warblers and others. Both Paul and Lock brim with knowledge and curiosity, making this a Bird Walk plus. Meet at Town Spring at 7:00 a.m. for an outing of about two hours. Directions: from Lexington, drive to the end of Ross Road (2.3 miles from city limits) and turn right on Union Run Road. Continue 0.6 miles to the Brushy Hills Trails sign and Town Spring on the right, with parking lot opposite.

Birds really *are* Dinosaurs

When a wide array of new dinosaur fossils were discovered in China in the 1990s, paleontologists were surprised to find that they had a variety of plumages, some including fully articulated quills. It turns out that feathers, once thought unique to birds, evolved in dinosaurs long before birds developed (this account is taken from a [Scientific American article](#) that tells a much fuller, and fascinating, story of dinosaur/bird evolution). And more recent discoveries suggest that the common ancestor of *all* dinosaurs had feathers (detail from a [National Geographic article](#)).



Other bird characteristics gradually evolved within one lineage of dinosaurs. According to Stephen Brusatte, a paleontologist at the University of Edinburgh, “the classic features of birds evolved one by one: first bipedal locomotion, then feathers, then a wishbone, then more complex feathers that look like quill-pen feathers, then wings.” The end result, Brusatte says, “is a relatively seamless transition between dinosaurs and birds, so much so that you can’t just draw an easy line between these two groups.”

— Alexia Smith

Left: Greater Roadrunner (*Geococcyx californianus*). Photo by Glenn Bartley, from [allaboutbirds.com](#)

Below: Artist’s conception of *Zhenyuanlong suni*, a dinosaur about two meters long that lived approximately 125 million years ago, known from a single fossil specimen found in China



Bob's Perch: Can I be a "driverless" birder?

I came to this curiosity about birds rather late in life. This has made it fairly challenging to keep all the different information about recognition and identification in my mind as I walk in the fields and woods around me. A couple of years ago, when the VSO held its annual Foray in Rockbridge County, one of the most highly regarded birders in the state stayed with us for a few days as he participated in the full-scale effort to inventory summer species. As we walked the first day he told me, a little matter-of-factly I thought, that I would never really be "good" at this. It wasn't meant as a criticism. It's just that the amount of learning that usually comes from years of experience and exposure to lots of different seasons of observing wasn't going to happen for me.

That usually means that a birding walk can be rather frustrating, with lots of uncertainty about which bird is which even when they're seen, to say nothing of the birds that are only heard. My guess is this uncertainty and frustration probably keep some people away from the experience, since a lot of the richness and fun come from recognizing the unusual sights and sounds that often appear.

Today, though, technology provides many ways in which the limitations of inexperience can potentially be overcome. As the devices we often carry in our pockets gain more amazing capabilities, we're effectively able to carry a full library of reference materials with us all the time. More than that, though, these devices are also becoming effectively another set of eyes and ears that can help us see and hear what's happening.

I've been using the Audubon Bird Guide: North America app (free; preview [here](#)) for quite a while. It's pretty easy to look up a species and get great photos that help with identification, but also to listen to songs and look at range maps and read descriptions of behaviors. You can also quickly get a list of similar species to make comparisons – that's been a big help with identification for the birds I see.



Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, by Dick Rowe

There are several other apps that help with visual identification. The Cornell Lab's Merlin app (free [here](#)) is designed to help you think through the ID process – using questions about size and color and shape to give suggestions about which bird you might be seeing. It can be helpful in narrowing the possibilities when you aren't sure where to start with an ID, aided (as are most of the apps) by its knowing your physical location. It “learns” by tracking the ID process of its users, so it can theoretically get better with time.

The biggest shortcoming with these, at least for me, was the inability to start with the sound of the bird rather than the view. Now there are several new apps that use sound to make identifications. I've been playing recently with something called Song Sleuth (\$9.99; learn more [here](#)), which allows you to record a song (cleverly recording everything as you go along but starting to save the data starting three seconds before you push the “record” button – a big help for those of us whose reflexes aren't what they once were). It employs a variety of algorithms using spectrograms of the sound you record to identify likely species. Then it gives you several examples of the songs of what it thinks are good candidates, along with David Sibley's descriptions and pictures of the birds it thinks you heard. You need to be pretty close to the bird, and background noise is (not surprisingly) sometimes a problem, but I've had some success (I think) in the early stages of using this. If it really works it will be a huge help, I'm hoping.



Red-eyed Vireo, by Dick Rowe

What about help with keeping track of the birds you identify? eBird is quickly becoming my standard for keeping lists and will be critical to the effort I'm making this year to contribute to the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas. (The eBird Mobile app can be downloaded [here](#) for free; the website, where you can both record observations and explore data, is [here](#).) With the app, it's easy to find a species and enter information about numbers and Atlas breeding behavior codes, all of which automatically goes into the full study database. The Atlas process is also using GPS software that identifies your specific location in a topographic map of the block you're standing in so that you know if you're in the right place and how far you've moved within the block.

So does all of this technology make me a better birder? Does it just distract from the natural experience, with me missing more of what's going around me as I stare at the screen and fumble with my thumbs? Each of these is possible, and there is surely a little more of the latter now as I'm getting used to how these tools work. I don't think there is any question, though, that the end result of each trip will be more reliable information and a broader identification of the species actually in the area than would have been possible with my inexperienced mind and a pencil. So I'm embracing the tools of today and hoping I can still keep my head up enough to capture the pleasure of the experience, along with the data.

— *Bob Biersack*



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 Alexia Smith, 540-463-4010, or Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

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 Betty Besal, 120 Chavis Avenue, Lexington, VA 24450. Thank you.

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