



February 2024 Newsletter
of the
Rockbridge Bird Club,
encouraging
the enjoyment, knowledge, &
conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

Calendar

Sat., Feb. 10, 8:30 a.m. — Second Saturday Birding at Boxerwood *

Mon., Feb. 12, 6:30 p.m. — Program: Gardening for Birds and Wildlife, by Robyn Puffenbarger *

* [see article below](#)

Don't think the garden loses its ecstasy in winter. It's quiet,
but the roots are down there riotous.

– Rumi, 13th century Persian poet & Sufi mystic

Second Saturday Bird Walk at Boxerwood
February 10 at 8:30 a.m.

We'll meet at the Boxerwood parking lot for a stroll of about two hours. This month we're likely to see many of the species that winter in Rockbridge, including the White-throated Sparrow, Hermit Thrush, and Winter Wren.



*Winter Wren.
Photo by Tim
Vellutini,
Macaulay Library*

Second Saturday, cont'd.

As always, wear appropriate footwear and bring binoculars. In the event of a heavy rain the walk will be canceled. For more information, including weather updates, contact Bonnie Bernstein (540-460-9147 or bonnie.bernstein@gmail.com).

Monday 12 February meeting: 6:30 p.m. in the Piovano Room at the downtown library

Social time, followed by the program at 7:00:

Gardening for Birds and Wildlife

“Just a few additions can make your backyard into an interesting, welcoming environment for birds,” according to our speaker, Bridgewater College biology professor Robyn Puffenbarger.

Dr. Puffenbarger will describe ecosystems and offer guidance for building a plant community in a variety of settings – sun or shade, on a patio or spread over acres – to help attract new backyard birds, and other wildlife as well.



Robyn Puffenbarger is professor and chair of the Department of Biology and Environmental Science at Bridgewater College. Since 2021, she has been on the team of Virginia Home Grown, filming about all aspects of gardening in the Shenandoah Valley for the VPM/PBS live program..

The Problem of Free-roaming Cats: a bill to support in the Virginia House of Delegates

Most of us know that in the U.S cats kill billions of animals, including birds, every year. If you haven't experienced watching a bird hopping up and down with a fatally

damaged wing, and a cat lurking in the underbrush — having fled the human presence before completing the kill — you've been spared a cruel reality. While it is perfectly natural for cats to kill, they are *not* a natural part of our native habitats but an introduced species, and they've had tremendous [negative impacts](#) on many bird and other wildlife populations.

In addition, free-roaming cats live short lives characterized by hardship, disease, and injury, and they transmit diseases such as toxoplasmosis to humans and to wildlife.

In Virginia there are estimated to be 2.1 million free-roaming cats, of which 1.2 million cats are unowned. A few years ago, a state-sanctioned group came together to come up with a strategy that would address this issue. A working group including wildlife officials, veterinarians, representatives from humane societies and from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and health officials prepared a [report](#) for the House Agriculture, Chesapeake, and Natural Resources Committee of the Virginia General Assembly.

The result is House Bill 221, which directs the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to establish minimum standards for Free-roaming Cat Management Plans, "for the purpose of reducing negative impacts on public health, wildlife, and the welfare of the cats." Passage of HB 221 will provide the groundwork for management strategies to be developed by different localities. I hope you will let your representatives know that you support it.

— *Laura Neale, Conservation Chair*

Not sure who your representative is? No wonder — Rockbridge County is, confusingly, divided between two districts:

District 36: Ellen Campbell, 804-698-1036, DelECampbell@house.virginia.gov

District 37: Terry Austin, 804-798-1037, DelTAustin@house.virginia.gov

Zoom in on this interactive [map](#) to find out which district you're in.



White-throated Sparrow. Photo by Keenan Yakola, Macaulay Library

An Owl Worth Waiting For

by John Pancake

It's a cold winter evening a few years ago. I have set up my spotting scope at the crest of Bell's Lane, on the northern edge of Staunton. Darkness spreads across the rolling fields. When I can barely see, they emerge from who-knows-where: Short-eared Owls.

The big-eyed, stiff-winged birds dance across the indigo sky. First one, then another, then another, then another. I am ecstatic. It is tricky to find these birds, but I have hit the jackpot. Great views. When the last light is gone, I stand shivering in the cold wind, the happiest man in Staunton.

I drive home elated until early the next morning when I sit bolt upright in bed and realize I have left my scope standing on the hill. (I arrive at Bell's Lane 47 minutes later. It is still there.)

I admit it; I'm crazy for Short-eared Owls. They visit us in the cold months. When and where they appear is a little mysterious. I first saw them 50 years ago when they gathered in the fields around the Roanoke airport. They were there for a few winters, and then they weren't.

I've found them in a handful of other spots around the state, always in open short-grass fields and always at dusk. The owls are brownish, darker above, streaked below, with long pointed wings. The body always reminds me of the chubby-headed profile of a bumblebee.

These owls roost on the ground. At dusk, they swing up into the sky and fly low over fields hunting mice, voles, and other small mammals. If Northern Harriers are the day shift, short-eareds are the night shift.

They should be in our county, too. Should be...but I've had no luck. None, that is, until one sunny morning

It's Jan. 21. I'm cruising north on McElwee Road, a mile or two west of Brownsburg. Very cold. Snow covers the fields. A few Horned Larks. Otherwise, the usual suspects. Suddenly a big bird flies up from nowhere and lands on the bank to my right. I stop the truck on a dime and grab my binoculars. It's in the shadows, but when I focus on it, it looks like the one I've been hoping to find in Rockbridge for half a century.

Can this be right? It's broad daylight. The bird cooperates by flitting to the west side of the road and posing in perfect light. I let the truck creep forward, holding my breath. Now I'm 20 feet away. I roll down the window. The bird glares at me with brilliant yellow eyes. It's not flustered, but I am. Why isn't Dick Rowe here with his telephoto? I am so close!

All I've got is an iPhone. Why not try? I take shot after shot. There's no traffic. Just the two of us. We spend a long time looking at each other. I could not possibly have a better look. Eventually, I decide to leave him in peace. I ease down the road. My last glimpse is in the rear-view mirror. When I come back an hour later, he's gone.

I message Dick and send a photo. He checks the records and says this is the seventh individual recorded in Rockbridge.

(cont'd on page 5)

J.J Murray, the godfather of Rockbridge birding, knew of six records, but some are clearly the same bird seen on different/consecutive days, Dick says. The McElwee short-eared is only the second since the early 1950s.

Here's an interesting thing: The other recent record was by the ever-watchful Jerry Jackson at his place is a half-mile from my encounter.

The fields west of Brownsburg bear watching.



Worth Waiting For



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 and find us on Facebook. Contact the Club by email at rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com, or call Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

Club Officers

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