



ROCKBRIDGE BIRD CLUB

Encouraging the enjoyment, knowledge and conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

December 2025 Newsletter

A SPECIAL CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT EDITION

CLUB CALENDAR

- Dec 9, 7:00 pm** – Christmas Bird Count planning session at RRL
- Dec 13, 9:00 am** – 2nd Saturday Birding at Boxerwood
- Dec 20, all day** – 2025 Christmas Bird Count
- Dec 20, 5-7 pm** – Potluck Tally at Boxerwood

I prefer winter and fall, when you feel the bone structure of the landscape – the loneliness of it, the dead feeling of winter. Something waits beneath it, the whole story doesn't show.

— ANDREW WYETH

One Hundred Years and Counting!

Planning Session for the 2025 Christmas Bird Count on December 9



As a lead-up to the centennial year for our local Christmas Bird Count, CBC organizer Dick Rowe will hold a planning session in the Piovanno Room at Rockbridge Regional Library on December 9 at 7:00 pm.

Dick will begin with a brief history of the Lexington area CBC and share data on some of the more interesting species. He'll devote most of the program to organizing volunteers for this year's count on December 20, establishing where participants will be counting and when – for example, noting who is owling, doing a feeder count, or leading a group at Boxerwood. That will indicate areas that still need coverage and prevent overlaps.

Dick will also help coordinate small parties who want to count together in the field and assign contacts for any late sign-ups and to alert everyone if there is a rare bird seen. He'll review the Audubon count protocols, including how to document mileage, time, and the sighting of a rare bird, and how to submit data. Most counts will be shared during the Potluck Tally at Boxerwood at the end of the day (see info below).

Birding at Boxerwood on December 13



A Hermit Thrush landing on a tree at Boxerwood photographed by Baron Schwartz two winters ago.

Join club members on the last Second Saturday morning walk at Boxerwood for the year 2025 – and become a regular in 2026!

“Birding at Boxerwood” is scheduled for the Second Saturday of the month starting at 9:00 am during the winter months.

Target species for December include Dark-eyed Junco, Golden- and Ruby-crowned Kinglet, White-throated Sparrow, Hermit Thrush, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, and Winter Wren.

Boxerwood birders were serenaded by a dozen White-throats during their November walk: “*Oh, Canada, Canada!*”

We meet in the nature center parking lot for a two-hour stroll through the field and woodlands. Bring binoculars, wear sturdy footwear, and dress for weather.

For more information or possible weather cancellations, visit Rockbridge Bird Club on Facebook or contact Bonnie (540-460-9147).

CBC & Potluck Tally Party on December 20

The Bird Club will once again host a tally potluck supper at Boxerwood following the 2025 Christmas Bird Count on December 20. The gathering begins at 5:00 pm. All club members, count participants, and interested birder are invited.

If you plan to party with us, please bring a side dish or dessert to share.

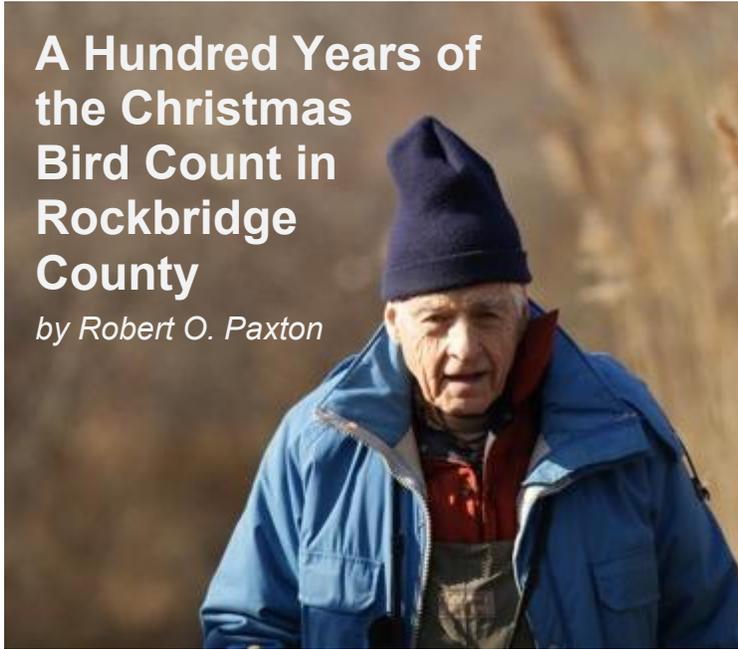
Gift Swap: Have something bird-related something you’re willing to part with? Wrap it up and bring it to the potluck gift swap. The rules are simple: give something, get something!



Dick Rowe calls out the tallies at last year’s CBC potluck at Boxerwood. Photo by Julie Robinson.

A Hundred Years of the Christmas Bird Count in Rockbridge County

by Robert O. Paxton



Shivering in the pre-dawn December chill, participants in the Christmas Bird Count might well wish it were an Easter Bird Count. But it takes place in midwinter for a historical reason. This endeavor was invented in 1900 by Frank Chapman, curator of birds at the American Museum of Natural History as a counter to the custom of that era whereby men and boys went out with their shotguns after Christmas Dinner to see how many birds they could kill. Chapman proposed instead seeing how many species of birds one could identify in one day.

Chapman's first counts were carried out by 27 dedicated birders in 25 localities, mostly near northeastern cities but including Pacific Grove, California. The

count's appealing combination of sport and science caught on rapidly and spread nationwide to involve over 80,000 people today at 2677 localities, mostly in North America.

Chapman established rules so that a Christmas Bird Count would be more useful than just a stroll in the country. The count must take place within one day within a circle 15 miles in diameter. The number of participating parties, the miles covered by foot or car, and the number of hours spent by each party must be precisely recorded so that the results for each count, reduced to a quantity per party-hour for each species, can be compared with all the others.

The first Christmas Bird Counts in Rockbridge County were taken in the early 1920s by Merriam G. Lewis. Like many early counts, they involved just a few hours and a limited number of the commoner species. The idea was taken up in 1929 by Dr. J.J. Murray, pastor of the Lexington Presbyterian Church, who came relatively late to birding but took it up with the intensity with which he did everything. After that, the series was continuous except for 1936.

In the 1930s Dr. Murray made the count by himself or with his wife and son. When I joined him in 1944, we started at dawn overlooking the Woods Creek gorge behind the Washington and Lee campus. Then we went to the cedar grove overlooking the Maury River at East Lexington, and from there to Big Spring Pond and nearby Kerr's Creek. By then it was lunchtime, and Dr. Murray insisted that everyone have a hot lunch at mid-day. Afternoon was spent on Brushy Hill. The short December day was soon ended.

At a date unknown to me Col. Robert P. Carroll, head of the VMI Biology Department and a remarkable naturalist, began covering the Maury River valley downstream from Lexington to the confluence of the Maury and South Rivers, passing by the Womeldorf family's farm pond on the way. The Womeldorfs kept geese, which seemed to make this small pond a magnet for passing waterfowl. One of the Womeldorf brothers, Joshua, took note of birds that visited his pond, and assisted the counters while they were on his land.

In the evening, the counters met at the Presbyterian Manse and combined their lists, along with hours and mileages. There were tales of the day's adventures, successes and misses.

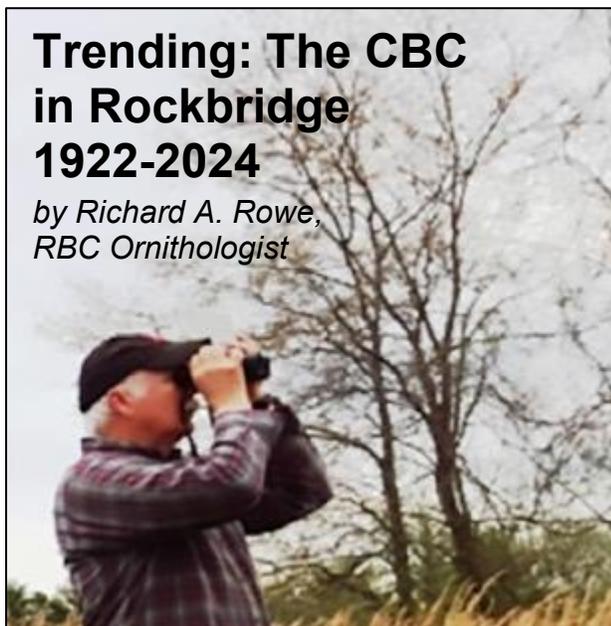
The circle of participants gradually expanded. Royster Lyle contributed his natural history expertise after moving to Lexington in 1962 to work for the George C. Marshall Foundation, though he hated to get up at dawn. Other long-term participants include George Tolley, Marguerite Moger, Polly Turner, Paul Cabe, and John Pancake. For many years Tolley took charge of the southwestern part of the Count Circle and prepared an indispensable spread sheet summarizing all the count results

since the beginning. Barry Kinzie from Roanoke and Myrian Moore from Lynchburg gave us indispensable help for many years.

I became the compiler in 1970, when Dr. Murray's memory began to fail. The count circle was centered originally at the Washington and Lee campus. In 1974, I moved the center to Big Spring Pond, in order to include recently-constructed Lake Merriweather, at the Goshen Boy Scout Camps, and Lake Robertson near Collierstown.

In 2007, living far from Lexington and not knowing all the new local birders, I passed the job of compiler to Dick Rowe, another chairman of Biology at VMI. Today the Rockbridge Christmas Bird Count continues with a dozen or more participants who enjoy its mixture of sport and science.

Dr. Robert O. Paxton grew up in Lexington and was a professor of history at Columbia University for 31 years. He is retired and lives in Sleepy Hollow, NY. Still an active birder, Bob takes part in the Rockland County, NY Christmas Bird Count.



Trending: The CBC in Rockbridge 1922-2024

*by Richard A. Rowe,
RBC Ornithologist*

This year marks the 100th Lexington Area Christmas Bird Count and the 89th consecutive count.

The first CBC in Virginia took place in 1905 near Alexandria, and the first Lexington count was taken in 1922 by just one participant. Except for three years in the 1920s and the year 1936, there has been a Lexington CBC; thus beginning in 1937 there has been a Lexington count every year.

There have been a number of changes to our CBC since its inception. Participation has grown over time, from a single participant in 1922 to the 53 in 2024 who joined 23 groups in the field or conducted counts at bird feeders on their property. As noted by Bob Paxton, the center of the Count circle changed in 1974 to Big Springs.

Perhaps most notable is the change in the birds we've seen. Over the years, 132 species have been reported with a grand total of just over 564,000 individuals counted. The yearly average is 58 species and 5,703 individuals. In the last decade, an average of 76 species have been seen and 8,166 individuals counted.

Some species (Downy Woodpeckers, Dark-eyed Juncos, White Throated Sparrows, European Starlings, to name a few) are seen every year. Others, such as Blue Jays, American Kestrels, Golden-crowned Kinglets, Field Sparrows, and Carolina Chickadees are seen most years and are expected in our counts.

Some species are rarely seen (i.e., fewer than 10 times). These "rarities" may be common outside the count circle or elsewhere in Virginia, or more common during migration or the summer. For example, the following species have been reported rarely in our counts: three Herring Gulls (1976), which are abundant elsewhere in Virginia; four Virginia Rails (2023, 2021-2019), which are common in marshes; two Common Loons (2014, 2007), which migrate through Virginia in fall and spring; one Green Heron (1971), commonly seen in summer and which nest in our area; one Long-tailed Duck (2020), which winters along the coast; one Rufous Hummingbird (2020) a rare migrant in Virginia; six House Wrens (1994, 1988, 1979, 1978, 1973, 1952), a very common summer breeder; and four Pine Warblers (1961, 1960), though this species can be found year-round along the Blue Ridge Parkway in our area.

A few species common in early counts are now uncommon or have become less common in recent years. These changes reflect general population and movement patterns for the species. American Tree Sparrows were reported on 56 of the last 87 counts, but fewer than 10 have been reported on a count since 1995 and they have not been consistently seen since the late 1960s. Tree Sparrows are common in the northeast and do not often move into Virginia during the winter.

Evening Grosbeaks were commonly seen from 1959 through the late 1980s but have only been reported twice (1993, 2020) since. Conversely, prior to 1993 no Bald Eagles were reported on our count; they have been seen every year since 2004. Common Mergansers were not reported on our CBC prior to 1988 but have been reported every year since 2010 and now breed in the county. House Finches first appeared on the 1974 CBC and have been seen every year since 1977. They were introduced in New York in 1940 and are now a very common species across the East.

Dr. Richard A. Rowe moved to Lexington in 1991 and was a professor of biology at VMI for 33 years. He is retired and spends time in Lexington and the mountains of NC birding and photographing birds.

FIELD NOTES FROM NOVEMBER

A drizzly but rewarding day at Locher Tract / November 21

Wendy Richards, Field Trip organizer



Photographs taken at Locher Tract by Laura Neale (above) and Joan Joyce (right).

offers such varied birding habitat, so we spent a little more time there and sure enough, we saw more birds!

Eleven hardy birders came out on a damp, overcast morning to stroll the wide mown trails of the Locher Tract. We were not disappointed! Even before we left the parking area, a huge flock of Common Grackles (250+) passed overhead.

We heard the dry chup call of Hermit Thrushes, and a Hairy Woodpecker and several White-breasted Nuthatches called as they foraged on tree trunks. We watched American Goldfinches busily feeding and caught fleeting glimpses of Swamp Sparrows as they hopped about in the reeds. A female Wood Duck made a quick exit from a wetland despite our careful approach.



Join the **ROCKBRIDGE BIRD CLUB**
for our annual Audubon
Christmas Bird Count
TALLY POTLUCK



*Saturday, December 20 from 5-7 pm
in Munger Lodge at Boxerwood*

*Dick Rowe will call the day's tally. Interested birders are welcome
to attend whether or not they have participated in the count.*

The Bird Club will provide tableware, chili and cider.

Please bring a side dish or dessert to share!



For more information about the Rockbridge Bird Club, visit www.rockbridgebirdclub.org and find us on [Facebook](#). Contact the Club by email at rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com, or call John Maluski (304-488-0037).

RBC COORDINATING COMMITTEE

John Maluski, Chair and Membership

Kip Brooks, Secretary
Jan Smith, Treasurer
Dick Rowe, Club Ornithologist
Wendy Richards, Field Trips

Laura Neale, Conservation
Bonnie Bernstein, Publicity
Lisa Gay-Milliken, Social Media
Baron Schwartz, Webpage