



**September 2021 Newsletter**  
of the  
**Rockbridge Bird Club,**  
encouraging  
the enjoyment, knowledge, &  
conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

**Calendar**

**Sat., Sept. 25, 8:00 a.m.**—Bird walk along the Buena Vista end of the Chessie Trail: beginning birders welcome \*

**Mon., Nov. 8, 7:00 p.m.**—Zoom interview with Jonathan Meiburg, author of [A Most Remarkable Creature](#) (book described [here](#))

\* See article below

The birds are molting. If only man could molt also – his mind once a year its errors, his heart once a year its useless passions. —James Allen, 1864–1912, British inspirational writer

*Some birds are indeed molting now — many species molt from late summer into fall.  
But molting is extremely variable; learn more from [All About Birds](#).*

**Birds Offer Us A Sweet Spot**

Welcome to another Bird Club year! We reach out to members and friends from September to May, through this newsletter and through activities that focus on the enjoyment and protection of birds. We'd hoped to offer in-person quarterly programs this year, but the recent spike in the COVID Delta variant in our area has dashed those plans for now. In addition to the Chessie Trail bird walk described on page 3, we hope to offer other outdoor, virtual, and (possibly) indoor activities, depending on the trajectory of this unpredictable virus as the year moves along.

From a bird and birder's perspective, this past spring and summer have been an anxious time. In addition to the COVID threat to humans, an as yet undiagnosed disease affected birds. National and state agencies in the Northeastern US asked folks to take down bird feeders and bird baths to prevent the spread of this mysterious condition, which was causing disabling conditions and death to certain species. More on this unsettling topic later in the newsletter.

On a sweeter, more personal note: despite not supplementing my local birds' diet this summer\*, I witnessed plenty of bird activity in my yard and field. Around the house and gardens, Carolina Wrens, Northern Cardinals, Chipping Sparrows, Eastern Wood-Pewees, Mourning Doves, Scarlet Tanagers, Tree and Barn Swallows all were busy

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\* I did maintain nectar feeders for the horde of hummingbirds that visited my yard, cleaning them thoroughly when I frequently refilled them. By next season I hope to have planted more native flowering plants for them and other birds.

hawking and gleaning insects, worms, and seeds. I discovered more nests than I can remember. Walking in our field I often startled American Goldfinch feeding on grasses, who launched into their undulating flight pattern. I heard the frequent ping-pong-ball-dropping sound of Field Sparrows, the hollow knocking call of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and the warbles of Eastern Bluebirds.



*Chipping Sparrow. Photo by Dick Rowe.*

Speaking of bluebirds, they started occupying our boxes in February, and as of the third week in August they still had an active nest with 3 eggs in one box. The adult pair were keeping an eye on it as I approached. This surprising late-breeding phenomenon was also in evidence at the Skyline Bluebird Box Trail at Natural Bridge State Park that was just established this year. I've been a backup monitor there for Aileen Spurgeon, who very conscientiously monitors the boxes. Of the 10 boxes, five have had successful attempts, including one that has been used three times. There are four young ones in this third attempt as I write, due to fledge around September 7th. Another box on this trail also had a late nesting where the birds fledged around August 20th. Here is a quote from Aileen: "I have been monitoring bluebird boxes for five years now, and I can recall only one other time that I had a late nesting that went well into August — and it was only in one box. We have two at Natural Bridge and I have one at home... It has been a busy year."

Enjoy watching birds,  
— Wendy Richards, President



*Eastern Bluebird Nestlings in a nest box at Skyline Trail, Natural Bridge State Park.  
Photo by Steve Richards*

### **Bird Walk along the Chessie Nature Trail on September 25**

We'll gather at 8:00 a.m. in the parking area off Stuartsburg Road (near the Route 60 Robey Bridge), then set off in small groups, each led by one of our more experienced birders. Plan for a two-hour stroll, but walkers are free to turn around at any point. Beginning birders are especially welcome!

We expect to see a variety of birds in this migration season — herons, raptors, songbirds heading south, winter returnees, and year-round residents.

Please do wear good walking shoes and bring water and masks. Be aware that there are no restroom facilities along the trail.

This event is co-sponsored with the Friends of the Chessie Trail. For more information, email Wendy Richards, [RichardsW@wlu.edu](mailto:RichardsW@wlu.edu). In case of rain, the walk will be cancelled.

### **Raptor Migration is Underway: Visit a Hawk Watch on the Blue Ridge**

Two Hawk Watch sites on the Blue Ridge are near our area: [Rockfish Gap](#), at the Inn at Afton, just off highway 64; and [Harvey's Knob](#) (with fewer sightings but a beautiful location), on the Blue Ridge Parkway between mileposts 95 and 96. Each is operated by members of nearby Bird Clubs, who will welcome you and help you see and identify raptors as they fly over. And Rockfish Gap has an [Open House](#) on Saturday, September 18, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., which includes live raptor shows and other family-friendly events.



## Birds of the Sea, Far from Land

I was most fortunate to spend a full week at the beach this summer, and while literally *on* the beach, when not swimming or seagazing, I read a seabook. Far From Land: The Mysterious Lives of Seabirds, by Michael Brooke, was published in 2018 and is a primer for those of us landlubbers infatuated with the open oceans — and ignorant of and mystified by its inhabitants.

I've been on several pelagic boat trips, and I spent most of those days astern, awaiting the next bout of the heavens. (One spectacular and seasickness-free day long ago keeps me trying.) Being out in the deep blue (or gray and green deep) is magical: big skies, open seas, the occasional peek at marine life, and the wonder of seabirds. Being out of sight of land, and motoring to spots where the captain, knowledgeable in the currents and depths and in the ways of birds, "chums" (throws cut-up fish in the water) to attract seabirds: this offers a taste of another world.

One of the most phenomenal sights is a flock of Wilson's Storm Petrels hovering above the chum slick and appearing to be walking on water. Again, it's hard to describe the pleasant shock of being many dozens of miles from land and coming upon a small, bobbing Red-necked Phalarope, solo (a usually-gregarious bird that breeds inland and winters at sea), or having a Barn Swallow dive-bomb the boat. In cool seas one can experience puffins and other auks diving and swim-flying underwater. Seabirds number almost 350 species and include albatrosses, and shearwaters, and boobies, and Rhinoceros Auklets, and Razorbills, and gulls... and more.



*Razorbill. Photo by Dick Rowe*

Michael Brooke is a Brit with a sense of humor who has travelled the oceans studying seabirds and has written a book that relates current knowledge of various species' habits. New technology has answered questions about where species nest or where they spend their lives as adolescents or in non-breeding periods. I was thrilled by

his wonderful explanations of currents, prevailing winds, and ocean depths at different latitudes and how these aspects all interact to create productive fisheries.

Of course, our species has had a tremendous negative impact on the status of seabirds. The author's contention that we can and should take responsibility is refreshingly hopeful: of a study showing 251 Laysan Albatross chicks dead due to ingesting plastics, he says, "If human activity can wreak such distress on innocent albatross chicks so distant from urban sprawls, has humanity abrogated responsibility for stewardship of the planet?" Please scroll down for an opportunity to advocate for legislation addressing plastics.

Likewise, seabirds and the fishing industry harvest from the same highly productive fisheries, and the author suggests that protection of stocks would benefit both groups. International efforts continue to establish marine protection areas. Many of us are familiar with the tragic consequences of longline fishing practices. Ultimately, "common humanity demands that distressing seabird deaths be reduced to the absolute minimum." Please scroll down for a second opportunity to help seabirds.

My awe at the adaptations of birds just grow and grows. [Far From Land](#) explores the legendary flights of albatrosses, the intriguing feeding practices of frigate birds, the migrations of penguins, the diving trajectories of gannets and puffins and penguins, and so much more. I recommend!

—Laura Neale, Conservation Chair



*Northern Gannet. Photo by Dick Rowe*

## **OPPORTUNITIES TO HELP SEABIRDS**

1. **Plastic in the Oceans.** The American Bird Conservancy tells us: "Every year, 17 billion pounds of plastic enter the marine environment. Despite efforts to promote recycling, less than nine percent of plastics in the U.S. are actually recycled."

"Birds are particularly vulnerable to plastic pollution. Many seabirds, like Laysan Albatross, are seriously injured or killed when they ingest or become entangled with plastic trash.

"To address the plastic pollution crisis, Congress has introduced the Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act of 2021 (S.984/H.R.2238). This bill would put the onus on manufacturers to take care of the plastic waste that they produce, ultimately reducing the amount of plastic that gets into our oceans and the toll it takes on birds."

**Take action [here](#).**

**2. The Albatross and Petrel Conservation Act** would implement the Agreement on the Conservation of Albatrosses and Petrels ([ACAP](#)), an international conservation agreement that has been signed by 13 member countries since 2001 and covers 31 species of albatrosses, petrels and shearwaters. Despite previous calls by President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama to ratify the agreement, the Senate has yet to vote on the agreement. The National Audubon Society is among those pressing for passage of the Act; learn more and

**Take action [here](#).**



Laysan Albatrosses.  
Photos by Bobby Brittingham,  
in the Macaulay Library



### **Bird Disease Update: follow best practices when feeding birds**

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources has lifted its recommendation to stop feeding birds in areas affected by the summer's mysterious disease outbreak. In our area, no cases of this disease was reported. But we can serve bird health and survival by keeping an eye out for sick birds — and by following carefully the bird-feeding practices DWR and other experts recommend. They include:



- Clean feeders and bird baths at least once a week, then disinfect with a 10% bleach solution to prevent potential infectious disease spread between birds and other wildlife. After cleaning, rinse well with water and allow to air dry.
- Wear disposable gloves when handling bird feeders and baths and wash your hands when finished.
- Keep pets away from sick or dead wild birds.
- Avoid handling wild birds. (If you must do so, see the [DWR update](#) for more information.)
- If you observe any additional bird mortalities in Virginia, submit a mortality event to the DWR via [dwr.virginia.gov/wildlife/diseases/bird-mortality-reporting-form/](http://dwr.virginia.gov/wildlife/diseases/bird-mortality-reporting-form/).

## Bob's Perch

One of the great things about birding, to my mind at least, is the way it draws you into your surroundings so that you're always more aware of what's happening around you. It happens when you join an organized group, bringing your binoculars and field guides and maybe even a scope, but it also happens when you step outside in the evening just for a walk and the sounds and movements of the birds draw you in.

A highlight of my summer happened a couple of weeks ago when I was sitting on the porch near dusk, while the dog wandered in the yard. I noticed a kind of chipping sound — a little less dry than the "chips" of a bunting or a sparrow or a chickadee. As I moved around to the side of the house I saw a small, round bird fly into the arborvitae right next to the porch. Then, as I walked around to try to get a look, another one flew into the big maple nearby. They were chittering at each other, and as I looked from one to the other I realized that they were Screech Owls. We'd been hearing the distinctive trill in the evening and morning recently, but I'd never seen them so close to the house before, and never sounding like this.



*An Eastern Screech Owl in a different context. Photo by Dick Rowe*

I have a kind of knee-jerk need to “explain” things like this, and I’ll often create a story that seems to fit what I’m seeing — even though it’s really just a creation of my own mind. These birds were quite small, it seemed to me, and their bravery (naivety?) and unusual sounds led me to think they must be young ones, eager to explore their surroundings but sticking together just to be on the safe side.

There are plenty of other possible explanations, I’m sure, but in a more general sense that isn’t so important. The excitement that comes from a new experience, and the way that a surprising sighting pulls one into the natural world wherever and whenever it happens, is a gift the birds have given me for which I’m most grateful.

—Bob Biersack



### JOIN THE CLUB OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP!

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](http://www.rockbridgebirdclub.org) and find us on Facebook.

Contact the Club by email at [rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com](mailto:rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com), or call Laura Neale, 540-261-1909.

### Club Officers

President, Wendy Richards  
Vice President, Bob Biersack  
Secretary, Joyce Cambron  
Treasurer, Jan Smith  
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Publicity Chair, Bonnie Bernstein  
Membership Chair, Alexia Smith  
Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe

Newsletter edited by Alexia Smith. Logo by Jennifer Cox

Website managed by Bob Biersack

Facebook page managed by Becky McKenzie

Atlantic Puffin.  
Photo by Dick Rowe

