



March 2016 Newsletter

of the

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

Calendar

Sat., Mar. 5, 8:00 a.m.—Boxerwood Bird Walk *

Weds., Apr. 13, 7:00 p.m.—Program by VDGIF bird conservation biologist Sergio Harding

Fri., Apr. 29 - Sun., May 1—Virginia Society of Ornithology's [Annual Meeting](#), hosted by the Roanoke Valley Bird Club *

*see article below

Boxerwood Bird Walk on Saturday, March 5

Meet Dick Rowe at the Boxerwood parking lot at 8:00 a.m. for a couple of hours of birding, in this ongoing first-Saturday-at-Boxerwood series. Directions are [here](#). In the event of rain or snow, the walk will be canceled.

Impromptu Field Trips: where would *you* like to go to see birds?

Anybody wishing to instigate a birding expedition is invited to send date, meeting time, and itinerary to rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com for forwarding to Club friends and members.

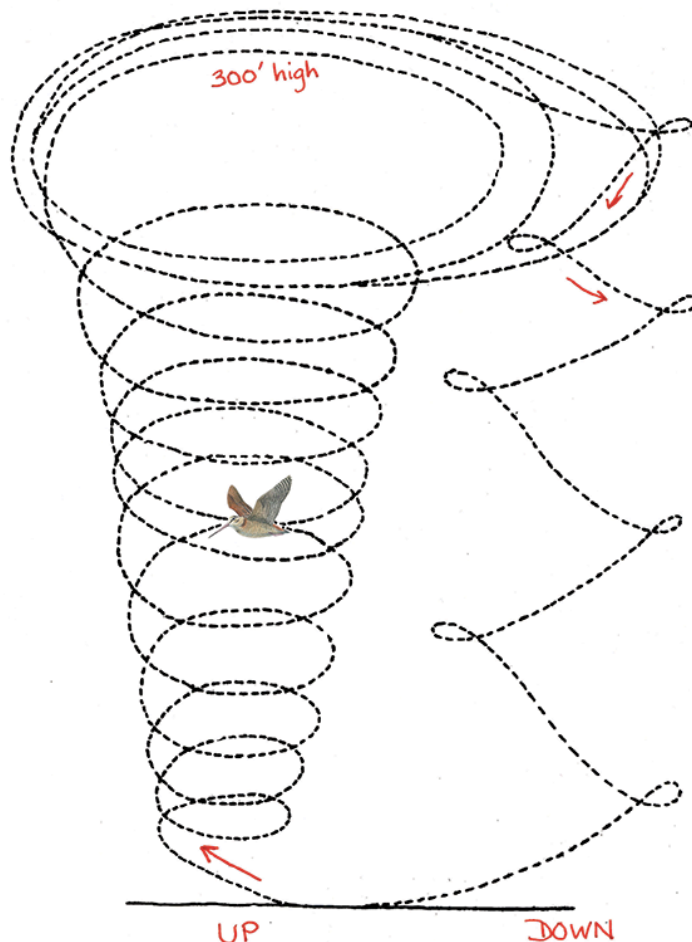
VSO Annual Meeting April 29 - May 1 in Roanoke

These gatherings are a wonderful chance to meet bird-lovers from around the state, joining with them for field trips and socializing. Saturday banquet speaker this year is Pete Dunne, well-known author of essays, field guides, and such books both informative and imaginative as The Wind Masters: Lives of North American Birds of Prey. And for a chance at Sunday-morning birding with Pete, buy a raffle ticket—or two! You can sign up on arrival for field trips Saturday and Sunday mornings; attend scientific presentations on Saturday afternoon; and check out the exhibits, vendors, and silent auction offerings between other events. Friday field trips require pre-registration and tend to fill up, so it's best to act soon for those. Rooms are available at special prices at the Sheraton Roanoke, where events are held as well.

For complete information, and to register, see the VSO [conference webpage](#). And if you're interested in carpooling and room-sharing, please send an email to rockbridgebirdclub@gmail.com, and Alexia Smith will undertake to co-ordinate plans.

Bird Note: the American Woodcock (*Scolopax minor*)

Here's what a male Woodcock is probably up to these days: Toward dusk he leaves the woods, where he and his kind have spent daylight hours foraging for earthworms, and goes to his "singing ground" in an open area—a clearing or an old field. He gives distinctive buzzy *peent* calls for a while. Then he flies upward in a wide spiral, and as he gets higher, the outer feathers of his wings start to make a twittering sound. At a height of 200–350 feet, he begins to descend, the twittering now intermittent, and he adds a melodic vocal chirp to the audio. Once on the ground, he resumes *peenting*, and then the "sky dance" begins again, perhaps continuing much of the night if the moon is full. On a darker night he may spend the night in the open or return to the woods, and he'll be ready for another series of displays at dawn.



Above is a schematic Chris Wise found at montgomeryparks.org.

The object is to attract a female, of course. The female often visits four or more singing grounds before nesting and may continue these visits even while caring for her young. Meanwhile our male continues his crepuscular displays long after most females have laid eggs, thus having no time or energy left, it seems, for child care.

The Woodcock's sky dance is a springtime marvel well worth attending and has been seen in Rockbridge County. If you have access to a likely open area, near shrubland or young forest that can provide forage and nesting sites, you may want to try approaching quietly at dusk and listening for *peents*. And if you're lucky enough to hear some, watch and listen for the aerial display that follows. [Here are recordings](#) of *peents* (first clip) and wing-twitterings (second clip, which includes chirps as well).





All three photos are from
[*Birds of North America*](#)

Though they're very well camouflaged, you just might see a Woodcock foraging in the woods any time of year. With its long bill it probes the earth under leaf litter for earthworms, capturing and extracting them using the specialized flexible upper mandible. It will surely be watching you, with its large eyes positioned for a nearly 360-degree field of vision.

The odd and entrancing American Woodcock is "a forest-dwelling shorebird," a member of the sandpiper family (Scolopacidae).

—Alexia Smith

Solid information for this Bird Note comes from two Cornell websites on birds, www.allaboutbirds.org and www.bna.birds.cornell.edu. Fanciful flourishes are my own.

The President's Perch

This month's cold and snow, and lately rain, have brought the feeders to life around our house. We've had a little more variety than normal—we even had a Brown Creeper early in the month at the base of the big maple tree near one of the feeders. It was almost impossible to see from only thirty feet or so until it moved. Mostly, though, I've been struck by the influx of Woodpeckers of just about every variety, generally going after the suet feeders. The normal Downy and Red-bellied have been here in numbers, joined by Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers and Northern Flickers.

We have an old tree stump lying on its side on the hill just behind the house, and the other day a Flicker stepped up onto one of the root pieces and stood nearly still for several minutes – maybe twenty feet away. It also would have been easy to miss if I hadn't seen it move to this perch, but once it was there it settled in, and I've come to believe they are among the most beautiful birds we commonly see.

I've since learned that my new friend was a male – identifiable because it had striking black slashes (malar) beneath its eyes. The definition between the rich brown of the head in general and these black patches – another larger one at the "bib" – were perfectly painted and reminded me of Japanese calligraphy in the precision of their smooth lines.

The same bright black appears in the spots on the bird's breast, and these too had other surprising features. Not just random individual dots, they look like they were created in groups of five or six together, sometimes in straight lines but also in bundles separated from the other groups by larger-than-normal blank spaces. Its almost like

there is a geometry to these groupings, an order whose meaning is lost on me but seems anything but random, even as they help the bird disappear among the similar colors and various shapes around it. And then there is the crimson slash on the back of its head – so out of place on a bird whose coloring is designed to hide it, but which oddly doesn't really make it any more visible, it seems, than it would be without it.

There are times when it's easy to see how nature's palette triggers an inspiration that we try to capture on canvas or film or shape from clay. While I envy those who are able to make those conversions and crystalize the essence of what they perceive, I'm also happy when I can find examples of what I can only think of as art sitting on a tree stump in the morning drizzle.

—Bob Biersack

The Club newsletter welcomes your submissions! These could be birding observations, thoughts, or travel stories; bird conservation news; photos—or some bird-related surprise. Please send items to alexia@rockbridge.net. Thank you.

—Alexia Smith, Editor



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.

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Newsletter edited by Alexia Smith & produced by Jan Smith (produced this month by Alexia). Please send feedback & news items to alexia@rockbridge.net.