



February 2015 Newsletter

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

Calendar

Unless otherwise noted, program meetings are held at 7 pm in the Old Courthouse meeting room, in downtown Lexington. Informal gatherings are held in the Munger Lodge at Boxerwood, on Ross Road.

- Saturday, Feb. 7th, 8 am** – Field Trip: Boxerwood Nature Center*
- Wednesday, Feb. 11th, 7 pm** - Program: Katie Fallon, “Cerulean Warblers” *
- Saturday, Mar. 7th, 8 am** – Field Trip: Boxerwood Nature Center
- Tuesday, Mar. 10th , 7 pm** - Friends of Chessie Trail, program about birds on the Trail, Piovano Room of the Rockbridge County Main Library
- Wednesday, Mar. 11th, 5:00-7:00 pm** – Informal gathering
- Wednesday, April 8th, 7 pm** – Program: Sergio Harding, bird conservation biologist with the Virginia Dept. of Game & Inland Fisheries
- Wednesday, May 13th, 5:00-7:00 pm** – Second Annual Spring Picnic at Boxerwood

* See article below

* Field Trips and Programs

* **Boxerwood Bird Walk Saturday on January 3**

Our first-Saturday walks at Boxerwood continue, this month led by Dick Rowe. Meet at 8 a.m. in the Boxerwood parking lot for about two hours of exploring the gardens. If you have questions, or in case of doubtful weather, please call Dick at 464-5972. And for driving directions, see <http://boxerwood.org/visit/index.asp>.

*** Cerulean Warblers Program Wednesday, February 11th**

Katie Fallon, author of *Cerulean Blues: A Personal Search for a Vanishing Songbird*, will give a presentation about the life history and remarkable migration of the tiny, beautiful Cerulean warbler - and about the precipitous decline in its population due to habitat loss, largely because of agricultural deforestation in the Andes and mountaintop removal coal mining in Appalachia. In her dedication to the Cerulean's cause, Katie traveled with scientists to its wintering grounds in Colombia, and she offers a fascinating picture of efforts there to help the warbler. The Cerulean is a summer resident in Rockbridge, at middle elevations along the Blue Ridge Parkway. And here's another link we have with the Cerulean: which coffee we drink may affect the Cerulean's survival! Come on the 11th to learn more and to enjoy a wonderful program.



Cerulean warbler Photo by Dick Rowe

Great Backyard Bird Count: Citizen-Scientists Fuel Research to Benefit Birds

Get ready to participate in the 18th Annual Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC), which will be held this year from Friday, February 13 to Monday, February 16. This international effort to count birds has contributed to research on the dynamic nature of bird distribution, abundance, and migration, and you can help. It's easy! To participate, if you don't already have an eBird account, set one up at www.birdcount.org. Once you have an account, all that's required is that

you count birds for at least 15 minutes one or more times during the four-day count period and enter your sightings into the easy-to-use entry form on the Bird Count website. At www.birdcount.org you'll find everything you need to participate in this fun and important effort.

This is a great activity for getting kids excited about nature, too. The website includes educational materials and tips for making the GBBC an educational activity.

The information gathered during the GBBC helps track the locations and health of bird populations at a scale that would not otherwise be possible. The GBBC is a joint project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society, with partner Bird Studies Canada.



Photo by Wendy Richards of a cardinal in her back yard, ready for the Great Back-Yard Bird Count.

The Winter 2015 issue of Cornell Lab of Ornithology's magazine "Living Bird" includes an article titled "Citizen Science in the Digital Age" by Miyoko Chu and Rick Bonney. Here are a few

quotes from the article: since its beginnings in 1998, “the Great Backyard Bird Count has grown every year; in 2014, participants documented half of the world’s bird species in just four days.” And “scientists at the Lab are now working toward the day when predictions of bird migration based on citizen-science data will become as ubiquitous as weather forecasts. They envision a growing corps of bird enthusiasts around the world contributing data at volumes great enough to serve as a global monitoring system for the conservation of birds.”

Mark your calendars, February 13 to 16, and get ready to participate in this year’s GBBC!

—Wendy Richards

Conservation Note: the Rare Red-cockaded Woodpecker

The Red-cockaded Woodpecker specializes in southern old-growth longleaf pine forest. With the destruction or degradation of most of its once-extensive habitat throughout the south, this woodpecker nearly disappeared as well, and is federally listed as an endangered species.

In Sussex County, Virginia, a degraded pine forest still held a few of these woodpeckers in the 1980s. The Nature Conservancy pieced together 3,200 acres in the area to establish, in 2001, the Piney Grove Preserve, then supporting just two breeding pairs.

The Conservancy began a burn program mimicking the frequent and intense lightning-strike fires that historically have maintained the pine savannah community of the Southeast. The Preserve’s habitat is now much restored, and supports the woodpecker’s northernmost population, tiny but growing, managed and monitored by the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William and Mary.

According to Mike Wilson, research biologist at the Center, 2014 was a particularly good year for this population. He reports, on the Center’s website:

“Center biologists just completed the winter population survey and detected 67 birds within 14 groups. Red-cockaded Woodpeckers are cooperative breeders, with each group consisting of the breeding male and female and often additional nest helpers that remain together throughout the year and often forage and work together during the day. The 2014 count exceeded the previous high of 57 birds set in 2013 and more than doubles the low count of 21 birds from 2001.”

To learn more, and to see a mini-video of an adult feeding young, go to
<http://www.ccbbirds.org/2015/01/12/virginia-red-cockaded-woodpeckers-continue-surpass-expectations/>



Adult Red-Cockaded Woodpeckers
Photo Robert Strickland, from
allaboutbirds.org

Those who have visited the Piney Grove Preserve (including some Club members who stopped there on a Club field trip in 2013) can report how unusual, beautiful, and rich with plant and bird species the pine savannah is. Even if you don't ever get a glimpse of the rare Red-cockaded Woodpecker, you can rejoice in the renewed life of this special habitat.

—Alexia Smith

Information for this Conservation Note is from the above website and from [allaboutbirds](#).

February Bird Note: the Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*)

Blue Jays form monogamous pairs. They don't have territories in the usual sense but defend their nest sites from other Jays that come too close, and they hang out in groups with others in their "neighborhood." Their ability to recognize each other as individuals is probably enhanced by the great variation in the black "bridle" across face, nape, and throat. They communicate by body language, including the raising and lowering of the crest (that Blue Jay in the photo looks pretty relaxed), as well as by an immense vocabulary of vocalizations.

In other words, they show much evidence of intelligence and a complex social life, as do their cousins in the corvid family, the crows and ravens.



Blue Jay: Photo by Dick Rowe

Here's how the Birds of North America website describes the Blue Jay's so-called "Elaborate Social Display," a phenomenon whose function and meaning isn't known: Three to 20 or more jays "move about an area in a loose flock, calling and bobbing in extended pulses. Members of the flock generally emit the same call type, but the call type may change several times during the display... The flock frequently fragments into smaller flocks, and the smaller flocks usually again coalesce. This pattern of fragmentation-coalescence is repeated as the flock moves through the local jay 'neighborhood'... As the flock moves through, some individuals or pairs drop out of the display, while others join. Observations indicate that the Elaborate Social Display flocks are composed primarily of several mated pairs from the local neighborhood, and one or a few individuals from elsewhere." Whatever else is going on, it sounds like a party.

What would you serve at a Blue Jay party? Acorns, nuts, fruits, and grains make up the majority of the Jay's diet. They prefer acorns and are quite accurate in selecting those that haven't been infested with weevils. By carrying two or three acorns in the "gular pouch" in the upper esophagus, another in the mouth, and another in the tip of the bill, a Blue Jay can carry off five acorns at a time to store for later feeding; six birds with radio transmitters were each

reported to cache 3,000-5,000 acorns one autumn. Some credit Blue Jays with spreading oak trees after the last glacial period.

If each temperate-zone human being cached just *one* acorn every autumn and let it be...

—Alexia Smith

Information for this Note is from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's sites www.allaboutbirds.org and <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu>. To hear a dozen of the Blue Jay's many songs & calls, go to <http://www.audubon.org/field-guide/bird/blue-jay>.

The President's Perch: Seasonal Confusion Syndrome

(Which is not to be confused with Recreational Mowing Syndrome – the phenomenon Justin Folks told us about last November, in his presentation on quail habitat)

I think I keep harping on the fun I'm having discovering changes in the types of birds and their behavior as we move through the seasons. This is just what I was hoping for when we moved here – noticing small (or big) changes that come over the course of the year. Some of them are expected, I suppose, and some are not, and they all add to the wonders of life here.

January brought another example, and this is the second year I've been surprised by this particular change. Just a couple of weeks after the shortest day of the year, I've noticed a change in birdsong that has jumped out at me. Just when you least expect it, it seems to me, among the normal winter birds (especially chickadees and titmice, but others too) the early days of January bring the first sounds of spring song. The familiar four-note song of the chickadee and the clear and frequent Peter-Peter-Peter of the titmouse jar my ears, because they've just been chipping and buzzing for months, and there isn't much else happening that feels like spring.

As the songs begin to carry through the trees, I also begin to notice changes in some birds' appearance. Goldfinches seem to change first, as the dull olive of winter moves toward a brighter yellow. The yellow can be especially bright as it's contrasted against a mid-winter snow. These hopeful signs come so quickly, and from surprising directions.

Glad *they* know what's happening, even when I don't. . .

—Bob Biersack, Club President

\$\$\$\$\$ Renew Your Membership Now for 2015 ! \$\$\$\$

The Club is still accepting membership renewals for 2015. We hope you will mail your dues of \$15 per household to our Treasurer, Betty Besal, at 120 Chavis Ave, Lexington, VA 24450.

--Adrienne Hall-Bodie, Membership Chair



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.

Club Officers

President, Bob Biersack

Secretary, Alexia Smith

Program Chair, Sarah Burleson

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Membership Chair, Adrienne Bodie

Vice President, Laura Neale

Treasurer, Betty Besal

Field Trip Chair, Vacant

Club Ornithologist, Dick Rowe

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