



November 2020 Newsletter
of the
Rockbridge Bird Club,
encouraging
the enjoyment, knowledge, &
conservation of birds in the Rockbridge Area

Calendar

Sat., Nov 14, 9 a.m.—Boxerwood Bird Walk, 2 - 3 hours *

Thurs., Dec. 3, 9 a.m.—Chessie Trail Bird Walk, 2 - 3 hours *

Sat., Dec. 19—Christmas Bird Count (Sun., Dec. 20—fallback/rain date)

* See article below

Everyone likes birds. What wild creature is more accessible to our eyes and ears, as close to us and everyone in the world, as universal as a bird?

— David Attenborough, English broadcaster and natural historian

Bird Walks for Beginning Birders—and others, too!

Boxerwood Garden at 9 a.m. on Saturday, November 14

Chessie Trail at 9 a.m. on Thursday, December 3

Club members will lead these 2- to 3-hour walks, with emphasis on getting to know our resident birds by careful observing and listening.

Everyone is welcome! Dress for the weather, bring binoculars, snacks, and water, and wear sturdy footwear. In the event of inclement weather, walks will be postponed to a later date. This is our chance to get outside together and spend time with our winter-season bird neighbors!

For Covid safety, masks are required, and we'll stay at least 6 feet apart. We'll limit our group size to 4 people per leader, with 2 or 3 leaders on hand, so it's important that folks **reserve a spot** by contacting me at 463-5214 or at richardsw@wlu.edu.

—Wendy Richards, Field Trip Chair

Project FeederWatch: Citizen Science for bird lovers

Here's a way to contribute to science just by counting birds at home! It's the Cornell Lab's Project FeederWatch, an April-November survey of birds that visit backyards, nature centers, and other locales in North America. The schedule is completely flexible. To take part, all you need is an area with plantings, habitat, water, or food that attracts birds—with or without a feeder. You can join the Project for an \$18 fee, and you'll then receive a Research Kit (with instructions on counting protocols and how to submit your data), along with a bird ID poster, a calendar, and access to the Lab's quarterly magazine. And the Lab's one-hour "Winter Bird Feeding 101" [webinar](#) on November 19 will help you get ready. Find out more about the Project [here](#).



White-breasted Nuthatch, year-round resident throughout the County. Photo by Dick Rowe.

Learning About Birds Online

The definitive resource on which birds are here when, with photos, is Dick Rowe's [Birds of the Greater Rockbridge VA Area](#).

The Cornell Lab's websites are full of information. [All About Birds](#) is free; the more scholarly [Birds of the World](#) is by subscription (\$49/year), but you can explore it a bit before joining.

For an interactive learning session, also from Cornell, you may find useful the "Winter Bird Feeding 101" [webinar](#) on November 19.

Please send us your suggestions for good online programming about birds. We miss being together for programs, but we can keep learning!

2020 Bird Seed & Suet Sale

Thanks to a record 103 customers who participated in the Rockbridge Bird Club's 2020 Seed & Suet Sale, the club sold 6,290 pounds of bird seed and 555 pounds of suet, raising \$1,685 for Boxerwood.

As in past years, proceeds from the sale go to support conservation of the nature center's diverse wildlife habitats. And the seed provides winter sustenance for our backyard birds!

We are so grateful to the Rockbridge Farmers Co-op, which co-sponsors this annual fundraiser. In particular, our thanks go to store manager Susan Kirby, who, in this year of pandemic, found hard-to-source seed, placed our orders with suppliers, and facilitated distribution in the Co-op parking lot.

And our thanks go to Bonnie Bernstein, who organizes the Sale every year!



Great Horned Owl. Photo by Dick Rowe

Great Horned Owls are Hooting

According to All About Birds, the Great Horned Owl "is equally at home in deserts, wetlands, forests, grasslands, backyards, cities, and almost any other semi-open habitat between the Arctic and the tropics." Dick took this photo in Florida — as he said, "the Spanish moss is a giveaway." And they're found here in the Rockbridge area, too, although they're not common.

But on one recent evening a friend heard hoo-HOOOOT-hoot-hooting outside her window in the open countryside, two birds calling back and forth, one voice higher than the other: a pair of Great Horned Owls! The higher voice is the female's; but if you got to know a pair, you'd find that she's the bigger of the two — with a smaller voice box.

The pair may even overlap their calls; such "duetting," I learned,* commonly begins one or two months before the first egg is laid. And egg-laying dates in Virginia, according to the VA Breeding Bird Atlas, start in late December — though those dates are variable, depending on the climatic conditions in a given season. Meanwhile, the pair are bonding and advertising their territory, which they defend vigorously. Such pairs are evidently strictly monogamous and often remain on the same territory year round.

Why do Great Horned Owls breed so early? For one thing, owls are large and take a long time to grow and mature. But, in addition, they have to learn complex hunting behavior for a variety of prey. Researchers in South Dakota found that fledged birds learned to capture insects by August but took longer to learn to catch mammals and birds. Youngsters stay with their parents through most of the summer and may still occasionally beg for food 4 or 5 months after leaving the nest.

To get acquainted with the variety of sounds Great Horned Owls make, listen [here](#) — and then try your luck listening outdoors at dusk! Or try for another owl altogether, the Barred Owl, which is active during the daytime and may [call](#) any old time of year, though more often in winter. They live in the woods; there's a pair in Brushy Hills.

—Alexia Smith (*see sources on page 4)

*Sources for the Great Horned Owls article, previous page: [All About Birds](#), [Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas](#), [Birds of the World](#), The Nature Conservancy's [Cool Green Science](#)



Barred Owl. Photo by Dick Rowe

Dues-&-Donations

Our Club will continue to support organizations that work effectively to reduce threats to birds and to save habitat, to the extent that we can. So if you can afford to contribute \$15 dues per household, or perhaps an extra donation, that's where your money will go this year (thanks to Covid, we're likely to have few or no program expenses!). You can mail payment to Jan Smith, our Treasurer (see address near the end of this newsletter).

Meanwhile, we'll continue to keep in touch with all of you by way of the newsletter. Many thanks for giving what you can — for the birds' sake.

—Alexia Smith, Membership

Bob's Perch

My favorite experiences in nature are when the common becomes extraordinary. These unexpected insights or experiences are more special because they reveal themselves without being sought out.

This year, for example, I've decided that my favorite local bird is the Carolina Wren. So common that they easily fade into the background when you're out looking for "interesting" birds, once in a while they impose themselves on you in ways you can't and shouldn't ignore. Often, when I'm walking through our fields on the forest edge, these little Wrens call the alarm in such numbers and at such volume that no one can miss the arrival of an intruder. On one late afternoon last week there were so many different calls that I stopped to try to find what was making this racket. After a minute or so, out from the thicket popped a Carolina Wren, perching atop the tallest of the fading wingstem stalks in the field.



Carolina Wren. Photo by Dick Rowe

It was maybe ten feet from me and gleaming in the late afternoon sun, whose yellowing light brought out all of the browns and dark markings on its wings and tail and exaggerated the yellow on its sides and breast. With the white slash above its eye suggesting a skeptical stare and its tail sticking up in the air, this common little bird turned itself into the dominant creature in the area—which, of course, included me. It appeared quite comfortable with my standing there watching as it used any number of calls and chits and other sounds (my Audubon phone app lists four different songs, along with cheer calls, Tdink, Dit & dit-dit, Rattled dits, a Scold, and Whines and chatter – more sounds, I think, than it lists for any other species). It was the best thing I'd seen all day, and I'm quite sure it knew that to be true.

This is not to say there aren't good reasons to seek out unusual things. Earlier this year, when a Sora was heard in the area after many years missing around here, it was really fun to get to the marshy pond and hear the unique call, and especially exciting to have it pop into view as we walked along the edge. But spending time with our more common neighbors is just as rewarding and can happen every time we step outside.

—Bob Biersack



Sora. Photo by Dick Rowe



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 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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