



Goldfinch Gazette

The Newsletter of the Rockingham Bird Club

<http://rockinghambirdclub.com>

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JANUARY MEETING

DATE: Thursday, January 4, 2018

TIME: 7:00 PM

PLACE: Detwiler Auditorium, Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community, 1501 Virginia Avenue, Harrisonburg, VA 22802.

PROGRAM: *Bluebirds* by Doug Rogers.

Learn about the lifecycle, threats to and resources available to support Eastern Bluebirds. Doug is an avid bird watcher and photographer who has monitored and maintained bluebird nest boxes for the past 9 years. He is currently president of the Monticello Bird Club, Board Member of the Virginia Bluebird Society (VBS), VBS Grant Coordinator for New & Refurbished Trails and former Editor of The Bird Box, the newsletter of the Virginia Bluebird Society.

Join us for dinner with Doug before the meeting: Bowl of Good, 831 Mt Clinton Pike, Harrisonburg, VA 22802 at 5:30 PM. Please contact Robyn Puffenbarger, 540-908-7335 or rpuffenb@bridgewater.edu, in advance if you plan to attend.

JANUARY FIELD TRIPS - *Diane Lepkowski*

Members and guests are welcome on all field trips. Minors under the age of 18 must be accompanied by a parent or adult who is responsible for the minor.

Hillandale Monthly Walk, Tuesday, January 16 with Tom Mizell: Meet in the Children's Playground parking lot 8:00 AM for our first Hillandale walk of 2018.

Highland County, Saturday February 3, with Mike Shank: Targets include wintering Golden Eagles and Bald Eagles. Meet at 7 AM at Bob-a-rea's parking lot on Rt. 42 in Bridgewater, across from the Bridgewater Volunteer Fire Department. We plan to return 3-4 PM. Bring lunch, snacks & drinks, and dress warmly; Highland is often ten degrees colder than Harrisonburg. Please contact Mike at tallwhiteoak@verizon.net or 540-810-7444 if you plan to attend.

TRIP REPORTS

Hillandale Park – *Tom Mizell*

Nine members of the Rockingham Bird Club and two visitors gathered at Hillandale Park at 10 AM on 21 December for the last walk of fall 2017. It was a pleasant morning; sunny and the temperature was 31 degrees. Our ‘wish list’ birds included Winter Wren and Kinglet.

Randy Cline was the first arrival and, as he secured the parking lot, he found Northern Flicker, American Robin and Crow, European Starling, Carolina Wren, White-breasted Nuthatch and Blue Jay. This served as a nice preview of coming attractions for the rest of us. By the time we reached the log cabin bridge we added Red-bellied Woodpecker, Downy Woodpecker, and Northern Mockingbird. Our pace picked up as the birds were quiet and not too active. By 10:48 AM we reached the northwest corner bridge and added American Goldfinch, Sharp-shinned Hawk, Black Vulture and Mourning Dove.

We tried the northeast corner near the biking trail and our youngest birder of the morning, Elias, spotted a Downy Woodpecker pecking away in a cedar tree. Most of us got good looks at the Downy. A White-throated Sparrow appeared. Our visitors and a member departed and the remaining group split into three groups and headed back toward the cabin. The western group added Carolina Chickadee; the middle group added a Turkey Vulture and the eastern group spotted a mature Bald Eagle circling overhead! The Bald Eagle was a most pleasant happening. Elias and his father Jacob drove back to tell us they too had seen the Bald Eagle as they were in their car and it flew quite close to them. Elias's parents and siblings enjoyed this unexpected surprise. It appeared a few minutes later and we watched it circle and rise on the thermals for perhaps 5 minutes. As the countdown to winter moved to 2 minutes, we tried to keep the eagle in our field of view as it streamed north. We hoped it would be our first bird of winter but try as we might it disappeared from view around 11:27 AM. That was fun; 19 species for the “Fall” portion of the walk.

Winter arrived at 11:28 AM and there were 7 birders left to walk the southern loop. Our first bird of winter was Northern Cardinal - a colorful bird to welcome the change of seasons. As we walked the south loop our birding contingent dropped to 4. Our bird species total remained at 19 for some time and we challenged ourselves to find at least 2 more species to match the species count with the calendar date. Yes, that's what we did. We searched and searched while enjoying repeats (12) of several of the “Fall Birds”. In good time we added Ravens, Black Vulture, a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker at the cabin walnut trees, Tufted Titmouse, House Finch, and down along the stream channel we added Yellow-rumped Warbler, Pileated Woodpecker and Song Sparrow to round out the walk's total to 27 species. The winter species count was 20. We reluctantly called it quits around 1 PM and the temperature was about 40 degrees. Happy New Year! Hope to see you in 2018!

BIRD SIGHTINGS

Shaphan Shank reported a late **Broad-winged Hawk** and a late **Blue-headed Vireo** at Union Springs on Nov. 25. Shaphan reported another (or the same) **Blue-headed Vireo** again on Dec. 16.

On Nov. 26 at Switzer Dam, Diane Lepkowski and Greg Moyers also reported a **Blue-headed Vireo** along with **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, **Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers**, **Pied-billed Grebes**, and a **Brown Creeper**.

Jonathan Todd reported a **Greater White-fronted Goose** at the RMH ponds on Nov. 26. William Leigh saw the goose at the same location on Dec. 2. Gabriel Mapel reported the goose, along with 10 **Cackling Geese** on Dec. 22. Diane Lepkowski reported six **Cackling Geese** at the same location the following day.

Folks at the Mt. Crawford Creamery found a **Snowy Owl** along Dinkel Avenue in Bridgewater on Nov. 29. The owl was frequently seen in the fields and other areas on the east side of the I-81 Mt. Crawford exit. The final sighting was on Dec. 19.



Snowy Owl, Mt. Crawford

Photo: William Leigh

Andrew and John Todd heard a **Great Horned Owl** calling in the backyard on Dec. 2.

Diane Lepkowski found a pair of **Blue-headed Vireos** at Madison Run Fire Rd on Dec. 3. Other finds included **Eastern Towhee**, **Winter Wren**, **Ruby-crowned** and **Golden-crowned Kinglets**, and **Brown Creeper**. That evening, Diane had a **Great Horned Owl** calling at her home east of Harrisonburg.

Greg Moyers reported a male **Red-breasted Merganser** and a **Horned Grebe** at Lake Shenandoah and three **Buffleheads** and a **Greater Scaup** at Lake Campbell on Dec. 9.

William Leigh reported a **Peregrine Falcon** flying low over the “Snowy Owl” field on the east side of the I-81 Mt. Crawford exit on Dec. 10. Jonathan Todd reported a **Red-shouldered Hawk** at the same location on the same date. Jonathan also reported **Savannah Sparrows** at his place in Harrisonburg.

A flock of seven **Pine Siskins** descended on feeders at Karen, Everette & Annie Shanks’ on December 13, feeding voraciously before moving on. Two days later, on Dec 15, a similar-sized flock visited Janet Shank’s in Hinton.

Matt Gingerich reported seven **Tundra Swans** and a pair of **Cackling Geese** flying over his place in Linville on Dec. 14.

A **Long-tailed Duck** was reported at Silver Lake on Dec. 15. The duck remained for the Christmas Bird Count the following day and was still being seen as of this writing. Other visitors to Silver Lake on the weekend of Dec. 15-17 included a **Northern Pintail**, **Redheads**, **American Wigeon**, **Hooded Merganser**, **American Coot**, **Lesser Scaup**, **Gadwalls**, and **Northern Shovelers**.



Long-tailed Duck, Silver Lake

Photo: Diane Lepkowski

Gabriel Mapel reported a **Snow Bunting** in Mt. Crawford on Dec. 16. Gabriel also had several other nice finds in his CBC sector in the Mt. Crawford/Bridgewater area including **Rusty Blackbirds**, **Bald Eagles**, **Winter Wren**, and **American Pipits**.

Greg Moyers and Diane Lepkowski reported a **Merlin** on Community Center Rd near Briery Branch during the CBC on Dec. 16.

Allen Lerner reported four **Cackling Geese** at Lake Campbell on Dec. 16. Greg Moyers reported six geese at the same location on Dec. 25.

Tom Mizell reported a red-morph **Eastern Screech Owl** on East Riverside Drive in Bridgewater on Dec. 18.

Mike Smith reported a **Northern Harrier** on Cross Keys Rd on Dec. 19. Mike had several nice yard birds at his place east of Elkton on Dec. 20 including a **Pine Warbler**, **Hermit Thrush**, both **kinglets**, and a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**.

Diane Lepkowski and Greg Moyers reported a **Pine Warbler**, as well as **Winter Wrens** (one singing) and a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker** at Madison Run Fire Rd on Dec. 23.

Greg Moyers and Diane Lepkowski reported a flock of approximately 15 **Red Crossbills** at Switzer Dam on Dec. 24. They also reported several **Red-breasted Nuthatches**, two **Brown Creepers**, a **Hermit Thrush**, and a **Yellow-bellied Sapsucker**. Greg and Diane also saw two adult **Bald Eagles** at the nest on Chrisman Rd on the same date.

William Leigh and John Shea reported a **Common Merganser** at Lake Campbell on Dec. 24.

Greg Moyers reported a pair of **Bald Eagles** at Lake Shenandoah on Christmas morning. Later that day, Diane Lepkowski found a **Bonaparte's Gull** and 25 **Ring-billed Gulls** at the same location.

Also on Christmas day, a visiting birder from California found 16 **Greater White-fronted Geese** at Leonard's Pond.

Tom Mizell reported a pair of **Red-headed Woodpeckers** drinking from a puddle at the top of Mole Hill on Dec. 26.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Treasurer's Report - Steve White

In accordance with our mission as stated in our by-laws, and in response to the directives of the RBC Executive Committee, I have sent out donation checks to the following kindred organizations who share our love of birds and our interest in ornithological educating and conservation:

Organization for Tropical Studies (a Costa-Rica-based group that tracks and fosters many of the migrant birds we see at our feeders in May), Wildlife Center of Virginia (a group that nurses our sick and injured birds back to life), American Bird Conservancy (a top-rated charity with one of the lowest overheads among charitable organizations, with over 90% of donated funds going to the mission), Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory (protecting migrating birds), Project Perry (a rescue operation that saves, fosters, and re-homes abandoned pet birds), Center for Conservation Biology @ William & Mary (preparing future ornithologists for our important work), and Jill and Lance Morrow's important Kestrel Nesting Box Project. In addition, this year the Executive Committee has added The Avian Conservation Center of Appalachia to our list of donees. The latter is the organization that Katie Fallon heads, and for those of you privileged to have heard Ms Fallon's presentation on vultures to the RBC last year and to have bought her wonderful book *Vulture: The Private Life of an Unloved Bird*, you will probably be happy to hear we have expanded our contributions to help her cause, the preservation of many of our local birds.

Our ability to contribute to and further these worthy causes is due to the support we got from all of you at our annual fundraiser sale of bird seed and to those of you who have renewed your memberships. We thank you for your help in 2017 and wish you all the best of birding, good health, and happiness in 2018.

Project Feeder Watch 2017-2018, Saturday, November 11 to Friday, April 13: Consider participating! Contribute your feeder observations to this annual citizen science project. New participants will be able to log into online data entry and set up their count site on November 1. The last day to start a two-day count is Thursday, April 12. Information at: <https://feederwatch.org/>

Save the Date

VSO Board of Directors hosting 2018 Annual Meeting in Harrisonburg, May 18-20, 2018. Watch this space or check the VSO website, www.virginiabirds.org, for more information.



Photo credit: Snowy Owl Project, Massachusetts Audubon

SNOWY OWLS – by Robyn Puffenbarger, VP for Programs

Just a few years ago, in 2013-14, Rockingham County hosted Snowy Owls (*Bubo scandiacus*) that made it onto the Christmas Bird Count. We have at least one other individual visiting our county this winter, bringing flocks of birders to Interstate 81 Exit 240 to try to see the owl, and many of us are asking lots of questions about the owls and their irruptive habits. Two websites, Project Snow Storm (<https://www.projectsnowstorm.org/>) and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology Birds of North America (<https://birdsna.org/Species-Account/bna/species/snoowl1/introduction>), have lots of information about what we know, and don't know, about these amazing creatures.

Snowy Owls nest in the Arctic, eating just about anything they can catch or even on carrion during the winter. To raise their young, adult owls need lots of small mammals, i.e. lemmings, to raise a brood. In a year with low lemming populations, a clutch would be just a few eggs (4-7) while in a year with many lemmings, a clutch might be 14-16 eggs! Researchers still do not know how Snowy Owls time their reproduction to lemming populations, and if Snowy Owls ever miss a lemming boom. We know summer 2013 was a very good year for Snowy Owl reproductive success, and the mega-irruption that winter was incredible. Small irruptions seem to happen every few years, but these mega-irruptions where Snowy Owls appear in the lower 48 states in large numbers only happen once or twice in a lifetime. Are the owls appearing here in Virginia, are they in trouble and starving? The answer to that seems clear, no. In fact, scientists studying the owls irrupting south have measured these animals as 'fatter and heavier' than average. Why come south then? It might have more to do with wandering away from adult territories, but this is an open question. Young raptors of all species do have a very high mortality rate, so many young Snowy Owls will not live to return to the Arctic to breed. Another interesting question is about plumage. It is clear that an individual photographed in 2013-14 was much lighter than the very darkly barred owl seen near Exit 240 in 2017. Both websites state emphatically that aging and sexing Snowy Owls is a tricky business. Scientists do agree that Snowy Owls take some time to reach maturity as defined by appearance, which is also known as definitive basic plumage. Scientists have not been able to determine at what age males or females reach adult plumage, and do males and females both whiten with age? More work is needed but generally both references agree that darkly barred animals are more likely to be young and possibly to be female as females generally stay darker as they age compared to males.

Many of us are enjoying incredible views of the Snowy Owl here in Rockingham County, getting wonderful views and images to share. Please make your enjoyment of the owl about respect for this

majestic creature. Snowy Owls will allow humans to approach them, but we should resist that temptation as it does stress the animal, possibly causing it to take flight. These owls are capable of hunting in the total darkness of the Arctic winter, or in the midnight sun of the Arctic summer. Scientists tracking tagged owls farther south in winter believe the owls are active at night and then quiet down to roost and preen during the day which might explain why the individual owl here this winter sits on light posts or a parked truck all day. The other issue with approaching the owl is respecting private property. Make sure you have permission before leaving public property or right of ways to look for or get better views of the owl, while always keeping in mind the welfare and well-being of the animal should be the most important concern!



NEW MEMBERS

Gwen Jones
Theodore McMahon
Cheryl Shull
Calvin & Joan Miller

Upcoming Meeting Dates and Speakers

February 1, 2018 - Ashley Peale on VA breeding bird atlas 2
March 1, 2018 - Kim Bolyard on animal behavior



Rockingham Bird Club
151 Deer Lick Lane
Broadway, VA 22815



PRESIDENT: Debbie Harrison
151 Deer Lick Lane
Broadway, VA 22815
Phone - 540-856-3058

VICE PRESIDENT: PROGRAMS - Robyn Puffenbarger

VICE PRESIDENT: FIELD TRIPS - Diane Lepkowski

SECRETARY: Martha Faw

TREASURER: Steve White - 540-833-6726

MEMBERS AT LARGE: Bill Benish & Tom Lord

GOLDFINCH GAZETTE - Denise Hoodock

EMAIL: info@rockinghambirdclub.com



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