



Goldfinch Gazette

The Newsletter of the Rockingham Bird Club

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December 2019

DECEMBER MEETING

DATE: Thursday, December 5, 2019

TIME: 7:00 PM

PLACE: ****NOTE CHANGE OF LOCATION**** STRITE AUDITORIUM, Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community, 1501 Virginia Avenue, Harrisonburg, VA 22802.

PROGRAM: Migration monitoring of Northern Saw-whet Owls - the history and growth of Project OwlNet, with David Brinker.

Although seldom seen, Northern Saw-whet Owls are a relatively common breeding bird across the northern U.S and in the boreal forests of Canada. Since they are so difficult to observe and detect, until recently little was known about this captivating little owl. Project OwlNet was started in 1994 to expand the banding effort focused on netting migrant owls, principally saw-whet owls. Each year Project OwlNet affiliates band thousands of Northern Saw-whet owls, now the most often banded owl in North America, including Clair Mellinger's station here in northwest Rockingham, at Highland Retreat.

A regional ecologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources' Natural Heritage Program since 1990, Dave works on biodiversity conservation. He began banding raptors at the Little Suamico Ornithological Station in 1975 and has been banding Northern Saw-whet Owls in Maryland since 1986, and at Assateague Island since 1991.

Join us for dinner with David at 5:30 PM at Bella Luna, 80 W Water St, Harrisonburg. Please contact Robyn Puffenbarger, 540-908-7335 or rpuffenb@bridgewater.edu, in advance if you plan to attend.

Special note: The January 2020 RBC meeting will be held in the STRITE AUDITORIUM at VMRC and will be **January 9th**, the SECOND Thursday of the month. This date change is only for the January 2020 meeting.

DECEMBER FIELD TRIPS - *Diane Lepkowski*

Members and guests welcome. Minors (under 18) must be accompanied by a parent or adult.

Hillandale Monthly Walk, Thursday, December 5, with Tom Mizell: Meet at the Children's Playground parking lot at 8:00 AM. Our wish list may include Swans, Geese, Calling Birds, French Hens, Turtle Doves and a Partridge in an Osage Orange Tree.

Christmas Bird Count (CBC) – Saturday, December 14, with Bill Benish (foul weather date TBA): We have several excellent field leaders lined up and a few of them need help. If you are

available to join the effort, please contact Bill Benish. Beginners are welcomed; this can be a great chance to learn from those more experienced! Usually we can accommodate preferences such as matching with a leader of a smaller area for shorter outings or car-only birding. Feeder watchers living inside the circle should also contact Bill in advance regarding reporting requirements, such as time start & finish times and total as well as the species counts. Along with data collected on count day, count week data is also recorded. Plan to document unusual sightings; photos are ideal. Contact Bill Benish at wcbenish@gmail.com or 540.908.7336

TRIP REPORTS

Northern Saw-whet Owl Banding at Highland Retreat – *Diane Lepkowski*

To quote Clair Mellinger’s website/blog description of our November 14 visit: “They had to wait over two hours and endure a long lecture and Q&A session but the Rockingham Bird Club visitors finally got to see a real live Saw-whet Owl for their patience.” Thirteen of us enjoyed every bit of Clair’s education session, although we did get concerned when the first two net checks came up dry. Clair decided the third check would be the last and let several of us accompany him and his able helper Chris up to the nets. Everyone (surely excepting the owl!) was thrilled to find one owl awaiting us.

Back inside the banding station, we watched, photographed, listened, and photographed some more as Clair and Chris weighed, evaluated and banded the owl, with Clair describing the process to further continue our education. Ultraviolet illumination of the underwing feather pattern indicated it was a second-year bird. A big thank-you to Clair for a most educational and entertaining evening!



Northern Saw-whet Owl under ultraviolet light – Nov 2019

Photo credit: Diane Lepkowski

Hillandale Park Monthly Walk, Thursday November 14 – Tom Mizell

For the second month in a row, dawn was announced by an impressive early morning red sky. The temperature was 24 degrees as I parked in an “empty” parking lot a few minutes before 8 AM. I wondered if I would walk alone this day. However, within a few minutes I was joined by four Rockingham Bird Club members. As we shuffled our feet in the parking lot to keep warm, our wish list was Brown Creeper, Anything, Hoary Red-poll and Lincoln’s Sparrow.

In the cold air we were greeted by Red-bellied Woodpecker and Northern Flicker as the day's first sightings. We soon heard Eastern Towhee and American Goldfinches. As we crossed the bridge at the cabin, I noticed ice crystals from the frost glistening atop my shoes. A flock of Cedar Waxwings flew southward. As we walked up the incline towards the cabin, Northern Cardinals flitted about. Along the trail were Juncos and White-throated Sparrows. Canada Geese flew over, announcing their presence in the chilled air. Blue Jays flew both to the east and west as usual, many of them carrying the peanuts they routinely gather from the shelter near the biking trail in the eastern portion of the park. Herb Meyers heard a Fox Sparrow, and we stopped. To our left we heard a distinct and beautiful song. At least two of us could not recall having heard a Fox Sparrow. Search as we might we did not see it. It shared its song a few times and then was quiet. A special moment on the trail.

By 8:50 we arrived at the northwest corner pedestrian bridge. The list grew with American Robin, Fish Crow, Carolina Wren, a tight-knit flying flock of “Blackbirds” and a Downy Woodpecker adding to the count, now at 16. White-breasted Nuthatch, Carolina Chickadee and Hairy Woodpecker gave us opportunity to lift our glasses to the treetops. We heard a Pileated Woodpecker as well, bringing the woodpecker species count to 5.

The morning seemed to grow ever colder. At 9:20, the weather app showed Harrisonburg temperature at 28 degrees. The wind chill, due to 5 mph winds, made it feel like 22! By the time we reached the cabin bridge a second time we added Black Vulture, Mourning Dove, Tufted Titmouse, Song Sparrow and Golden-crowned Kinglet, raising our list to 25 species.

We turned left after crossing the bridge at 9:36 AM, and began the southern loop. Grackles. We heard the Northern Mockingbird! Mockingbirds can often be found in that southern loop of the trail. Turkey Vultures were now seen overhead, mixing in the sky with the Black Vultures. Our list was now 28. We completed the second loop around 10:20 AM and commented that things had really been quiet with little bird activity.

We lingered briefly at the cabin bridge a third and final time. We often pick up a new species or two if we linger long enough before leaving for home. Bingo! We heard a “kek, kek, kek, kek.” Looking to the east, in a tall oak that often is a gathering point for the Hillandale birds, we saw a Cooper's Hawk perched high in the tree. As we focused our glasses on the Cooper's Hawk, a Red-tailed Hawk flew low from the golf course behind the cabin towards us. It flew overhead, giving us one final highlight. The raptor finale boosted our list to 30 species. Might they have been the reason for a very quiet southern loop? The temperature was 28 and our “below freezing walk” was over for the day. Time to head home! Thanks to Doug Ruby, Herb Meyers, Bob Eggleston and Fletcher Bingham for braving the elements and completing a cold but very enjoyable walk! Please join us in December for our last Hillandale Park walk of Fall.

BIRD SIGHTINGS

Greg Moyers reported three **Fox Sparrows** at Switzer Dam on Oct. 29. On Oct. 30, Greg reported two **Rusty Blackbirds** at Leonard's Pond.

Diane Holsinger reported her first-of-season **Dark-eyed Junco** in her yard in Timberville on Oct. 31.

Mike Smith reported a yard first at his place near Elkton on Nov. 2 – an **American Woodcock** bobbing around and probing the soil with its long bill.

Over the first four days of November, Matt Gingerich hosted **White-throated, White-crowned, Swamp,** and **Savannah Sparrows** at his place near Linville. Matt also reported flyover **Purple Finches** and **American Pipits** on Nov. 3 and 4.

Robyn Puffenbarger and Bill Benish had a **Fox Sparrow** at their place in Bridgewater on Nov. 10.

Mike Smith had a **Hermit Thrush** feeding on dried hackberry fruit at his home near Elkton on Nov. 14.

Michael Shank reported a **Winter Wren** at his feeder in Bridgewater on Nov. 15.

A **Peregrine Falcon** has been sighted in downtown Harrisonburg several times, first by Diane Lepkowski on Nov. 21.

Diane Lepkowski and Greg Moyers reported a **Horned Grebe** at Lake Shenandoah on Nov. 23.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

BIRD SEED SALE

A HUGE "Thank You" to everyone that supported the bird seed sale. Members helped by making suet cakes, ordering seed, and helping on Pick Up Day. We purchased a few extra bags of seed. This is the seed we have available for purchase:

- 3 – 25 lb bags of Black Oil Sunflower Seed @ \$15 each
- 1 – 25 lb bag of Safflower (squirrels do not like this seed!) \$25

Contact Kathy Byers if you are interested kkbyers77@gmail.com or 820-6517



Northern Saw-whet Owl – Nov 2019

Photo credit: Diane Lepkowski



Cooper's Hawk – Hillandale Park – Nov 2019

Photo credit: Tom Mizell

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