

Best Bird Memories

The Best Bird Memory project was launched as part of the Rockingham Bird Club's 50th Anniversary, known as its "Goldfinch Jubilee". In brief, the goal was to chronicle memories from the past 50 years in Rockingham County/Harrisonburg. The participant defined what constituted their best bird memory.

Here are the submissions we received in the order they were received. They will be archived along with other RBC materials in the James Madison University Libraries Special Collections. We hope you enjoy reading.

Barred Owl
Hillandale Park-Harrisonburg

Stephani Tusing
November 11, 2018 4:30pm

A few years ago, I was walking the trails in the woods at Hillandale Park in Harrisonburg. Since the sun was starting to set, I was heading back to the parking lot. I turned a corner in the trail and then right in front of me, I saw a Barred Owl perched in a tree about 20 feet away from me. I froze in my tracks, hoping to not scare it off. It stared at me for a minute, looking more irritated at my arrival than scared. Then it flew off into the woods, its large wings flapping silently. It was the first time I had actually seen an owl in the wild rather than hearing one. I felt very honored to be able to see such a majestic bird-quite an unforgettable experience!

Evening Grosbeak
Timberville

Saraona Minnich
early 1980's

My Mom (Louise S. Minnich, also an RBC member) and I had just started to feed wild birds. Back then, the Evening Grosbeaks came in large flocks to feeders, arriving around Thanksgiving and staying until May. Mom's favorite color was yellow so we just fell in love with these birds.

Red-shouldered Hawk
Harrisonburg

anonymous
2021

The hawk was sitting on my in-laws fence eating worms. I did not realize that hawks ate worms, and it was hilarious.

Snowy Owl
Mt Crawford

Stephanie Gardner
January 9, 2014

After hearing that a Snowy owl was at the White Wave Plant in Mt Crawford, I went to see the owl on the afternoon of January 9, 2014. Experiencing this rare and majestic visitor was a real treat. It was breathtaking when those piercing yellow eyes looked down at me. The way that people help each other to locate and view birds is a special part of our local culture.

Osprey
Evergreen Valley Rd, Timberville

Allie Sawyer
Summer 2008

When I was a budding birder at 12-years old, I had a memorable summer with an Osprey in 2008. From my home in Timberville, I noticed a hawk-like bird perched high in a dying, mature American Beech tree. My young eyes knew this was not one of the typical raptors I would see around my home. I flew to my "Birds of Virginia Field Guide" by Stan Tekiela and stealthily crossed the creek with book and binoculars in hand. Unfortunately, I was not sneaky enough for the sharp-eyed bird of prey. Over the following weeks, I dedicated my afternoons to discovering the bird's routine and making myself part of the environment for it. With time, I was able to get closer without it flying away. Throughout the process, I discovered the raptor's identity and developed part of my own - a love for intimate experiences with birds and a curiosity for their routines.

On one particularly lucky day, my Osprey had a Largemouth Bass clutched between its talons and the branch. Time stood still as I watched it rip fishy flesh from the carcass. The combination of familiarity with the strange being that had observed it over the weeks plus being captivated by the meal at hand allowed me to approach the base of the tree where I lounged for what seemed like hours. Even after the meal was concluded, we sat and digested the moment at hand. Suddenly, a stream of white-flecked substance came like a jet out of the sky, causing me to laugh and be glad I wasn't 10 feet closer to the river. While the Osprey didn't fly off in that moment, it felt like it was time for me to go. Stealing glances over my shoulder, I retreated back through the field and across the creek. With one final glance, it took flight. Until tomorrow my dear friend.

Tree Swallow
Leonard's Pond

Art Fovargue
August 13, 2003

My wife and I had gone birding at Leonard's Pond and there were hundreds of Tree Swallows flying above and around the pond, and perched on the telephone wires along the road. But what really caught my attention was watching them play with feathers. Individuals would fly with a feather, sometimes dropping it into the pond and then retrieving it. Or other times catching it in the air before it hit the water. At times they seemed to chase one another as if the feather was a prized possession. Sitting on the wire they would sometimes pass the feather to a neighbor. I was mesmerized and intrigued by this behavior; it took my bird watching to a new level.

Blackburnian Warbler
Route 33 west @ Switzer Dam entrance

Jo Ellen Capstack
Spring 2015

I attended one of my first Rockingham Bird Club field trips with Tom Mizell leading the expedition. That morning we spotted many warblers as soon as we arrived, but my excitement level rose as he specifically told me where a Blackburnian was located. The colors were vibrant! It was the beginning of my love for warblers. Thanks Tom, you are officially in my memory bank!

Red-tailed Hawk
In the woods behind our home in Harrisonburg

Kathy Byers
2020 onward

For at least the past five years I have watched Red-tailed Hawks nest in the woods near our home. A pair will start hanging out regularly in late January. Occasionally it is one bird for a while and I get a

little nervous. But usually by March a second bird is seen close by. I become obsessed with watching them and have binoculars at all windows facing the woods. With no leaves on the trees they are usually easy to find, but it is a challenge to find their nest if they have begun a new one. I was surprised to learn that they are very particular about which twigs etc to use and realized that they prefer live twigs that are pliable. It's quite entertaining to watch a big bird wrestle with a twig that it has its heart set on! I am quite certain that I could not build a better nest using my hands and I'm certain I'd fail if I had to use my feet! About the time the eggs are hatching the trees have leafed out and the birds have their privacy back. As the weeks go by I laugh to myself when I hear the young birds squawking and begging from their over worked parents. As juveniles are spotted soaring over the woods, I wonder who might be returning next year.

Painted Bunting
My home in northern Harrisonburg

Mike Donaldson
2/22/2021 about 12:30pm

On February 22, 2021—a gray, wintry day with snow on the ground—a little after noon, I was in my kitchen on the phone with my daughter and a flash of red caught my eye at the bird feeder. As I neared the window to investigate, it quickly became apparent that the red I had seen was the bright belly of a male Painted Bunting! In addition to its rarity, this bird was extra special for its bright colors and for making itself at home, visiting our feeder for several weeks.

Saw-whet Owl
Highland Retreat

Debbie Harrison
November 2007

I moved to Broadway, VA, in March 2007 and later found out about the Rockingham Bird Club. In November, I contacted Kay Gibson, President of the RBC, to find out about meetings & field trips. I had already missed the November meeting, but that very week the Club was going to visit the Owl Banding Station at Highland Retreat. She encouraged me to drive myself there & introduce myself to Clair Mellinger & Zig . Which I'm glad I did! The owls are amazing. Especially when I got to hold one to take outside & release after they had been thoroughly measured & recorded. And the camaraderie of the banders and club members was wonderful. I've been a member of the RBC ever since :)

Snowy Owl
Cecil Wampler Rd, Mt Crawford

Denise Hoodock
December 2017

Having never seen a Snowy Owl before, this sighting was a 'once-in-a-lifetime' event that was so very special to me because I absolutely love owls! Surprisingly, I located it again around the same time on the top of a light pole next to the Danone Warehouse in Mt. Crawford. An experience that I will never forget!

Rose-breasted Grosbeak
Harrisonburg, Parkview

Cindy Smoker
May 9, 2021 ~9:00 AM

I woke up on Sunday, May 9, 2021 and was overjoyed to add a lifer to my birding list! Out at a feeder on our deck was a brightly colored male rose-breasted grosbeak. I recognized this bird from the cover of the Sibley Field Guide to Birds of the Eastern North America but needed to look up its name in the

book. This was also Mother's Day and after many months of masking and social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, I was also able to finally hug my parents on this day. A banner day indeed!

Rufous Hummingbird
Tangly Woods, 2715 Fruit Farm Lane, Keezletown

Herb Myers
October 31, 2020

This Rufous Humminbird was an unusual winter bird that showed up at our feeder after the Ruby-throats had left. It was judged to be a second year female by someone more expert than I. People came to see it which was fun. It hung around between our place and Vic Buckwalter's place on the northwest side of the hill between our places. Suddenly it seemed to be staying at his place. He said it was because he put chocolate chips out for it. I doubt that but it was a nice bird to share between our places.

Peregrine Falcon
Cargill Feedmill, Harrisonburg

Randy
January 1, 2024 & 2025,
5:15 PM

It spoke to me because I had no idea why the bird chose the feed mill as a night home

American Coot
Silver Lake, Dayton

Kate Komorous
October 13, 2024, noon

Zachary and I moved to Rockingham County in September of 2024 from South Carolina. A month later on October 13th, 2024 we went over to Silver Lake to see if any waterfowl were bobbing around. Out on the lake we noticed a dark bird with a white bill. I had never seen one like it and it puzzled me at first. I noticed it's bizarre movements and features and soon realized it was a single American Coot. The perfect representation of the strange experience of making a new place home.

Common Nighthawk
About a mile South of Bridgewater

Walker H
May 30, 2024

It was not uncommon for me to hear the call of the Nighthawk as a child, but I never knew what made it. My grandfather would say the "booms" from the Nighthawk were a "raven," but I always thought it was something else (chalking it up to be a bullfrog). The evenings would be filled with the sound Nighthawks diving over the field. For awhile I had not noticed the sounds anymore, and only last year did I spot one. The Nighthawk was performing its mating ritual. Something about it felt so welcoming and nostalgic, as if I were seeing it again as a child, but with an adult's appreciation and attention. My winged friend kept making its passes until it was dark, and continued to do so for a few days. I hope it found another Nighthawk to keep company.

Barred Owl
Madison Run Rd, Rockingham Co.

Kathy Kaeli
May 4, 2024, late morning

The owl was perched in a tree just a few feet away with its back to me. I wanted to take a photo of her and quietly asked it turn around to face the camera. She slowly turned her head and looked at me, and threw up some pellets before flying away. I did not get a picture . . .

White-winged Crossbill
Rockingham County

Shirley Knicely
11/20/1999

I enjoy birding anywhere and adding a life-bird to my list. The most exciting is having a rare bird show up in my very own yard!!! I still remember the thrill of seeing the White-winged Crossbill on my feeder and drinking from the little stream that we had made in our yard in hopes of attracting birds.

Lincoln's Sparrow
E College St, Bridgewater

Bill Benish
10/23/2004

Vantage Points! Window birding is important to us for close-up viewing access. This has also been important for our indoor-only cats, not only for their health and enjoyment, but also for the safety of the birds. There were several vantage points, at various windows, where they could easily see outside to monitor what was happening at the feeders, baths and garden hotspots of the yard.

On October 23, 2004, our male cat Wolfie "barked" at something out the window. He didn't usually make a big fuss, so we joined him to see what drew his attention. We saw a sparrow running around a bit differently than most of our other visitors. We also noticed plumage features of this sparrow different from our regular Song Sparrows. This led us to suspect Lincoln's Sparrow, a species which for several years we had been hoping to find somewhere. Now it was a potential lifer in the yard thanks to our diligent kitty!

We studied features of the bird and concluded this was a Lincoln's Sparrow. Nonetheless, we wanted to see if another Rockingham Bird Club member and local expert Leonard Teuber could help us confirm the review. Leonard was about 83 by this time and resided nearby in the Bridgewater Retirement Community. After calling him, he immediately came over to help us review our bird. Leonard clinched the ID as Lincoln's Sparrow. He had a big smile and was also tickled that Wolfie safely found the bird for us.

We thanked both Leonard and Wolfie for helping us with this life-bird in our own prized habitat gardens.

Red Crossbill
"Crossbill corner", road intersection before finishing
the drive to Reddish Knob (Briery Branch Gap)

Robyn Puffenbarger
Spring Semester 2023

Charles Ziegenfous (Zig) graciously taught this molecular (think lab only) biologist how to run a field biology (ornithology) course on my first sabbatical spring 2008. I've now taught that course a number of times and in the last iteration, I had to go to an afternoon lab time due to student schedules and the lack of light in early mornings when the Bridgewater semester started in the second week of January! In this 2023 class, we headed up to Reddish Knob hoping to get Black-capped Chickadees, and the crossbills at the corner. As a professor, I try to mitigate expectations, since you never know what you are going to see with birds. Well, we got out of the van at the crossroads and there was the whole

flock of Red Crossbills, getting gravel, interacting, calling, I think I got pictures with my iPhone. It was stunning and so much fun to share with the students. I've had many opportunities to use the knowledge Zig so kindly shared, and his legacy is as much a part of this story as the birds.

Groove-billed Ani
Broadway

Clair Mellinger
October 24, 1981

On a sunny fall Saturday morning, 24 Oct 1981, Thelma Showalter called me and told me that there was an unusual bird at their feeder just south of Broadway along Rt. 42. She said that it was a black bird with a parrot-like beak. As I recall, I immediately thought of an ani but that may be wishful remembering. I am not sure that I knew what anis looked like at that point in my birding career. At any rate I quickly drove to their home. It did turn out to be a Groove-billed Ani and was photographed and seen by dozens of persons from around the state. It was seen regularly for a couple of weeks and then intermittently until 18 November. It was only the third state record of this species for Virginia. Thelma kept a careful record of all the bird species she saw around their rural home ... not only the unusual ones. But that also meant that she did spot anything unusual.

Barred Owl
Madison Run Fire Rd

Eva G.
First week of July, 2024

My Dad and I were walking up Madison Fire Road one evening when we heard the screeching of fledgling Barred Owls. We stopped to listen and were astonished when a immature Barred Owl landed on a branch above our heads and craned her neck to observe us. To our greater astonishment, her siblings arrived after her; landing in trees and hopping through the leaf litter, all while continuing to screech. Their behavior was adorably inquisitive, and it seemed like they were studying us. I wondered if maybe we were the first humans the new fledglings had seen.

Belted Kingfisher
Lake Shenandoah

Dan Getman
11/03/2024, 7:00 AM

Belted Kingfishers are my favorite bird and, although I had seen them since moving to Virginia, those moments had been fleeting. While canoeing with my family on lake Shenandoah one morning, the local Kingfisher caught a fish near to where we were on the lake and then landed only a few feet away. We thought the fish looked quite big, but it turned out the Kingfisher knew exactly what it was doing. It was a special moment to sit quietly on the water together and see this beautiful bird preparing, and by that I mean vigorously and repeatedly whacking the fish on the tree where it was perched, and then downing their freshly caught breakfast.

Eastern Screech-Owl
Edith J Carrier Arboretum, Harrisonburg

Hope Getman
Afternoon of April 15, 2023

My first time spotting an Eastern Screech-Owl I was walking along a dry creek bed when a cacophony of songbird alarm calls caught my attention. I circled back, slowly approaching the ruckus and observed a variety of species harassing what appeared to be a cluster of red dried leaves. Upon closer inspection, I realized it was a red-morph of the Eastern Screech-Owl. I never would have

noticed it without the songbirds assistance. The owl was so beautifully camouflaged and so small; not much bigger than some of the birds mobbing it!

Red-necked Phalarope
Leonard's Pond, Faughts Road

Kathy Fovargue
September 2004

Word had gotten out that Red-necked Phalaropes were on Leonard's Pond. It was September 2004. Many club members were sharing their sightings on a group email site called Shenvalbirds. I believe that's how I heard. I drove out to the pond and found two birds in the water a few feet from shore. They were spinning around like a bath toy that was broken. I didn't know they did that. It was really fun to watch and it was a life bird for me.

Blue-winged Warbler
Deep Run Ponds Natural Area Preserve
on Ore Bank Road

Greg Moyers
6/7/2006

I was checking the natural area preserve for Prairie Warblers one last time before giving up on them for the season. I had found them there in years past and was disappointed that they hadn't returned. Soon after entering the preserve, my disappointment turned into excitement as I heard a buzzy call up ahead. I had been listening to a bird songs CD in an effort to learn warbler songs and I recognized this buzzy song as either a Blue-winged or Golden-winged Warbler. After a few minutes of trudging through the briars and weeds, I was rewarded with a few quick views of my life Blue-winged Warbler!

Great Blue Heron
949 Northfield Ct, Harrisonburg

Audrey Shenk
Summer 2017?

I'm not sure when this happened exactly, possibly around 2017. I have a very small fenced-in backyard in northeast Harrisonburg (949 Northfield Ct). There is a small water garden with several goldfish and a waterfall that birds love to play in. One day during the summer, I noticed a very large bird in the yard that would fly away as soon as I entered my bedroom and looked out the window. The bird moved too quickly for me to identify for sure, but it was definitely some type of heron. This happened multiple times and I began to notice that I had fewer fish in my pond. I talked to other people who had fishponds and they mentioned the same thing happening at their ponds. Perhaps it was a young bird looking for food? I restocked my pond with fish which have thrived since then and I haven't seen the heron anymore. It was exciting to see such a large bird in my yard, but I wasn't very happy about losing my fish!

Belted Kingfisher
Boat launch behind the Mount Crawford municipal building

Zachary J Peters
March 22, 2025
around 12:00 PM ET

On March 22, 2025 I was out scouting river access points and went to check out one in Mount Crawford around noon. I walked down to the river and was surveying the ramp and the river itself, when I heard that unmistakable chattering of a Belted Kingfisher. I looked north up the river and to my surprise saw not one, but two Kingfishers darting from one side of the river to the other, occasionally

hovering high above the water looking for their next meal. The Belted Kingfisher has always mesmerized me. I see them when I'm out fishing or hunting and seeing a photo of one or hearing their call makes me think of adventures in far off salt marshes and meandering valley rivers.

Ruffed Grouse
On Hone Quarry Rd just East of the Hidden Rocks trailhead

Andrew Troyer
late July 2021 in the evening

I just finished my 2nd date with my future wife where we hiked the Hidden Rocks trail. On the way out we saw the grouse beside the road and have since marked it as our first of many notable bird sightings together.

Roseate Spoonbill
A farm pond near Linville Creek between Linville and Broadway.

Matt Gingerich
August 7, 2022, 6:40 AM

On this morning in August, I headed out early to beat the heat and look for any wandering waders along Linville Creek. When I checked a friend's pond, I was shocked to see a beautiful pink bird wading in the shallow waters. Spoonbills had been recorded throughout the East Coast in recent weeks, so the occurrence was not completely unexpected.

While any sighting of a Roseate Spoonbill is exciting, the reason I chose this sighting as my "best bird" was because of the way this bird exemplifies how birding can draw people in and bring people together.

Soon after I found the bird, I alerted fellow birders to come visit the private pond to view the bird. By that evening the bird relocated to nearby Linville Creek and numerous people came to admire the pink visitor. Birders of all levels, ages and even people unfamiliar to birds were enthralled with the vagrant.

Birds bring people together. In a time when we may feel more and more divided, it is always encouraging to share experiences with people from different background and perspectives.

Cedar Waxwing
Airport Rd, Bridgewater

Tom Mizell
circa 2005

One day in the early 2000's, perhaps around 2005, Suzanne and I got home from church and as I stepped out of the car I heard a repetitive little tweet. The little chirping came from the direction of the flower border next to our house. As I looked down on the ground there was a baby bird about 20 feet away. It was struggling to make its way through the tall grass (four to five inches) that dwarfed it. It hopped and climbed over grass stems towards us. Its little legs moved somewhat awkwardly through the sea of grass.

We looked around for parents and never saw any. We were concerned the neighborhood cat would find it and that the little one would end up as a meal. So we put it in a cardboard box on the patio hoping the parents would return and perhaps lead it or us to the nest. We had no experience in uniting adult birds with offspring and thought the box on the patio would be a good start. The little chorister showed no inclination to stop its constant chirping during the following hours.

The day past into evening. The baby bird kept chirping. It had to be hungry and we didn't know what to do. Finally I called Clair Mellinger and asked him what I might feed the bird. Following his suggestion we wetted some dry cat food and I used an eyedropper and the little bird took to it. No question it was hungry. Still no sign of the parents at sunset. The next day we continued to search for the parents in the yard and periodically feed the baby bird.

That second afternoon I decided to place the little bird up in the mimosa tree and maybe the parents would see it there. Periodically I checked on the bird as it remained in the tree through the afternoon into early evening. I sat in a lawn chair about 50 feet away from the tree and watched still hoping the parents would show up but they never did.

I called Mary and Dick Smith. Many of you longer term members remember them as RBC Members. I believe they were both Charter members of the club. Mary joined me that afternoon and we sat in the back yard hoping to see the parents pick up the little one in their arms and take it home. That didn't happen. Mary confirmed that it was a young Cedar Waxwing.

Mary and I watched and listened to it chirp as it remained perched in the Mimosa tree for about an hour then Mary had to leave.

It was still before sunset and I was content to keep vigil. I sat there watching, relaxed in a chair and the little bird hopped off the tree limb and dropped almost straight to the ground. Not big enough to "wing it" even a little bit. It began wading through the grass towards me. Hopping, climbing over grass blades, it was a challenging journey. It took quite a while but it continued to head in my direction chirping intermittently. It came straight to me, very close. Close! and soon guess what happened?

It hopped up on my shoe. Yes up on my tennis shoe! It apparently imprinted on me due to my feeding it. Oh my! This a new chapter in my world of nature experience. It was content sitting on my shoe. I certainly bonded with it and to see it hop up on my shoe was beyond words.

The sun was about to set. After a few minutes sitting on my shoe it pulled up its little legs, lay down as birds lay down, tucked its little head close to its body and fell asleep. I was surprised! It had a busy day and sadly the parents never showed. To see the little bird on my shoe, fast asleep was very much a life changing moment. Here, trusting me was a baby Cedar Waxwing. I had to eventually move. So I put it back in the cardboard box and took it back into the house to protect it from the cat. The next day I placed it in the mimosa tree and checked on it periodically- still no parents. About the third day I had to go out of town and when I got back it was gone. I wondered and wished it well. I hope the parents found it!

Western Tanager
Broadway

Karen Seward
14 February 2025

A gentleman approached me at the Broadway Wastewater Treatment Pond and asked if I might be able to identify a bird that was visiting his backyard by his description. He described it as looking like an American Goldfinch that was bigger in size like an American Robin. The best I could come up with logically was a female Baltimore Oriole. But I asked if I could come to his house, and he was happy to allow that. The moment I stepped into his backyard (which was a bird magnet with multiple feeders) I flushed a gorgeous Western Tanager off a suet feeder. It landed in his neighbor's large deciduous tree, which allowed great views and several photo opportunities. I didn't know it at the time, but it was a county first! The bird stayed there for a month. I hope it finds its way back there next winter. Although I have seen many wonderful birds in the county, even though I've only lived here a year, this one no doubt is a star!

Snow Bunting
Harrisonburg, bordering the Heritage Oaks golf course

Dawn Keplinger
circa 2018 – 2021, wintertime

The Snow Bunting came to our backyard feeder. One of the bird club members came a few different times to our house to try and spot it, but it only came infrequently, and not for long. It was determined by pictures to be a juvenile. It's the only time we've ever seen one here! A beautiful bird! (We saw so many during our Navy tours, Florida, Maryland, Iceland, northern Japan, CA, Sugar Grove WV, and then Harrisonburg)

Great Blue Heron
Wildwood Park, Bridgewater

Amanda Gray
Late Spring 2018

One afternoon my parents and I decided to visit Wildwood Park in Bridgewater. It was late Spring 2018. Shortly after I got out of the car, I noticed a Great Blue Heron near the base of the dam hunting for fish. I was able to watch it catch fish for several minutes, which was definitely a rare treat.

Black Vulture
N Main Street, Harrisonburg

Linda Eberly Miller
Winter or early spring 2020

It was during the covid lockdown (Winter/early spring 2020), and my husband and I were going stir crazy. We decided to walk the Northend Greenway trail from the Park View Walgreens to N Main Street, Harrisonburg. As we ambled along N Main, I was shocked to see a large cat sitting and looking at a store front door. Beside the cat, one on each side, sat two Black Vultures. The three animals were all about the same size. Suddenly, the store door opened and a woman set out a plate of food. Cat and vultures happily dug in.
