



Northern Neck Audubon News

The Northern Neck of Virginia Chapter of the National Audubon Society

P.O. Box 991, Kilmarnock, Virginia 22482

www.northernneckaudubon.org

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UPCOMING

Virtual Chapter Meetings via ZOOM

Monday, March 1st, 7:00 PM
Photography of Birds and Critters in our Area
Jeff Wright

Monday, April 5th, 7:00 PM
"Old Growth Forest"
Dr. Joan Maloof

(Zoom Access Details on Page 3)

GBBC

akaGreat Backyard Bird Count

Since 1998, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society have promoted the first online citizen science project to collect data on wild birds and to display the results in near real time.

For four days each year, February 12-15, participants spend at least 15 minutes per day watching and recording the birds they see. You can watch through a window to your yard, from your favorite secret birding place or some exotic spot where you always wanted to be (although in Covid-19 times, that is pretty much out). You can be by yourself or with family; but, again, Covid protocol prevails. The data can be uploaded easily in a variety of methods.

This is a very valuable citizen science project. All information can be found via a search on the web for Audubon Great Backyard Bird Count.

Bird-watching is certainly a joy in which we should all partake more often. The data we collect and record provides scientists with long-term population trends and a better understanding of a species population before one of its annual migrations.

PLEASE PARTICIPATE

...AND, feel free to post highlights of your Count on the NNAS list website:

nnasnet@freelists.org

.....Kevin Howe

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Some of you may know that our President, Joe Cooney, is away for several months. He is well but in November joined his wife in Wyoming for a short-term job opportunity. His wife is working while he is birding---what a life! He saw a Snowy Owl.

So, I am your acting President. I have been, and still am, the Chapter Vice President. Joe should return around April and will then step back into his President shoes.

Last year came as a shock to all of us. Our Board wrestled with what to do and how to do it but found no suitable pathway. Bird walks and programs had been the focus of the Chapter, and these we could not offer. For 2021, we now have plans. Bird walks are still off the table, but we are arranging several virtual events. Please check elsewhere in this newsletter for details on some of these.

We started this year off with a virtual nature walk. In past years, our Chapter, along with the Northern Neck Chapters of Virginia Native Plant Society and Virginia Master Naturalists, co-sponsored a New Year's Day Walk in search of Skunk Cabbage, Virginia's earliest blooming plant. The walk was a success and got many people out in nature on the first day of the year. Since we couldn't hold a public walk this year, a New Year's Day virtual walk at Hickory Hollow was developed. If you missed it, I encourage you to visit the Chapter's website:

<https://northernneckaudubon.squarespace.com>

and click on the link at the top:

"Click for Virtual Hickory Hollow Skunk Cabbage Walk."

Hickory Hollow Natural Area Preserve is owned by our Chapter and is designated a Virginia Natural Area Preserve, one of only 65 such sites in the Commonwealth. It consists of 254 acres of wild... a wonderful area to hike, bird and just get away. Given that so much is virtual these days, the NN Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists' recent presentation, January 19th, also featured the site

with "Walk Through Hickory Hollow in Winter." A link to this two-part program can be found on the home page of the NN Virginia Master Naturalists:

<https://northernneckmasternaturalists.squarespace.com/>

Hickory Hollow itself needs some attention, and this spring we will be looking for some volunteers to help with a variety of tasks. If you would like to be placed a list for jobs like walking trails to check for trash or such (nothing too hard), please e-mail me with your contact information and specific interests:

kevinmhowe@gmail.com

In the near future, we will be mailing out a membership dues request. No such request was sent out in 2020, due to Covid-19. Several members simply sent in dues on their own; but many of us, me included, need reminding. As a result, the Chapter has come up short in monies needed to sustain all that goes on, such as the Port-a-John at Hickory Hollow, our website, public programs, insurance, mailings, oversight of the six properties on which we hold conservation easements and maintenance on the four properties that our Chapter owns, including Hickory Hollow. It is hoped that many or all will be happy to help support the Chapter so that we can continue with all that we do.

A commitment of a more long-standing nature is that of Board Membership. Some of those slots need filling, and we would surely appreciate an offer from any member willing to serve the three-year term.

Ours is the oldest Audubon Chapter in Virginia, having begun in 1970 and incorporated as a non-profit in 1971. We are in our 50th year and would like the Chapter to continue for another 50. I hope you all see fit to support such an outlook.

.....Kevin Howe

Vice-President NNAS

ZOOM ZOOM ZOOM

In accordance with coronavirus constraints, all bird walks have been suspended for the foreseeable future. Our Northern Neck Audubon internet posting site at nnasnet@freelists.org is still active and should be used by all of us to post interesting things we encounter about birds and nature

As mentioned elsewhere in the newsletter, last year was lost; so, this year we are jumping on the Zoom program bandwagon. At some point in the future, we will announce and resume our regular Monday afternoon gatherings at the Lancaster Community Library.

Thus far in 2021 we have “booked” Zoom meetings for the next two months, but we will have more coming each month, except for July, August and December. These programs will be posted on our website and advertised in the local papers. Additionally, each member will receive an e-mailed Zoom reminder with link a few days before the event. The first two programs are:

Monday, March 5th, 7:00 PM

“Photography of Birds and Critters in our Area”

Program to be presented by Jeff Wright, a Virginia Master Naturalist, long-time birder and former NN Audubon Board member. Get your drinks and popcorn ready. Jeff is a knowledgeable and entertaining speaker.

Monday, April 5th, 7:00 PM

“Old Growth Forest”

This program will be presented by Dr. Joan Maloof, author, forest ecologist at Salisbury State University (MD) and founder of the Old Growth Forest Network. Get your notebooks ready, as Joan will enlighten us all about Old Growth Forests and why they are so valuable. As you may know, our own Hickory Hollow Natural Area has been inducted into the Old Growth Forest Network.

.....Kevin Howe
NNAS Vice-President

BIRDING ELSEWHERE

I have been in Wyoming now for over two months and have about one month to go before heading to Oregon and Washington.

Birding in Wyoming has been both familiar and difficult. While driving the many back roads of Goshen and Platte Counties, I have seen numerous small brown birds flying into the air. Back home I can reliably estimate what they might be. Out here I am having trouble. The other thing I noticed around here is that the birds are very skittish. The geese and ducks sitting on open water will panic and rise to flight if they notice you getting out a spotting scope. This has happened on several occasions.

All in all, though, it has been fun. When, in November, I realized I was coming out here, I contacted some individuals listed on a Christmas Bird Count (CBC) circle. Thankfully, without knowing anything of my skill level, they allowed me to participate in their count. It turns out they are deeply knowledgeable about local birds, having written a book about them: Wyoming Birds by Jane Dorn and Robert Dorn.

In my first week here, I was able to add a new bird to my Life List: the Townsend Solitaire. So far I've added fifteen more. The next identification was the Rough-Legged Hawk. It is currently joined in this area by Red-Tailed Hawks (several different varieties) and Ferruginous Hawks. I put a bookmark into the bird book pages for Rough-Legged and Ferruginous and started driving.

The Rough-Legged can be identified by a large black patch on the wing's underside, near the wrist. Tail feathers are white with a black band at the end. Adding to the challenge of identification, they come in light and black morphs as well.

While, according to the books, the winter range of the Ferruginous Hawk is mostly in Colorado, there are several in Goshen County, Wyoming. They are the largest of the North American hawks. They have a gray head and rusty shoulders with fully-feathered and rusty-colored legs. Sometimes they can be hard to distinguish from the light morph male Rough-Legged Hawks. In the air, the underwings are mostly white with some light brown and without any dark patch.

During my first week in Wyoming and the Nebraska Panhandle, I added a few raptors to my Life List. I saw a Golden Eagle and a Prairie Falcon. The Golden Eagle is a large raptor with beautiful golden feathers adorning the head and back of the neck. I was glad to see one up close. Most of the time a good spotting scope is required. They, like the local waterfowl, seem to be on the skittish side.



*Snowy Owl, Perched and Flying,
Ferruginous Hawk*

PhotosJoe Cooney

Prairie Falcons are large falcons with a pronounced moustache stripe. They are brownish-gray overall with distinctive dark brown armpit feathers and are similar to the female Merlins (prairie) in the area, except in size. Prairie Falcons are often used in falconry here in the United States. Out here it is easy to spend a day driving around and seeing the larger birds perched on the electricity poles and irrigation equipment.

I have also been fortunate enough to spot some birds that are rare for this area (at least according to eBird.) The first were what I initially thought were three large white garbage bags out in a field with the cows. They turned out to be Trumpeter Swans, who apparently like that field, as I have them there several times since.

I added Pinyon Jays to my Life List. These are another rarity for the area. They are a dull, blue-gray color with bright blue cheek feathers. I had decided to drive down a dead-end road and there they were, going from one tree to the ground and off to another tree. Unfortunately, I had no camera along that day.

One of my biggest surprises was seeing a Red-Bellied Woodpecker, a bird with which I am very familiar. Apparently there are only a few documented reports of them in Wyoming, and many of those in eBird are for the same individual (continuing bird). I was so unimpressed with seeing one that I didn't take any photos of it. I had gone about half a mile down the road and was closing out the eBird list, when it showed up as "rare." I had to turn around and look for it again so I could get a photo. I was surprised by the interest in my sighting and received an e-mail looking for more information. Currently the sighting has been confirmed and submitted to the Wyoming Bird Records Committee, which will officially list it as being identified *IN* Wyoming. Who would have imagined?

The most recent Life List addition from my Wyoming sojourn, and the 68th species I've recorded from the area, is the Gray-Crowned Rosy Finch.

I am very grateful to my fellow birders who have immense knowledge and are willing to share it with just some ordinary Joe who is traveling through.

.....Joe Cooney, NNAS President

BIRD BOOKS



#63336841

Anne Tyler penned a rather winsome tale, drawn in one of her usual Baltimorian neighborhoods, wherein the protagonist “travelled” from the comfort, the safety, and perhaps the agoraphobia of his own warm armchair. I read that Accidental Tourist some 20 years ago, recall only vague echoes of the central character, but was constantly reminded of him when I tackled, appropriately in January, Owls of the Eastern Ice. This book should be read among only the softest pillows, with the warmest teacup in hand, and the thickest blanket tucked about one’s toes. It is a tale of bird-watching at its most harrowing and most courageous.

Author/ornithologist Johnathan Slaght had flown above Siberia in his early years, and he had never forgotten the utter remoteness of Russia’s Primorye Province, “a talon of land hooking south into the belly of Northern Asia,” where it shoulders into China and North Korea. He returned there for three years’ work with the Peace Corps, during which time he stumbled upon the astonishing Blakiston’s Fish Owl, the world’s largest owl. Mr. Slaght became obsessed by the rarity, if not the beauty, of this creature, one that always seems to be having a very bad hair day.

Problems for this owl remind one of those that face the Red-Cockaded Woodpecker: the need for an extremely specific habitat. When habitat falls prey to exploitation, human occupation or climate disruption, the niche organism suffers. What ARE the narrowly defined needs of this bird?

1. An enormous range.
2. A nearby and fish-rich river with sufficient current to remain partially open in the Siberian winter.

3. A potential nest tree of great girth, one which would accommodate the highly-set and deep cavity the owl uses.

4. Protection from a voracious human hunting community.

5. Mate availability: not such a given with a very, very sparse population.

When he decided to pursue a doctorate concentrating upon the salvation of this owl, a project that would consume ten years, he began the work in “a village called ‘Hell.’” He began, as well, the journal that would become this book.

The story is a gripping adventure set along unprounceable rivers (Dzhigitovka) in pursuit of a 3-kilogram bird he describes as a “dissheveled mass of wood-chip brown.” Trials and dangers of Primorye are staggering. In order to watch the owls fish, one has to be at their choice lacunae of open water, where the glacial streams race, roar, liquefy and refreeze capriciously. Nearby settlements, like “Hell,” are peopled with wild West-style miners, trappers, and hunters whose idea of dinner is a raw moose haunch, tossed onto oilcloth, to be roasted over an oil drum and washed down with great cascades of vodka.

Mr. Slaght gamely did all required to blend into this, often completely drunken, often dangerously violent, populace as he sought to band just 4-5 fish owls/year. Just to locate the birds, who blend so entirely into the forest tapestry, one had to follow their throaty duet: a 3 second wheeze from the male with an answering deeper hoot from the female.

The plan was to identify individuals, track behavior patterns, and use the data to write up a protection scheme. One of Primorye’s other inhabitants has already achieved protected status: the Amur Tiger. Unlike the fish owl, however, the tiger occasionally drifts from its natural prey to pull a farmer off his tractor and eat his head. In all ways, this mountain-spined and sea-hemmed country is a tough one.

In contrast to such toughness, the author and his biologist cohorts devised the gentlest possible means of catching and banding. Boxes baited with busy fish lured the owl to a delicate mesh net, one that would automatically loosen under stress, so the bird could escape if

not found within minutes. Wings would then be softly enwrapped, and the owl would usually, and rather surprisingly, cooperate, lying peaceably on its back to await the ministrations of its captors. Mr. Slaght felt that identifying 5-10 fish owls in a single season, would meet his short-term goal.



Blakiston's Fish Owl

Photo: Jonathan Slaght.

BUT, what of long-term goals? After half of every year spent away from his wife, children and home territory of St. Paul, Minnesota, were those goals met? With 40% of Primorye leased to loggers, and with only 1% of the total territory considered to be suitable Blakiston habitat, he has had his work cut out for him. Through negotiation, progress been made with the logging industry, and he now works officially for Wildlife Conservation Russia on-site and a protection plan is in place.

There remains, however, the entity with whom one cannot negotiate: Mother Nature. In 2016, Typhoon Lionrock literally razed down great swathes of Asian forest. The thick-trunked ancient beeches and oaks best loved by fish owls were felled to ground level, leaving no treasured nest trees in many areas; but, as the biologists roamed the devastated landscape, they were heartened to once more hear the fish owl duet.

.....Letha Harris

"SPOON" BILLS



Birds' Nest Breakfast Cups

from allrecipes.com

(Oh dear... EGG\$! To conform to Audubon ethics, one must be sure to use only those from domestic hens. !)

1 30-oz. package frozen shredded hash brown potatoes, thawed.

2 ½ tsp. salt
ground pepper to taste
3+ TB. olive oil

1 cup shredded cheddar
12 eggs
2 TB water
8 slices of bacon, crumbled.

Preheat oven to 425.

Grease 24 muffin cups.

Mix potatoes, ½ the salt, pepper, oil and 2/3 of the cheddar together.

Divide among the muffin tins, shaping nests with your fingers.

Bake 15-18 minutes....or until potatoes are browned about the edges and the cheese has melted. Remove from oven and lower heat to 350 degrees

Whisk eggs and water with remaining ½ of the salt & pepper and divide equally among the nests, topping each with a sprinkle of bacon and cheddar.

Return to cooler oven for 13-16 minutes, or until eggs are set. Cool before removing from muffin tins with a knife.

LANCASTER-NORTHUMBERLAND CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT 2020

Our local Christmas Bird Count was held on Tuesday, December 15th, and it was fabulous. The count participation was defined by social distancing, so many of us were out on our own or with close family members. Still, it was wonderful.

This was the fifth year for the count in our neck of the woods and each year a few more people join in. Over 60 people participated this year, and the total number of species recorded was also the highest yet, numbering: **105 !!!!**

Not bad for a Covid-19 day that started out very, very cold but did get sunny and warmer as the day progressed. Over 9,100 birds were counted, which was fewer than last year's total and the total of 2017, but more than were counted in 2018.

Jeff Wright, the founder of the count and the compiler of the data, said he was very proud of all participants and their diligence, considering the wintry rigors of the day.

We all thank Jeff for his organizational skills and the time he has spent on this project. If you did not participate, please consider doing so next year, either on your own or, if able, in a group.

.....Kevin Howe
NNAS Vice- President

Editor's Note:

January has been our normal issue date for the first newsletter of any calendar year. Because there was going to be a board meeting in early February, we deferred putting this issue out until the current week.

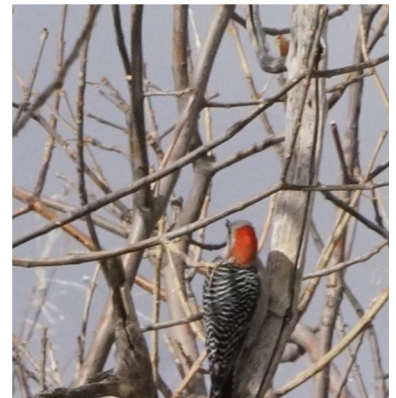
ERRATICS

Unlike geologic "erratics," boulders abandoned by a retreating glacier, ornithological erratics do not stay put. They surprise us by NOT staying where one would expect them to be.

While birding in Wyoming this winter, Joe Cooney sighted, then captured photographically, a Red-Bellied Woodpecker. As he posted, this was no big deal to him, as it is so commonly seen in Virginia. Then, "I realized that eBird flagged it as rare. So, I had to turn around and get a photo. It took me awhile to locate her, and I finally succeeded." An eBird list person subsequently e-mailed Joe to say that there had only been about a dozen such sightings in the state of Wyoming.

Right :
Wyoming
Woodpecker
....Photo
Joe Cooney
Below:

.....Photos
Linda
Hamilton



Turkey taking advantage of a warm car engine and a convenient railing perch.

Application for Membership in NNAS - Chapter Code X50, 7XCH

☐ Local Chapter Only Membership - \$15.00 annually, renewable in June; includes chapter on-line newsletter.
Make Checks payable to NNAS.

☐ National & Local Membership - \$20.00 introductory (\$35.00 after), is above, plus glossy National Audubon Magazine.
Make checks payable to "National Audubon Society"

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City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Mail to P.O. Box 991, Kilmarnock, Virginia 22482



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