



# 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](http://www.northernneckaudubon.org)

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Photo: Harriette Fishburne

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## Upcoming Programs

### Lancaster County Library

3:15 Monday, November 6th

Chapter Meeting

Kyle Langford, Speaker

3:15 Monday, December 4<sup>th</sup>

Chapter Christmas Party

What's Your "Spark Bird"?

### Bird Walks

Monday, November 13, 9:00 AM

Kendall Farm Essex County

Saturday, November 25, 9:00 AM

Windmill Point

Lancaster County

Monday, December 11, 9:00AM

Menokin

Tuesday, December 19

Christmas Bird Count

### Special Event

NNAS Entry at Tablescapes

December 13 & 14

## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Here we go, embarking on a new adventure! Why do I say “we”? Because this new adventure involves all of us in our local chapter of the Audubon Society. Why do I say “new”? Well, I’ve been voted in as the new chapter president. Honestly, I never thought I would end up being president of ANYthing. I’ve never really considered myself much of a leader; but I decided to accept the challenge, step out of my comfort zone and try something new. The officers and board members are knowledgeable and helpful. Some have already spent a degree of time on the board or in the chapter and are therefore a little savvier as to the nuts and bolts of meetings, minutes and agendas. I’m confident they will make up for those skills I don’t have.

A bit of an autobiography—I have always loved birds. In fact, the first thing that I wanted to be when “I grew up” was an ornithologist. Yes, I even used that word when I was about six and possibly a bit precocious. I learned the cardinal, blue jay and mockingbird and heard the call of the wood thrush; but my spark bird is the osprey.

In the early 70’s, for a special treat, my grandfather took us to see the local osprey nest, (just one, somewhere near Gulf Shores, Alabama), hoping that the resident osprey would be there. We were all disappointed, as it wasn’t in, or near, the nest. At some point we did see the osprey, and I fell in love. To this day, I still have the picture I took of that nest. Now, I relish the sound of the first osprey in early March and love watching them nest on Nomini Creek behind our home. Two have survived from this summer and have migrated, and I got to watch the whole thing!

I never could have believed, way back when at the time of the first osprey encounter, that such a thing could happen.



*Melissa at Sapsucker Woods*

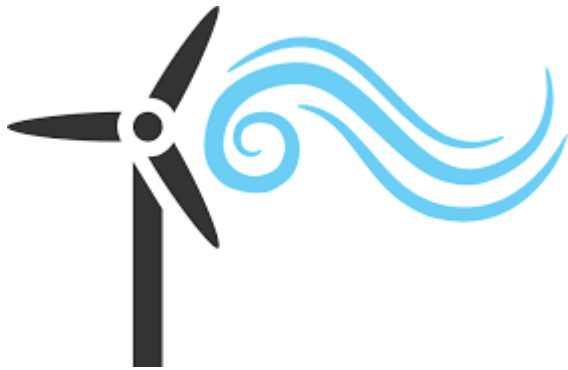
For many years while I went to college, got married, worked my career, birds were not as important. When robins began building nests in our shrubs in Maryland, red-tailed hawks perched on the power poles, blue jays nested in the red maple, the ember rekindled. I discovered the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and eBird, which showed me how much there was to learn.

When I retired and moved down to Mt.Holly, I found myself fairly close to heaven: ospreys, waterbirds, warblers, etc. I didn’t even know what I didn’t know, if that makes sense. I found the NNAS and joined up but was only sporadically active, as it is a little far to get to Kilmarnock from Westmoreland County. I’ve enjoyed getting to know other people who actually share my enthusiasm for birds, and I look forward to learning from each and every one.

So, here we go! As the new “gal-in-charge,” I extend an invitation to old members, new members and “maybe” members, to join us. Step out and get involved. It’s worth it, and we need you.

Melissa Gross, President

## WINDPOWER AT OUR FINGERTIPS



*Are you a conservationist?*

There is a very simple, easy way to reduce your carbon footprint! A company called "ARCADIA POWER," to which the Better Business Bureau gives its highest rating of A+, is offering windpower support to anyone in Virginia. If you sign up, (an act which requires only the lifting of a finger to click your computer keyboard!), nothing about your power service changes. You keep all your current equipment and repair services as provided by your current energy company, be that Dominion or a co-op.

You MAY sign up for the "Free Plan," which will supply half your power usage to support wind farms and costs no more than you currently pay. However, you may also opt for 100% wind energy credits for only 1.5 cents more per kilowatt/hour.

Detailed information is available at the web-site: [www.arcadiapower.com](http://www.arcadiapower.com).

Katharina Bergdoll  
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## BIRDS IN WIRDS

Many years ago, so many that we were slotting flimsy plastic tape cassettes into our car radios, I listened to the author Bernd Heinrich reading his *Ravens in Winter*. There was for me no inkling that Mr. Heinrich would become, as he has, such a luminary in the pantheon of naturalist writers. What was immediately evident was that he could transform pedestrian scientific data into hysterically funny anecdotes. He provoked a guffaw-on-the-interstate response that prompted me to ferret out more of his work.

The seminal among these was probably *One Man's Owl*, the documenting of life with adopted "Bubo." Mr. Heinrich kept corvid companions as well and has become a corvid authority with his "adventures with wolf-birds," *The Mind of the Raven*. His naturalist interests stretch beyond the avian. He has published *The Trees in My Forest* and *Bumblebee Economics*, in which his insights are enhanced by his own lovely drawings.

Crucibles of creativity can be surprising. Bernd Heinrich grew to adulthood in the ravaged landscape of post-war Germany. His sole escape, and one he was fortunate to have, was the still undamaged woodland near his family farm. Relocation into America's vast Maine forests allowed the scientist/artist to flourish. Days of perching silently in a chilly pine or of walking woodland trails became punctuated, as well, by spectacular long-distance runs.

Mr. Heinrich, now professor *emeritus* of the University of Vermont, has recently published a compendium of individual bird stories, *One Wild Bird at a Time*.

Letha Harris

## BIRDING ELSEWHERE

One Day I Gotta Wild Hair....or feather, or whatever.

I had been wanting to do this for years. Now that I'm retired, I can. Anytime I want, right? Welllll, not necessarily. I have to fight with myself, as I am inherently lazy. I really need to start my mornings with a prayer, coffee and nature. So, getting up uber early so I can get on the road to make a hawk watch is a little...out of my comfort zone.

That wild hair really tickled around September 20<sup>th</sup>. I knew that the raptor migration was in full swing. I checked the hawk watch reports ([hawkcount.org](http://hawkcount.org)) looking at the amazing numbers of broad-winged hawks described in "kettles of hundreds at Rockfish Gap. I could resist no longer! I took the plunge.

The site is in Afton, close to Waynesboro on the Blue Ridge Parkway at I-64. I've been by it many times, although never really knowing exactly where it was. I left the house later than I had wanted to (around 9:00 a.m.); but it was a gorgeous day, and I was ready to enjoy the two-and-a-half hour drive. I got past the accidents on I-64 at Charlottesville, started up the mountain and got really close to the exit. I thought to myself, "Is it really that cruddy - looking hotel up there where they gather to watch? Naaah, it's not even open." Why, yes. Yes it IS that scary-looking rusty water tower, and Addams Family-like hotel waaaayyyy up on the hill. And it IS open. But the group of "watchers" is outside. Of course. Thankfully.

I think I arrived somewhere around 11:30. I was seriously excited. Sunny, clear, breezy..., really breezy... up there, and actually chilly. Glad I had my safety orange sweatshirt to keep warm, especially around people I don't know. It screamed: YES, I'M HERE, I'M THE NEWBY!

Not really, of course. The fifteen or so people there didn't even know I had arrived. I pretty much just broke out my binoculars, found a space not blocking someone and, well, .....watched. Then I heard this: "OK, we gotta broad-wing over the turtle's head!" Me thinking, "whut?" "I see a sharpie over the first t.p.!" Me again, "huh?" OK, I'll explain.

There was a lot to see down in the gap and the valley from the top of the mountain. So, a lot of towers, buildings, antennas, and geographic attributes had been named and their distances written down. This was to help you describe 'where' you were looking when you saw something important. I had seen the sign when I walked up but hadn't read it. I was way too excited to see that kettle of 300 broad-winged hawks.



It was pretty easy to learn the "teepees," the "turtle" and its "head," but it was not easy learning how to speak this new language of describing where you saw what you saw. And how in the name of Murgatroyd did Vic (Laubach) know that the raptor he was seeing that far away was a broad-wing vs. a red-shouldered?

This guy was incredible. I can tell when I see a 'tippy' turkey vulture, and a black vulture when it snappily flaps about five times and then glides. But when they're just soaring in circles rising with a column of lift?

Wow!



## Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch, continued:



Photos: Melissa Gross

Staring at the far away sky with a pair of binoculars for 4-5 hours is surprisingly tiring. I had seen one medium-sized kettle of hawks when I had arrived, but the number of sightings dwindled down. There were some vultures to watch, but I had a long drive home. The light had gotten hazy, the sun had gotten hot, and the breeze had died down. I decided to scoot.

All in all, I had a great time. I was able to pick out a merlin once, and I think I correctly ID'ed a sharpie. But I had missed the ginormous kettle of hawks by about an hour.

When it comes to hawkwatching, it DOES pay to get up and get going early.

I hope our chapter can take a field trip next year to Rockfish Gap or Kiptopeke and become awestruck by a huge kettle of broad-wing hawks.

Melissa Gross

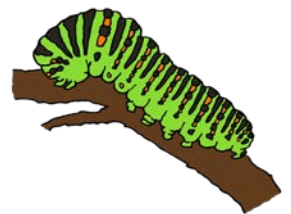
## TABLESCAPES ENTRY

This year marks the third time that our chapter will be represented with a tablescapes entry to the Christmas on Cockrell's Creek fundraiser. The event benefits the Reedville Fishermen's Museum and showcases entries from various non-profit organizations from the Northern Neck. Our display, "The Pollinators' Party," will reflect particularly Audubon's concern for nature by featuring these crucial elements in our environment. There will be seating for bees, bats, butterflies and hummingbirds!

All the tablescapes will be on view at Festival Halle on the Main Street in downtown Reedville on Saturday, December 9<sup>th</sup>, from 10:00 AM to 5:00 PM and on Sunday, December 10<sup>th</sup>, from 11:00 AM to 4:00 PM.

As members of a contributing and non-profit organization, we are invited as well to join the introductory cocktail reception on the preceding Friday evening, December 8<sup>th</sup>.

Further information is available from Carol Cole at [ccole@kaballero.com](mailto:ccole@kaballero.com) or from Letha Harris at [waterthrush@verizon.net](mailto:waterthrush@verizon.net).



## HOUSE SPARROWS

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has published its assessment of the 2016-2017 winter bird sightings from its Project FeederWatch. One article addresses the puzzle facing scientists regarding the diminishing of the House Sparrow population. Researcher Liam Berigan has used 16 years of FeederWatch data to reach several conclusions. The sparrows' numbers are, in fact, remaining stable in rural areas, while a rather precipitous crash is occurring in urban or suburban sites.

A graph published with the article and drawn from the southeast U.S. shows two converging lines: the downslope of House Sparrows and the comparable uptick of Cooper's Hawks. It would seem obvious to assume that a virtual population explosion of these small accipiters must account for sparrow depletion. As in the case of many over-simplifications, this logic is not borne out by fact. Those Cooper's and Sharp-Shinned Hawks hunting in agricultural habitat have not made a meaningful dent in the numbers of neighboring House Sparrows. The ornithologists wonder whether such an effect might occur in another season; but it is not present in the Southeast's rural winters.

This conundrum has left the scientists considering that a shortage of food may be causing urban sparrow decline.

Whatever the problem's source, Cornell can use all data from Project FeederWatch to help find a solution and reminds birders, when they enumerate their species, not to ignore sightings of the once-common House Sparrow.

## NOT TO BE MISSED

Kyle Langford will speak at the regular membership meeting at 3:15, Monday, November 6<sup>th</sup>, at the Lancaster Community Library. He will present and discuss current birding apps for smart phones, tablets, desktops and the NNAS website, [northernneckaudubon.org](http://northernneckaudubon.org). Kyle serves as an NNAS director through 2020 and administers the chapter's website as its webmaster.

After 37 years working in information technology (IT), especially databases, at the University of Maryland, Kyle retired/escaped to nature in the Northern Neck. His primary residence remains Howard County, Maryland; but three years ago Kyle and his wife acquired a get-away home in Heathsville. Their house is nestled in the woods on Bush Mill Stream, set on a ridge next to a ravine. Since they are diagonally across from Bush Mill Stream Natural Area Preserve, the Langfords feel as though they live in a park. You can see their dock from the end of the Deep Landing Trail.

Kyle is an avid photographer, cook, crabber and history buff. To these interests he has added the thrill of finding and learning about the elusive flora and fauna in our parks, preserves and yards, and he is now "hooked" on nature.

Although he has retired from IT, he still loves to learn ways to apply old and new IT skills in his life. In this specific case, he will explain how IT can improve conservation, access and understanding of the Northern Neck's natural areas.

## BIRD LORE

We can look at a bird through binoculars or a spotting scope, see it limned on a museum wall, study it as delineated in finest black and white in a scientific guide...or, to cast the bird in a more symbolic light, we can see its totemic character.

That's what is done in Tim Andrews' very UNorthodox, and UNornithological book, Animal Wise. Among the avian species discussed therein are several that appeared in Melissa Gross' hawk watch experience. The sharp-shinned hawk was



venerated by the Pueblo, who credited it with providing them with a "throwing stick," that let them hunt small prey. The stick's shape was modelled on the curved wing of these hawks. Although relatively small, sharpies were seen by the Pueblo as swift and tireless and thus were thought to inspire their young people.

Who assigned the following attributes to the black vulture is not specified, but the Egyptians certainly partook of these ideas. "Black vultures are not nesting people. They do not indulge their young but render them strong and self-sufficient." The black vulture means to encourage us to soar, to free-wheel, to relax with the rhythm of life.

....And of the merlin, there are all the expected magical connotations attached to the wizard of Arthurian legend. Shape-shifting and frank deceit seem uppermost. It does not seem that emulating the merlin is a laudatory behavior....certainly not if one is a hapless songbird plucked from flight by this wily falcon.

So, imagination, as well as observation, can take wing in the world of birding.

Letha Harris

## IMAGES OF THE SEASON



Here are yellow-rumped warblers taking an Indian Summer plunge. In past decades we've often known these as "myrtle warblers"; but the photographer, Paul Servis, refers to the Audubon website to elucidate the nomenclature. It was in the 1970's that two warbler species were merged to be renamed "Yellow-Rumped Warbler." Recent DNA testing may, however, see the classification redivided.



Rose-Breasted Grosbeak Photo:Paul Servis