



Northern Neck Audubon News

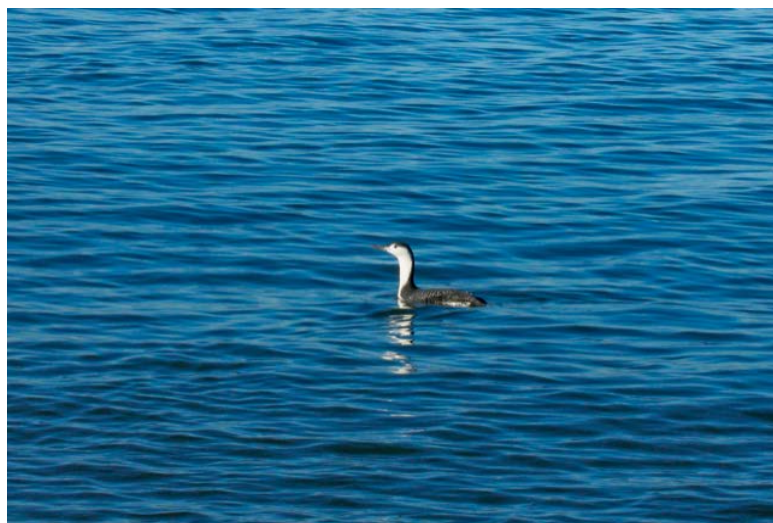
The Northern Neck of Virginia Chapter of the National Audubon Society

P.O. Box 991, Kilmarnock, Virginia 22482

www.northernneckaudubon.org

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Red-Throated Loon at Bethel Beach
Photo.....Alice Stieve

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UPCOMING

MEETINGS

Chapter Meetings Upstairs
Lancaster Community Library
(for GPS: 16 Town Centre Drive, Kilmarnock)

Monday, March 5th
3:15 PM Program: William Young
"99 Ways to be Fascinated by Birds"
See Page 3 for Details

Monday, April 2nd
3:15 PM Program: Bob Schamerhorn
Wildlife Photographer
"Our Wonderful Wood Warblers"

BIRD WALKS

All walks start at 9:00 am. EXCEPT Dameron Marsh, 1:00 pm.
(Because of morning glare on the Bay)

Monday, March 12 Wilna Tract, Rappahannock River NWR
(for GPS: 336 Wilna Rd., Warsaw, Va.)
Saturday, March 24 Hickory Hollow (Lancaster County)

Monday 9 April - Dameron Marsh (Northumberland County)
Saturday 28 April - Kendale Farm (Essex County)

Monday 14 May Chilton Woods SF (Lancaster County)
Saturday 26 May (MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND) Kilmarnock
City Park and Library (Lancaster County)

Monday 11 June - Reedville (Northumberland County)
Saturday 23 June - Westmoreland Berry Farm/Voorhees
Preserve (Westmoreland County)

LEISURELY THOUGHTS: THE BOX TURTLE

This quiet, slow-moving and beautiful creature has inspired curiosity in me since early childhood, when I would have my father stop the car on our way home from shopping in Richmond, so I could take home one seen crossing the road...to keep a few days before releasing it into a field. This is a very bad practice, being one which dislocates the Turtle from its accustomed home territory, encompassing about the two-mile circuit which each one traverses in a given year. They have often been found, on the same day and in the same location, year after year. This, I fear, is becoming less and less frequent an occurrence as so many are killed on our ever-expanding highways or are destroyed by farm equipment.

They may well live over 100 years, if not destroyed by man or other predators. A female must be at least five years old to breed. Few eggs are laid, and even fewer survive to maturity. The species is in decline in Virginia and, most likely, everywhere else. DCR is developing an action plan for their conservation, but it is almost impossible to imagine what may be done to help. We all know that highways will only be *widened....never, never made narrower!* And, farm equipment gets ever bigger and bigger, as hedgerows are rooted out and fields made larger to accommodate this mega-equipment. Such practices destroy habitat for creatures of all sorts.

I have long thought the Box Turtle to be one of Nature's great philosophers: it moves very deliberately, and the very intelligent-looking eyes are ever searching. The many I have known over most of my life have, also, exhibited very varied personalities. Some, being very shy, quickly pull in to "close the door" behind them when picked up, while others remain unperturbed by such a startling act. Still others are very active, even attempting to nip the hand which holds them by bending their heads over the back.

I can't help but shed a tear every time I witness one crushed on the road; so, at every opportunity, I always stop to place a road-crossing turtle a safe distance off to the side to which it was travelling. In the past year I have had two candidates for such moving seemingly *disappear*: this when I had cars behind me and had to turn around to reach the turtle in question. I have discovered, getting out of my car to move one from Rte. 3



near Stratford Hall while trying to get the weekend traffic of SUVs to slow down while I stood watching the turtle frozen in the middle of a lane, that the creature was passed over by a speeding car, picked up and tumbled across the road! At a gap in the traffic, I ran out, moved the poor animal to safety, and only hoped it could continue its journey.

Such is the turbulence created by large vehicles moving very fast. Please, slow down and think of the humble Box Turtle, and that it has a valued life, too.



Photos and Article by Katharina Bergdoll

BIRDING BY EAR

Spring! Backyard birders: Challenge yourselves!

It is Spring, and the birds are busy belting out their chirps, chips, calls and compelling songs, as they fill the air with their mating chorus...a veritable orchestra of instruments and confusing sounds.

Do you hear it? More pertinently, do you LISTEN to it? Or, as I used to do, are you blocking out bird sounds because you are frustrated by not being able to tell one song from the next? Have you subscribed to the myth that you need a special talent in order to learn how to bird by ear; or, do you think you need to be able to read sheet music or have played in a band in order to succeed? Or, do you think that for you, it is just too difficult?

Let me assure you that none of that is true. What are true and necessary are a willingness to spend some time listening, the ability to tolerate some frustration, and lots of time spent reviewing each song, as you learn its identity, one melody at a time.

If you can name a handful of birds (usually those at your backyard feeder) but shy away from learning their songs, this will be a challenge for you.

Start slow (one or two at a time), start simple (with a bird you know), start smart (take it easy, Sweetie, Rome wasn't built in a day!).

Go out for a few minutes each day and listen for the songs of the one or two birds you have chosen. Possibly, all you will hear is a total confusion of sound. Even worse, what you thought were several birds singing might have been just one solitary mockingbird teasing you with his mimicry of various birds! If you can see him singing, usually high atop a tree or pole, just watch and listen.

What are you thinking as you watch and listen to a bird singing? Often this is the key to remembering a bird song. What does it remind you of? Does it create a picture in your mind? Does it go up or down? Try to create a "hook" so that you will recognize it next time you hear it.

Once you have picked one or two birds and listened to their sounds, either on an app or at www.allaboutbirds.org, your lesson for the day is finished. Continue to review daily until you begin to recognize the song. Remember to listen when you're outdoors. Remember to analyze the song. Remember your "hook."

How to use Cornell's All About Birds? Pull up the web address on your computer and bookmark as a "favorite." At the search prompt, enter a bird name and press "GO." When the page opens, you will see several pictures, including the one you want; and directly beneath the picture, you will see the sound icon. Click this to hear the song, then click on the picture of your bird so that you can explore its dedicated page. Here you can see photos, hear several song recordings and read all about the species' behavior and life cycle. There is even a map that shows where the bird lives in each season. Open and pull down menus to familiarize yourself with the wealth of information that is literally at your fingertips.

One last tip is to draw your attention to the quarrelsome, noisy House Sparrows that dominate any large parking lot. I hope you will never hear them in your backyard, because they take over the nesting sites of native species, even killing birds. Nonetheless, the box store parking lot is a great place to hear their chatter and to study what a sparrow looks like: size, beak, etc. The male House Sparrow is actually a handsome little beast, while the female is a demure, pretty, but drab little bird. It is this very drabness that renders it so difficult to differentiate one sparrow species from another.

Special thanks to Teta Kaine, who gave me pointers on how to get started with birding by ear, and to Edie Bradbury, who has patiently told me, over and over again, the names of the birds we hear.

by Felicity Rask

WHO'S SINGING WHAT?



February 5th was a spectacularly bright, sunny day on the Northern Neck, but the wind was blowing with gusts up to 40 miles/hour, and it was so very cold as our chapter members and guests gathered at the Lancaster Community Library to hear Jeff Wright's presentation: "Learning How to Identify Bird Voices." The emphasis was on visualizing sounds using computers, field guides and apps.

Over thirty people gathered to hear his energetic and humorous presentation on birding by ear.

His suggestions for identifying bird songs were to bird with a friend, bird in the winter, and use phonetics to recreate what you hear.

He shared with us the fact that there are over 5,000 species of Passeriformes world-wide, so it would be helpful to narrow down your expectations considerably, especially if you are a beginning birder. He suggested creating a certified Wildlife Federation Habitat on your property and checking, as well, the Audubon-at-Home website for information on attracting more birds. He then recommended setting as a goal a certain number of bird songs that you want to learn.

Jeff then demonstrated Bird Song Hero on the Cornell website. This method uses spectrograms to help you visualize specific bird songs. It is structured like a game, with multiple levels of difficulty, each level presenting several songs.

As he led us through the steps for playing the game, he spiced up the program by giving prizes to the first person correctly to identify a bird song (we found out that we are a pretty competitive bunch.)

This was a very fun and interactive program, giving us lots of information on the many media resources available to help with identifying birds and their songs. Jeff has posted all these on our website and encouraged us to check them out.

Last of all, he recommended that you always go birding accompanied by one of our outstanding chapter birders: Leslie Fellows, Melissa Gross, the Colstocks and Teta Kaine.

Of course, I also recommend that Jeff Wright be included in that list of experts!

Thank you, Jeff, for an enjoyable and informative program.

by Nancy Garvey



No bird song here!

Photos by Paul Servis

BIRDING ELSEWHERE

Although we speak the same “English” language, we Americans have tweaked the Brit vocabulary...have changed “collect” to “pick-up,” “tap” to “faucet,” “holiday” to “vacation,” and notoriously “bathroom” to “loo.” Birding terms have not escaped our tinkering. The English gaze into a “garden,” rather than a “yard,” to contemplate the “bird table,” not the “feeder.” Like the words, the species have been modified while remaining somewhat recognizable.

Somewhere in the not too remote past, perhaps just a dozen millennia ago and between ice ages, familiar passeriform species got trapped on one or the other side of the Atlantic, developing North American and European strains. Thus when I spent a few expectedly dank February mornings birdwatching from our daughter’s London window, I saw birds that were a bit familiar, but not identical to our local individuals.

There were the touch-and-go inflights of the Great Tit and Blue Tit, the same behavior that characterizes our similar Carolina Chickadee and Titmouse. The little Blue Tit silhouette is a pert and crested one, like that of his American cousin. The chubbier Great Tit wears a chickadee-esque black cap and bib.

Into this gentle brotherhood there were visits from “The Bold and the Beautiful,” the corvid cognates of our raucous jays. Flying in as a mob of iridescence would come several glorious teal and onyx magpies. In typical corvid fashion, they chattered intelligently, if not intelligibly, sporting the confidence born of brain and size. Even heavier, but unaggressive, the ever-present collared dove waddled in its own muted colors and equally softened coos. This huge pigeon feeds normally along the ground, but did occasionally, fluttering comically, try an abortive peck at the seed tube.

One little avian was especially folksy, willing to fly onto whatever British botanical offered a perch and to stay close by, when we were outside on the patio. This was “Robin Redbreast” of nursery rhyme fame, he who leant his name erroneously to our worm-eating, lawn-loving, big American thrush. His habits of caroling joyously all year long, of friendly persona, and of sprightly movement are all those of our Carolina Wren. This robin’s breast is of a cherrier red and more emphatically bright than is the rusty shade that marks our American Robin.

Another year-round singer, the European Blackbird, he of the brightest tangerine bill and the glossiest ebony plumage, sings like Shelley’s Skylark, sending forth music of “unpremeditated joy.” From one street to the next, his melodies change...but all are heartstoppingly beautiful.



Tawny Owl and Blue Tit



Great Tit

Twilight’s encounters, however, were the most exciting. It was just as the recalcitrant low sun, wintery drowsy in these northern latitudes, left the scene at around 4:00 in the afternoon, that the resident Tawny Owls took up their duet. The male’s voice, close to a traditional owl hoot, differs entirely from the female’s; and they maintain a colloquy, each speaking from an opposite side of the “garden,” from sunset well into deep night. His hoots are high-pitched, and we were able to match them to about a C or D above middle C, there being a fortuitously placed piano just inside the patio doors. His mate, on the other hand, has not been graced with either his counter-tenor skills, nor those expected of a maidenly soprano. She scrapes and screeches a two-syllable note of interminate frequency, the “keewik” phonetically described in bird guides.

The pair, or another such, has been resident there for many years, and one or the other owl can occasionally be seen as a large, silent, cut-out against the darkling sky as it shifts position.

by Letha Harris

BLUEBIRDS OF HAPPINESS!

The bluebird season is fast approaching. Yes, it is still cold out, with no spring blooms or new leaves; but the hormones are starting to rise for the bluebirds. In February and March, the male bluebird searches for a suitable nesting box. When he finds a site that impresses him, he will perch on or near that box, singing and wing-waving to attract a female to be his mate. A female may appear and check out the box. If she likes the kitchen counters and the bathroom tile, then she may decide to become a mate to the male. Just kidding, but some females do appear to be very picky.

So, now is the time to check out your nesting box to make sure it is suitable for the coming season. It may be necessary to brush out some of last year's dust, or to add a bead of caulk to keep out the rain. Is the entrance hole still facing away from the afternoon sun?

Are the guards still in place? The torpedo or cone guard is good for keeping critters, principally squirrels, raccoons and possums, from getting to the box. This type of guard does not necessarily block snakes. Some black "racer" snakes are long enough to "bridge" the guard. I have lost two sets of fledglings to black racers, despite the presence of a guard. This year I am going to try bird netting around the cone guard as an additional protection. This netting tends to trap the snakes as they become entangled and cannot get enough of a purchase on that netting to push themselves out of their predicament.

Some nesting box areas also need a Noel guard. This apparatus is named for its inventor, Jim Noel. At one point, on a trail I was monitoring, eggs and fledgling birds started disappearing from their boxes. It turned out that crows had learned that the boxes contained delicacies, and that they could get their heads into the entrance holes. Adding Noel guards to those boxes ended the crow raids. If your box is in a relatively high traffic area that crows might avoid, you may not need the Noel guard.

The bluebird pairs typically start their nesting in April. The female builds the nest while the male perches nearby, watching. Occasionally, however, the male may poke his head into the entrance hole to make sure that his mate is doing everything correctly. Nest-building usually takes several days.

Nest material is always of a homogeneous nature, either all grass or all pine straw. There is never a mix of materials. The nest is not lined with feathers, as is the practice of some species. It is just plain.

The eggs are laid, usually one a day, over a period of several days. Typical egg production will be 3-6, but occasionally surpassing that total. One nesting box at a golf course contained 9 eggs, all of which hatched! That was one box full of babes by fledging time!

Incubation does not start until all the eggs have been laid. That way, all eggs hatch on the same day and all babes fledge at the same time. Very efficient. The female has a "brood-patch" on her breast: a bare spot which allows her to provide the skin-to-egg contact which starts the incubation.

Once incubation has started, it takes about 14 days for the babes to hatch. Both male and female birds will feed the young, and the babes will fledge, leaving the nest, at 16-21 days of age. The range of time taken between hatching and fledging is a function of food supply. If there are plenty of insects available for feeding, then fledging occurs at the early age of the spectrum.

As soon as the young have fledged, the old nest materials should be removed. The babes do not return to the nest, and removing the detritus allows the parent pair to start a new brood, after a short rest. Here in our area a pair of bluebirds will normally produce a second brood, and about 5% will go on to raise a third.

Happy blues to you!

by Tom Teeple

OUT OF THE ORDINARY



Connie Purringon notifies me whenever she encounters bird-oriented material, most recently this photo of the astounding "Golden Cardinal."

Posted on www.thenaturalistsnotebook.com, the portrait was taken by Jeremy Black, a professional photographer who has most graciously allowed us to print it. Jeremy captured this anomalous creature in Alabama.

From the expertise of an Auburn University ornithologist, Dr. Geoffrey Hill, he learned that this plumage results from a spontaneous mutation, one that disturbs the normal metabolic process that produces the cardinal's signature red pigment and yielding this golden yellow. Exceedingly rare, this beautiful coloration is seen on average only once yearly in the entire United States. Letha Harris

Brown Nuthatch Photo by Joseph Cooney



OUR MARCH MEETING

The Northern Neck Audubon Society will hold its next meeting on Monday, March 5th, at the Lancaster Community Library. Please join us for refreshments and socializing at 3:15, to be followed first by our business meeting and then by a program titled: "99 Reasons to be Fascinated by Birds." The speaker will be Arlington-based writer, William Young.

Mr. Young has traveled to all seven continents to study birds and natural history. His book, *The Fascination of Birds: From the Albatross to the Yellowthroat* (Dover, 2014) explores the connections between birds and a broad range of subjects. He



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shows the avian domain linking into ecology, literature, music, history, politics, economics, religion, geography, physics, chemistry, linguistics, the visual and performing arts, sports and comedy.

It is the mission of this book to help beginners better understand not only the birds that they see but also the bird references they encounter in all those subject areas. Experienced birders can also benefit from noticing these intersections between the ornithological and non-ornithological worlds.

Mr. Young also makes bird and natural history videos. His YouTube channel has had more than 160,000 views. His latest venture is the production of a website, MPNature.com, designed to showcase the wildlife to be found in Monticello Park, Alexandria.

Produced in partnership with Ashley Bradford, the site contains more than 120 bird summaries, daily checklists, natural history essays, natural history resource lists, and many other items of interest.

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

- ☐ Local Chapter Only Membership - \$15.00 annually, renewable in June; includes chapter on-line newsletter.
- ☐ National & Local Membership - \$20.00 introductory (\$35.00 after), is above, plus glossy National Audubon Magazine.
 Make checks payable to "National Audubon Society".

Name _____ Phone _____ - _____

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Northern Neck Audubon Society Resources

Officers		Committee Chairs		Media
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