

A Brief History of the Augusta Bird Club
by Mary Vermeulen, Ph.D.

The systematic study of birds in Augusta County did not start with John Mehner or even YuLee Larner. Prior to the arrival of Dr. John Mehner, biology professor at Mary Baldwin College (MBC), who taught from 1963 to 1986, the study of birds in Augusta County was sporadic. Several species of birds were referenced by a field worker in a personal letter (1919) based on work done prior to and after 1900. The *Birds of Virginia* published by Harold H. Bailey in 1913 discussed the distribution of birds in general terms and included only species that were known to breed in Virginia. In 1919 William Alphonso Murrill published *The Natural History of Staunton, Virginia* which was based on his observations of the birds, insects, plants, and mammals located with a three-mile radius of the Wesleyan Female Institute in Staunton where he taught from the fall of 1893 to the summer of 1897. The Virginia Society of Ornithology (VSO) was organized in December, 1929, and launched the VSO journal, *The Raven*. A field worker for the Biological Survey (later the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service) collected the Dark-eyed Junco, Common Yellowthroat, and Eastern Towhee from Elliott Knob and the Song Sparrow from Staunton in 1934. A curator at the Smithsonian Institution recorded a Bachman's Warbler in 1937 and a Swallow-tailed Kite in 1946. Dr. Lillian Thomson, a biologist at Mary Baldwin College (1937-1963), held a bird-banding license and began a comprehensive collection of bird skins in the Dept. of Biology. So who began the systematic recording of bird activity and when? It was Dr. James S. Sprunt, a pastor at Bethel Presbyterian Church (1957-1968) who was the first person to keep systematic avian data in this area during those years. Dr. Sprunt and his brother, Dr. Alexander Sprunt Jr., a well-known ornithologist, both began birding as teenagers.

It was Dr. John Mehner, however, who established a group of dedicated birders in Augusta County. Within three years of his arrival at MBC, Dr. Mehner had initiated a course in ornithology and founded the Augusta Bird Club (ABC) in 1966 with thirty charter members. He expanded the collection of bird specimens begun by Dr. Thomson and eventually, the collection numbered 750 by 1987, the year after Dr. Mehner's retirement. Two of the ABC charter members, YuLee Larner and Isabel Obenschain, audited Dr. Mehner's course in ornithology in 1968 and later joined Dr. Mehner's "traveling ornithology class" in 1973 along with Dorothy Mitchell, a bird bander from Newport News, VA, who is now a member of the ABC. This class was a twelve-week field trip to the upper Midwest and included a stop in Michigan to see the Kirtland Warbler, an endangered species.

In the forward to the first edition of *The Birds of Augusta County*, published in 1988 and edited by YuLee Larner and John Mehner, Myriam Moore marveled at the effectiveness and dedication of the young club. She wrote in the foreword: "Since its early beginnings, the Augusta Bird Club has been outstanding among the local chapters of the Virginia Society of Ornithology (VSO), which now number 27 across the state. Augusta Bird Club

is especially appreciated for the dedication of its members to its cause: to promote the systematic study of the birdlife of Virginia and thus stimulate interest in birds and their well-being among all citizens of the Commonwealth.” Myriam Moore attributed the active involvement of the ABC members to the inspiration and tutelage of Dr. Mehner.

A number of bird monitoring activities began for the ABC in the mid-nineteen sixties. In 1966 the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service began the Breeding Bird Survey. The Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) is a roadside survey designed to monitor population trends of land birds. One 24.5-mile route called the Churchville 004 was established in Augusta County. Dr. Mehner and YuLee Lerner “ran the route” for two years; YuLee Lerner and Isabel Obenschain for twenty-six years; and YuLee Lerner and Allen Lerner for four years. Currently Allen Lerner runs the route alone. Censuses have been conducted on this route every year with the exception of 1968 and 1969. For information on this long-term study and other bird monitoring studies, go to the United State Geological Survey site: <http://www.pwrc.usgs.gov/>

The first Christmas Bird Counts in Augusta County were held in 1966 and continue to be sponsored by the Augusta Bird Club to the present time. Two are held during the Christmas season. Currently, one count is chaired by Dr. John Spahr and includes Staunton and the western section of Augusta County; and the second count is chaired by Crista Cabe and includes Waynesboro and the eastern section of Augusta County including a small section of Nelson County. The areas are circles with a diameter of fifteen miles under guidelines set by the National Audubon Society. The first Christmas Bird Count (CBC) was initiated by the National Audubon Society and occurred on December 25, 1900. This birding activity was designed primarily for birding fun and recreation, but the CBC does provide valuable information on the status and population trends of selected species. For the story of how this enjoyable winter birding event began go to: <http://www.audubon.org/bird/cbc>.

In 1972, bluebird trails were established throughout Augusta County. The nesting habits of bluebirds were observed and monitored by members and friends of the Augusta Bird Club. The early trails were monitored by ABC members John Kiser, YuLee Lerner, Isabel Obenschain, and Ruth Snyder. John Kiser and Si Lerner made most of the boxes, a labor of love currently done by Pete Colby. John Kiser kept the records but no one knows where those records are today. By 1975, ABC members and friends were monitoring 524 boxes. In 1987, 97 ABC members and friends monitored at least 542 boxes and 1104 bluebirds fledged. The estimated total of fledged bluebirds from 1972 to 1987 exceeded 10,000 and by 1998, the total estimated since 1972 exceeded 16,000. Editor YuLee Lerner did not include any bluebird fledging estimates in the 2008 edition of the *Birds of Augusta County* because many people have stopped monitoring the boxes and no one is keeping records. The issue of the loss of bluebird population is not as pressing as it was in the 70s when people noticed a drastic drop in the numbers of bluebirds and attributed it to the loss of nesting habitat. Bluebirds have made a come back.

Expertise in the location and identification of birds and enthusiasm for field work developed rapidly. Bird club members were active in field work almost on a daily basis and Isabel Obenschain and YuLee Larner soon began contributing field notes to *The Raven*. In 1971 Ruth Snyder began the practice of submitting bird notes to the National Audubon Society's journal, *American Birds*. Significant local records were sent to the Appalachian regional editor for *American Birds* (now *Field Notes*). YuLee Larner, as Records Chair, currently sends records to the journal, *Field Notes*. The first local records were primarily the sightings of Ruth Snyder, Mozelle Henkel and Isabel Obenschain. The number of observers and fieldwork increased significantly in the 1970s and the 1980s. ABC members who contributed up to twenty years of birding records to the first edition of *The Birds of Augusta County* were Bradford Cabe, James Gum, Mozelle Henkle, YuLee Larner, Brooke Meanley, John Mehner, Anne Moss, Fields Moss, Isabel Obenschain, Stephen Rottenborn, Julie Russell, Brian Scruby, Ruth Snyder, James Sprunt, and Leonard Teuber. Leonard Teuber, while living in Highland County, developed a set of field notes that has comprised the bulk of the Bath-Highland County Bird Club early birding records. Stephen Rottenborn and Brian Scruby began their birding careers while in high school. Julie Russell, while a student at MBC, organized the records of the ornithology classes who regularly traveled the roads of Augusta County.

A small group of birding friends started to informally gather at various spots including Rockfish Gap to watch hawks in migration in 1976 and, of course, to watch any other avian creature that choose to fly in front of their telescopes and binoculars. We recognize those folks, John and Mozelle Henkle, YuLee Larner, and Isabel Obenschain among others for their enthusiasm and expertise in beginning the Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch. Brenda Tekin, currently the chair of the hawkwatch, told a charming story of how it all began with those "raptorians" as they called themselves at the 25th anniversary gathering in 2001 for the hawkwatch. It was Myriam Moore, an active member of the Hawk Migration Association of North America (HMANA), who convinced these folks to settle on one site, Rockfish Gap, for their observations. YuLee Larner became the first formal chair, followed by John Irvine, Jr., and now, Brenda Tekin. The Augusta Bird Club, the Monticello Bird Club, and the Rockingham Bird Club sponsor this activity held from mid-August through mid-November, which has been a great source of records for HMANA.

All this expertise and birding activity attracted the attention of the VSO, and ABC members were asked to be board members, committee members, and officers. Mozelle Henkel, YuLee Larner, Dr. John Mehner, Isabel Obenschain, Ruth Snyder, Julie Russell, and Leonard Teuber served the state organization in various capacities in the early years. In a stroke of collective genius after a discussion of the sad affairs of the state birding records, the VSO board asked outgoing board member, YuLee Larner, to be the editor of *Virginia's Birdlife, An Annotated Checklist* and have it published in time for the VSO's 50th anniversary in 1979. It was considered an almost impossible job to be the chief

compiler of a huge amount of scattered records. As Myriam Moore states, YuLee Larner's success in completing this task "has become legendary in the annals of the VSO." YuLee Larner followed that achievement up by becoming President of the VSO from 1982 to 1984.

A number of ABC members did individual projects and field studies during the 70s and 80s. James Gunn set a goal of finding nests of breeding birds for the summers of 1972 and 1973. He added to the records of Augusta County by finding the nests of 46 species. For her senior research project at Mary Baldwin College, Julie Russell studied the breeding biology of the American Goldfinch during the summer of 1972. While he was a senior at Waynesboro High School, Brian Scruby was the first person to organize Augusta County avian records and completed a paper on *The Birds of Augusta County, Virginia* in 1974. Brooke Meanley did field studies on the nesting behavior of the American Crow and the Fish Crow. For several years after he moved to Augusta County, Leonard Teuber, an intrepid birder, kept detailed records of birds seen on his daily excursions throughout the county. In 1980 as chair of the ABC Records Committee, YuLee Larner established a permanent file of Augusta County bird records. She also mentored a young Stephen Rottenborn who added extensive information to the county records, arrival and departure dates, peak counts, and nesting data, beginning in 1985.

Another activity, the development of bird checklists for various locations in Augusta County, began in the early 1970s. YuLee Larner and Isabel Obenschain went to Natural Chimneys once a month for a year to count species seen there and gave the results to the manager to help visiting birders. YuLee Larner, Isabel Obenschain, and Leonard Teuber did a checklist for Grand Caverns and a checklist for Montgomery Hall Park. More recently in 2004, YuLee Larner and Mary Vermeulen started a checklist for McCormick's Farm, which has been carried on by Jo King and ABC members attending field trips to McCormick's.

From 1984 to 1989, ABC members "contributed the most significant data of birds in Augusta County to date" according to YuLee Larner through the Virginia Breeding Birds Atlas Project. Larner was a member of the state committee headed by Sue Ridd of the Virginia Game and Inland Fisheries Department (VDGIF) and co-sponsored by the VSO. This project was an effort to map the distribution of breeding birds statewide. ABC members contributed over a thousand records of 131 species in 20 Augusta County Atlas Blocks. It was a great boost for the records of Augusta County. By 1988, the species total for Augusta County numbered 282.

Ten years later, ABC members and friends did another breeding bird count under the direction of YuLee Larner with the goal of obtaining significant breeding record for the county. The Breeding Bird Blitz (BBB) involved over 100 birders who contributed almost 5000 records of 139 species in 120 BBB blocks covering every part of Augusta County.

With the publication of the 1998 edition of *Birds of Augusta County*, Editor YuLee Larner proudly announced that the species count was 292.

The Augusta County Bird club has published three editions of *Birds of Augusta County*, in 1988, 1998, and 2008. The 1988 edition was edited by YuLee Larner and Dr. John Mehner and both the 1998 and 2008 editions were edited by YuLee Larner alone. The ABC's *Birds of Augusta County* is recognized as setting a high standard for recording the birdlife of a county in Virginia. Augusta County is also recognized as "the most actively birded areas of the state" according to Dr. Stephen Rottenborn, co-editor with Edward S. Brinkley of the recent VSO publication, *Virginia's Birdlife: An Annotated Checklist* in 2007. Yes, *that* Stephen Rottenborn, mentored by YuLee Larner, now has his doctorate in ornithology. Dr. Rottenborn credits the field work done by ABC members and the precise and dedicated record keeping by YuLee Larner for this recognition. Larner follows the highest quality assurance standards for accepting records for the *Birds of Augusta County* and only those records accepted by the Virginia Avian Records Committee (VARCOM) are included. Her "are you sure" question is legend among the birders of the Augusta County Bird club. She also encourages birders to "beat the book" by finding a new species, or a species either earlier or later than the extreme dates, or a higher peak count than those already on the books. Allen Larner has risen to that challenge as once a young Stephen Rottenborn did. As a result of Allen Larner's almost daily sweeps of the county and the efforts of other members, the 2008 edition has a species count of 307, and 900 new records that "beat" those in the second edition.