



AUGUSTA BIRD CLUB BULLETIN

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March 2023

"You have to believe in happiness, or happiness never comes. Ah, that's the reason a bird can sing — on his darkest day he believes in Spring."
~ Douglas Malloch

MARCH MEETING

Date: Monday, March 13th, 7:00 PM

Place: Covenant Presbyterian Church
2001 North Coalter St., Staunton

Program: Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas

Speaker: Dr. Ashley Peele

Pre-meeting dinner: At Little Maria's in Verona (arrive by 5:15 PM). If interested, please contact Vic Laubach (laubach@virginia.edu) before noon that day.

Dr. Ashley Peele is an avian ecologist who has spent 18 years studying avian conservation and management in the U.S. and the Caribbean area. She became Coordinator of the 2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas in late 2015, after her PhD in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from Tulane University. Her graduate work focused on studying winter population dynamics of migratory songbirds in Jamaica. She has managed bird conservation projects for NGOs and worked on sponsored projects for the Florida Wildlife and Conservation Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Geological Survey. Her research background and interests include avian microbiology, migration ecology, population biology, and the application of citizen science tools for bird conservation.

Currently, Ashley is a research scientist and course instructor at Virginia Tech in the Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation department, focusing primarily on migratory bird conservation and community science in the Appalachian region. In her spare time, she can typically be found hiking, gardening on her place near Pilot, Virginia, or birding around southwest Virginia. At our March 13 meeting, Ashley will talk about the status of Virginia's breeding birds and provide an update on the 2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas (VABBA2).



UPCOMING FIELD TRIPS

Wednesday, March 15th: McCormick's Mill Farm

Meeting place & time: At the Mill parking lot by 9:00 AM; no car pooling during the pandemic.

Coordinator: Jo King, kingbird10@yahoo.com, 540-430-0186

Join Jo King at this historic site at the southern edge of Augusta County. On this easy walk through open fields, mixed woods, and two ponds we may see waterfowl, woodpeckers, etc. Dress for the weather. In case of rain, the makeup date is March 22.

Saturday, March 18th: Waverly–Wakefield–Piney Grove, in Sussex County

Meeting place & time: Park & ride parking lot in Waynesboro off of Rt. 340 at 6:00 AM.

Coordinator: Allen Lerner,
larnersky@mindspring.com, 540-280-3423

This is a 3+ hour drive to Waverly–Wakefield, in hopes of seeing the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Not every trip is successful, but we will keep our fingers crossed. Other expected birds: Brown-headed Nuthatch, Kinglets, maybe an early warbler or two, and possibly Red-headed Woodpeckers, Blue-headed Vireos, and many more. Dress for the weather and bring snacks. After the field trip we can go down to the Virginia Diner and have a meal. Bad weather will cancel this outing.

Friday & Saturday, April 28-29th: Chincoteague
(Sunday will be on your own / returning home day.)

Meeting place & time: Saturday 8:00 am in the McDonald's parking lot across from the Best Western. That is in case someone who wants to go finds some other nearby hotel on the island.

Coordinator: Allen Lerner,
larnersky@mindspring.com, 540-280-3423

Planning ahead! Friday travel is going down on your own. Allen Lerner will be leaving around 7:00 am and can take three people with him, if anyone wants to carpool. He has six rooms at the Best Western Hotel blocked off in the name of the Augusta Bird Club for those two days. They will hold these rooms at off-season prices until March 25th. They have breakfast at the hotel.

From there we will go to one of the hiking trails to look for warblers and any early migrating songbirds, with the hopes of finding any leftover wintering birds. After that we can go to the causeway to look for Black-necked Stilts, gulls, shorebirds, any waders. After that we will travel to Saxis NWR to look for Marsh Wren, any rails that may be there, and Seaside Sparrow. We will take some time off until the Wildlife Loop opens up at 3:00 and again meet at McDonald's at 5:00 pm, and we will birding around Tom's Cove Wildlife Loop. This schedule for Saturday is flexible.

Best Western hotel's phone number: 757-336-6557
If there are any questions, contact Allen Lerner.

NOTE: Check our website for updates on field trips that have been added, cancelled, or postponed:

www.augustabirdclub.org/Field_trips.php

THE GREAT ESCAPE FROM THE GREAT CAUCASUS MOUNTAINS

by Penny Warren

Just about one year ago, I was winding up my antipodal, slow journey in the Republic of Georgia. It took decades for Georgia to recover and to stabilize after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with their economy in shambles, civil war, corruption, etc., but things were balanced out by the mid-2000's. Although still a poor country, what shines through now is their fascinating, rich, ancient culture with warm, welcoming people, beautiful landscapes, great food, lovely wines (recent research indicates that wine originated in Georgia), art, and theater. There are also remnants of the former Soviet dominance and influence in the architecture and abandoned villages. Even now, two regions of Georgia are Russian occupied.

As I was finishing up my stay, the war in Ukraine started, so Russia was once again at the forefront. Estimates are that 1.5 million Russian emigres have crossed the border into Georgia, with 300,000 remaining in the capital, Tbilisi. The influx has caused real estate prices to double, and has given a shot in the arm to the economy. However, there were nightly anti-Russian demonstrations and there continues to be much anti-Russian graffiti throughout the capital. And then, there is China, a whole other kettle of fish, recreating the old Silk Road under the "Belt and Road Initiative," forever changing the landscape of Georgia ... and beyond.

On to birding ... My last big adventure was joining up with a group of British twitchers, six blokes, all of whom were great birders but two in particular were awesome. They are military and attacked our birding trip with guerrilla warfare style ... no bird left unturned! And Alex, our Georgian bird guide was phenomenal.

With the van loaded, we headed north from Tbilisi with the goal of reaching Kazbeghi in the Great Caucasus Mountains. The Great Caucasus form the border between Russia and Georgia with Mount Kazbeghi being the third highest peak in Georgia clocking in at 16,558 feet! There is one road in and

one road out, comprising a major transportation route along the Terek River that is used by truck drivers crossing the border between the two countries.



Ananuri Fortified Ensemble, north of Tbilisi.

Our first stop was at Ananuri Fortified Ensemble, a 17th-Century UNESCO World Heritage site, about half way between Tbilisi and the Russian border. We were searching for the Wallcreeper, a bird species that this building complex often hosts during winter. Although it took a little while to find it, we did get great looks ... a beautiful bird and in flight with white polka dots accenting the red and black, it looks like one giant, gorgeous butterfly!



Wallcreeper

(All bird photos in this article are courtesy of Alex Rukhaia.)

Several more stops gave us Red-billed Choughs, Ring Ouzels, White-throated Dipper, a Bearded Vulture, and our first mammal of the trip, East Caucasian Turs. Arriving at our charming hotel, we had spectacular views of the Great Caucasus Mountains! And, it turned out to have some of the best regional cuisine I had experienced in Georgia!



Birders at the Kuro Gorge, east of Kazbeghi.

One of our target birds was the Caucasian Snowcock, and as we were settling in for lunch, the two military commandos came down from their room saying they had several Snowcocks in their scope from the bedroom window. Several of us saw them, but most did not ... including me! The remainder of the afternoon brought us a staggering flock of about 1,000 Alpine Choughs, a Griffon Vulture, and three species of Tits: Eurasian Blue, Great, and Long-tailed. Further venturing up in the mountains did not give us any Snowcocks, however.

Up and out before daybreak and heading back to the Kuro Gorge, in spite of the weather taking a turn for the worse, we managed to catch a group of Caucasian Grouse up on the mountain side. A bit later in the morning after breakfast we headed to a nearby dam with a hillside of Sea Buckthorn, a native, thorny tree, and the weather brought in a bounty of Guldenstät's Redstarts and Great Rosefinches, along with Eurasian Bullfinches, Rock Buntings, Fieldfares, Mistle Thrush, Horned Larks and more Alpine Choughs. Local lore says they are harbingers of snow! One of the commandos found four Snowcocks, but the wind picked up and they were gone from our sight!



Guldenstadt's Redstart



Great Rosefinch

The following day we learned the Jvari Pass was closed out of concern of an avalanche. Remember “one road in, one road out”? We were stuck. It was raining, plain dismal weather, and the decision was made to go back in the opposite direction toward the Russian border. We picked up some Griffon, Bearded Vultures, Gargeneys, Jays, and Coal Tits.

The Alpine Choughs proved to be correct when the following morning gave us about 10” of snow, and the snow was continuing. The mountain pass was closed again. From our breakfast window we saw an “exaltation” of Horned Larks ... hundreds and hundreds. A return to the Sea Buckthorns gave another huge gathering of previously mentioned birds, and as the Brits said “crippling” views ... absolutely stunning visuals in the fresh snow. Later in the day we tried once again for the Snowcocks in spite of bitter cold temps on the mountainside, but no Snowcocks. However, several of us caught fleeting glimpses of three Lynxes!!!



Gveleti Ponds, in the Dariali Gorge, near Russia.

At one point when we were in the van and waiting two days for a departure, one of the Brits began humming and singing, “We Gotta Get Out of This

Place” by The Animals ... I pulled up the song on my phone and everyone joined in singing! A good laugh and relief from the frustration everyone was feeling!



Red-fronted Serin

On the third morning of waiting to depart, a call was received that the mountain pass would open some time that day. We packed up and hit the road with one stop in mind on the way, and we caught among other birds, Alpine Accentors and Red-fronted Serins! Wow! We moved on, getting as close as we could to the police station to get updates.... Nothing was happening. Alex decided we would get on the ski lifts, within walking distance, and hop from chairlift to chairlift to get on the other side of the mountain and wait for our van. Blue skies, bright sun, fresh snow, and a lot of people enjoying the slopes could be seen from our bird’s-eye view! The pass was opened, and our van was waiting for us on the other side of the mountain. The Great Escape now accomplished!!



Georgia’s Great Caucasus Mountains

Although we lost two days due to snow, we had three amazing jam-packed days toward the end of our tour. A pre-dawn departure in SUVs took us 90 miles southeast of Tbilisi to Vashlovani National

Park, with unique and diverse landscapes. We flushed Crested and Calandra Larks, Common Chaffinches, Bramblings, and at our breakfast spot in one of the gorges, we found Greenfinches, Western Rock Nuthatches, and against a gorgeous blue sky, we saw Steppe Eagle, Griffon Vulture, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, and several Hen and Pallid Harriers. Eventually we came upon Isabelline and Finsch's Wheatears, and picked up Eurasian Skylarks and the target Turkestan Short-toed Larks.



Finsch's Wheatear

Starting our return to Tbilisi, we stopped at Eagle Gorge to find nesting Black Storks and Peregrine Falcons. Our last morning found us locating several Krüper's Nuthatches, and then we headed to Lake Kumisi and had many waterfowl, Ruddy Shelducks, Red-crested and Common Pochards. We were also treated to great looks at White-tailed and Eastern Imperial Eagles. Lastly, we stopped at Ponichala Forest Park, one of my regular haunts while I was there, and we found five species of woodpeckers: Middle Spotted, Syrian, Great, Green, and Black. It was a splendid finale!

I look forward to returning to Tbilisi, a city that was, according to legend, founded by a Pheasant and a Falcon!!!

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is Penny Warren's third article about birding in the Caucasus region; also see November 2021 (coastal Georgia) and May 2022 (Azerbaijan).

FIELD TRIP REPORT

On this morning of February 15th, thirteen members of the Augusta Bird Club conducted a field trip to the McCormick's Farm in Raphine. The weather gradually cleared up and was pleasantly sunny by the end of the trip. Thirty species were recorded including the two continuing, Eurasian Wigeon

drakes. Among the other highlights were: Gadwalls, American Wigeon, American Kestrel, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Brown Thrasher, and Eastern Meadowlark. Many thanks to the intrepid bird club members for their participation. Looking forward to next month's returning migrants and resident birds and wildflowers. The Skunk Cabbage was just beginning to show. Thank you everyone, you make this trip rock.

by Jo King

FIELD NOTES

FieldNotes110 — December 2022–February 2023

The following are abridged highlights of fall records, peak counts, early or late dates, from December 2022 through February 2023. The full reports will be incorporated into the book *Birds of Augusta County*. NOTE: The previous Field Notes edition (#109, Fall 2022) was published in the January issue.

Eurasian Wigeon (2) – Dec. 11, 2022 – Feb. 28, 2023, McCormick's Mill: 1st county record; species number 321

Great Blue Heron (4) – Feb. 13, 2023, Sangers Lane Staunton: early date returning to rookery (nest site)

Sandhill Crane (30) – Dec. 14, 2022, Stuarts Draft area: new peak winter count

American Woodcock (10) – Feb. 23, 2023, Shenandoah National Park: matches peak winter count

Brown-headed Nuthatch (1) – Jan. 27, 2023 – Feb. 28, 2023, Grottoes area: 4th winter record since 1981

**Allen Lerner
Records Chair, Augusta Bird Club**



**Common Goldeneye, Saxis NWR (eastern shore of Virginia) on February 21.
Photo courtesy of Jim Hill.**



American Woodcock, near Heathsville, Virginia on March 2. Photo courtesy of Ann Cline.

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE: MARCH, 2023

As Bear Claw said to Jeremiah in the 1972 movie *Jeremiah Johnson*, "March is the green, muddy month." But as birders, we know March as one of the two big transitional months (the other being October) in nature. You could say it's a reawakening, with many changes already underway in the bird world.

Our resident birds continue doing what they do, and our winter visitors are not quite ready to head back north. In many years they may hang around well into April, and of course, we may even begin to see some of our early summer favorites start arriving. The weather is usually unpredictable: warm days, cold days, windy days, and possibly even snow can all be expected. But the birds know changes are coming, and the silence in the woods and fields of winter, gives way to the musical calls of spring.

Listen for woodpeckers to increase their drumming in March, as Northern Cardinals, Carolina Wrens, Song Sparrows, Chickadees, Titmice, and Nuthatches begin to really crank up their vocalizations. It's also a key time for spotting waterfowl as well, with many species stopping to rest on our local ponds and waterways, on their long journeys north. By March, Great-horned Owls and Bald Eagles are already busy feeding chicks, which may have been born back in February. In addition, one of the early harbingers of spring, the Red-winged Blackbirds, are back in their favorite marshes and fields, with males staking out cattails, tree tops and telephone wires with their familiar "conk-a-ree" calls. Another exciting arrival that may

be "experienced" in March is the American Woodcock. The evening courtship flights of the male "timberdoodle" are one of the most magical bird shows in nature!

Yes, indeed, the weather of March may come in like a lion, or go out like a lamb, but don't let this stop you. This in-between month can bring some exciting birds to our area! Strap on your boots, throw on a jacket, and get outdoors! Good Birding!

**Rich Wood,
President, Augusta Bird Club**



Red-tailed Hawk, near Swoope, February 22. Photo courtesy of Antonio Martinez.

AUGUSTA BIRD CLUB MINUTES

February 13, 2023
Covenant Presbyterian Church

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 by President Rich Wood.

Volunteer Opportunities: Rich put out a call for volunteers to represent the ABC at two upcoming events: (1) Staunton's Earth Day celebration on Apr. 22; and (2) Riverfest in Waynesboro on Apr. 29. We will have tables at both events and encourage new members to get involved by sharing the joys of the ABC and birding with the public.

Field Trips: McCormick's Mill hike is a delightful, easy hike each month led by Jo King on a Wednesday, date to be announced. Allen Lerner is working on trips a little farther afield to Lake Anna, Piney Grove, and Chincoteague. The club is trying to schedule more trips both local and more distant.

A suggestion was made to establish a system whereby individuals could contact other members for a spontaneous birding activity. This will require more planning.

Recent Sightings: Members mentioned seeing a Bonaparte's Gull, Eurasian Wigeons, Common Goldeneye, Tundra Swans, Merlin, Red Crossbills, Saw-whet Owl, a Great Blue Heron rookery, Woodcocks, Purple Finches, Brown-headed Nuthatch, and Evening Grosbeaks.

Bird Feeding: Many members put meal worms out as part of their bird feeding smorgasbord. A member suggested a more nutritious (and American-made!) alternative to be Black Soldier Fly Larvae. These can be purchased at New Country Organics in Waynesboro and the Augusta Farm Co-op.

Membership: Mona Bearor reports that we currently have 137 paid members.

Conservation: The Virginia Native Plant Society has created a book of plants native to our area. Native plants support insects/caterpillars which support our birds and other wildlife. The Board agreed to purchase a certain number of these books and thus we will be included in their promotion. We can resell them as a fundraiser for our club. The books will soon be available for purchase.

Program: Our scheduled speaker was unable to attend due to Covid exposure, so President Rich Wood gave a delightful, informative presentation on Owls of Virginia, complete with photographs and remarkably realistic vocalizations.

The meeting ended at 8:10 pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Marilyn Nash, Secretary

HELP WANTED

Editor, Augusta Bird Club Bulletin.
Will train. Desired qualifications: layout design, editing for grammar, etc., and an eye for detail. Duties begin in the fall. Interested persons should contact the club president, Rich Wood, at:

beagleboy831@comcast.net

TREASURER'S REPORT

submitted by Mona Bearor
2/01/2023 – 2/28/2023

Opening Balance February 1, 2023	\$34,883.32
Revenue	
Dues	\$85.00
Nature Camp	\$30.00
Interest	\$4.02
Total Revenue	\$119.02
Expenses	
Education & Outreach	\$440.00
Donation - Shenandoah Green	\$200.00
Administration	\$107.55
Total Expenses	\$747.55
Closing Balance February 28, 2023	\$34,254.79

BIRD QUIZ!

Can you identify this bird?

(Photographed by Oleksandr Nastachenko in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine about one week before the February 24, 2022 Russian invasion.)



The answer will be revealed at the March meeting!

~
Last month: NONE

Augusta Bird Club Bulletin
Editor: Andrew Clem, agclem@comcast.net

Club website:
www.augustabirdclub.org

Virginia Society of Ornithology
www.virginiabirds.net