



# THE MEADOWLARK

The monthly newsletter of the Augusta Bird Club



## Binoculars—Choosing the Right Pair

by Rich Wood

(Portions of this article are reprinted from Nov–Dec 2009 issue of *Audubon*.)

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As birders, there's nothing more irritating than seeing a bird with your eyes but then not being able to find it with your binoculars or identify the details of the bird because it's blurry or too dark. As trip leaders we've all had participants who get frustrated because they simply can't use their binoculars to find or distinguish the bird that the leader is pointing out. I've even had participants that get so annoyed, they simply leave a walk before it's over. Experienced birders should always try to teach beginners about the

importance of having a good, reliable set of binoculars. It's the number one way to grow our enjoyable pastime and, more importantly, the best way to increase a person's interest in the conservation of birds! So, I tell beginning birders "Fear not! The problem is probably not you, but your binoculars! A quality pair of binoculars is the most important tool in a bird-watcher's toolbox!"

Birders, even beginners, need more from their binoculars than do any other users. Bird-worthy binoculars must be bright enough to show subtle features in poor light and sharp enough to resolve fine detail. They must focus quickly enough to "get on" a fast-moving bird. They must have a field of view wide enough to locate birds rapidly and follow them in flight. They must also provide accurate color rendition, have no observable distortion in the center of the field, and should not fog up in wet or humid weather. And they should work with or without eyeglasses. That's a lot to ask from a pair of optics. Fortunately, in today's rapidly changing world of technology, there are many choices to meet these requirements, in a range of prices to fit most people's budgets. But a word of caution: The market is also littered with junk! OK, so what are the most important things you should know when looking to purchase a new set of binoculars?

### Anatomy of Binoculars

source: *Outdoor Life*



(Cont'd on page 2)

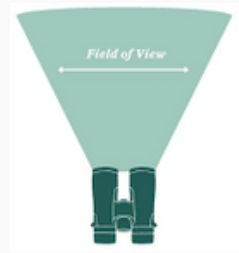
## Binoculars—Choosing the Right Pair

(Cont'd from page 1)



One of the first things you'll notice when you go shopping is that all binoculars are described by two numbers, such as 8x42 (pronounced "eight by forty-two"). The first number tells you the **magnification**, or how many times the object is being enlarged. The second tells you the diameter of the **objective lens** (the lens at the fat end of the tube) in millimeters. Thus, 8x42 binoculars magnify the image eight times and have an objective lens that is 42 millimeters in diameter. When comparing binoculars of equal quality, the bigger the difference between the two numbers, the sharper and brighter the image. There are, however, some practical limits. Binoculars with objectives larger than 42 millimeters will be too big and heavy for most people to carry around all day. Binoculars with objectives smaller than 30 millimeters will be lightweight and easy to carry, but they are not bright enough to show all the detail you need in poor light.

Another spec you'll discover is **field of view**. Field of view is the term for the width (and height) of the image you see through your binoculars. Whereas **magnification** and **objective lens** determine how big and bright your image will be, field of view determine how much of the world you're able to see. Field of view is very important when you're finding birds in flight, looking for a bird in dense foliage, or following a bird as it moves. A wider field also leaves more room for error when you put your binoculars up to your eyes, allowing the bird to stay within your binocular image even if it's not right in the center. A bigger field of view is particularly helpful for people new to birding, making it easier to find birds when putting binoculars up to your eyes.



### How Much Magnification?

Many beginners assume that the job of binoculars is to enlarge an image, so it must be better to buy the most powerful binoculars they can find. This is a mistake, because brightness and field of view are far more important than magnification. In fact, too much magnification makes binoculars useless. Keep in mind that binoculars that magnify an image eight times also magnify the small movements of your hand eight times. Ten-power binoculars magnify those movements ten times. The more the image moves, the less useful the information you get from it becomes. Since your brain must work harder to interpret a shaky image, higher-power binoculars will be tiring to use. Higher magnification also increases the distortion from rising hot air currents—called "heat shimmer"—which can make it impossible to get a sharp image when looking across a field or a marsh.

### Clear Eyes

Look for binoculars that have a single focusing knob located between the two barrels that turns one to one-and-a-half times. Don't buy binoculars with separate focus adjustments on the two barrels—they're too slow to be useful for birding. If you pay more than \$200 for your binoculars, they should be waterproof and nitrogen-purged, so they don't get "fogged" in humid conditions.

You will be using your binoculars for many hours at a time, so make sure you buy the right pair. Do they feel good in your hands? Can you comfortably reach the focus knob? Can you see the entire field of view with your eyeglasses on? All binoculars have a hinge to allow you to adjust the barrels to match the distance between your eyes. If you have closely set eyes, be sure you can adjust the barrels so you can see a single image. All binoculars can be adjusted to allow you to compensate for differences in your eyes.

These are just a few of the things to keep in mind when shopping for a new set of binoculars. If you have additional questions, or are still confused about certain specifications, please reach out to one of the Augusta Bird Club (ABC) board members. We have a lot of experienced birders who may be able to give you some guidance. Good Luck!

## Field-Trip Reports

Eight hardy, windblown birders conducted a field trip to **McCormick Farm on Wednesday, June 14**. A total of 43 species were recorded. Most noteworthy was observing a pair of Belted Kingfishers feeding their young, and Indigo Buntings, newly born baby Bluebirds, swarming Tree and Barn Swallows, along with Cedar Waxwings and American Goldfinches delighting the landscape.

Thank you to everyone for your wonderful energy and camaraderie. Have a great summer. See you in August. **Check out the the spotlight on McCormick Farm as one of our local birding hotspots on the next page!**

—Jo King



An adult Belted Kingfisher feeds a young one on a telephone wire.  
Look at the size of that young beak!

photos by Bonnie Hughes



A recently fledged Eastern Bluebird  
poses for the camera!

**Resource  
Review**



[www.birdingvirginia.org](http://www.birdingvirginia.org)

The seeds for *Birding Virginia* were planted in 2017 by a group of birders who all enjoy statewide county birding. This online resource presents two main types of information. County profiles offer concise summaries of each county or independent city, including some history, major birding attractions, and other amenities and sites of interest. Through these profiles, you can get a quick overview of each county or independent city as a way to guide your birding and travel plans. The second major component is individual write-ups for each of the eBird hotspots in Virginia. These pages will ultimately offer a quick resource to consult for questions on location and access, as well as the best time to bird a hotspot, and how to most effectively seek target species.

The Augusta Bird Club is fortunate that our county write-up was completed by our own members, Vic Laubach, Allen Larner, Gabriel Mapel, and Andrew Clem.

This is an excellent resource, especially for those birders just getting started! The county profiles are full of information on what species you may see, dozens of eBird hotspots, and even how to get to each! If you're curious about birding here in our home county, or in many others across Virginia, you gotta check out this website!



## Spotlight on Augusta County Birding Hotspots

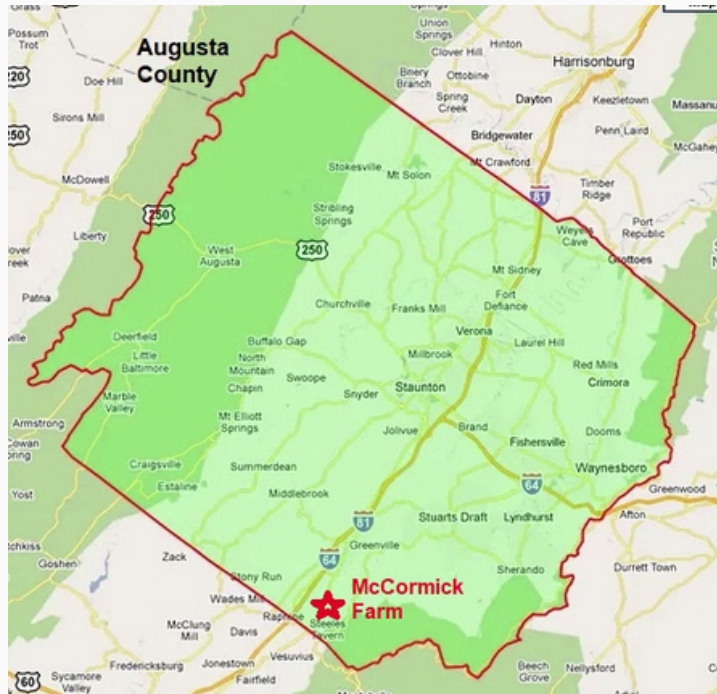
Where can I go?

### McCormick Farm

128 Cyrus McCormick Circle

Raphine, VA 24472

eBird Hotspot name: "McCormick's Mills"



McCormick Farm, also known as Shenandoah Valley Agricultural Research and Extension Center (AREC), includes more than 900 acres of land owned and leased by Virginia Tech in southern Augusta County. This site is the former farm of Cyrus McCormick, who invented the McCormick reaper. The development of this important piece of farm equipment is widely recognized as the birth of the modern mechanical revolution in production agriculture. The site also has the McCormick Grist Mill. Built in the late 1700s, the mill has been fully restored to working order. The entire site is listed as a National Historical Landmark.

### Birding

The site has a variety of habitats, such as fields, forests, ponds, and brushy areas, that make birding excellent. One of the most popular walks is the Marl Creek Interpretive Trail, a 2/3-mile dirt/gravel trail that winds its way along a small stream and passes by the beautiful mill pond and through thickets dotted with some very large oak trees. The trail is very good in the spring and fall for migrating warblers and vireos and has a good population of resident songbirds as well, including Gray Catbirds, Eastern Towhees, Carolina Wrens, and Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers. In the spring and summer, look for Belted Kingfishers, Great-blue and Green Herons, Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, and occasional Great Egrets along the shores of the mill pond, as well as Wood Ducks and Blue-winged Teal feeding in the back coves. Watch for raptors hunting over the farm fields, such as Red-tailed Hawks and American Kestrels, and Northern Harriers sometimes visit during the winter months. Search these same fields in the spring and summer for Eastern Meadowlarks, Bobolinks, and Savannah and Grasshopper Sparrows. Baltimore Orioles regularly nest in the willow trees next to the old mill, and the lower pond is a good spot for waterfowl in the fall, winter, and spring. In the winter of 2022–23 a pair of Eurasian Wigeon spent several months on this pond along with American Wigeon, Gadwall, and Mallards. **A great way to discover the birds at McCormick Farm is to join one of Jo King's monthly walks! You won't be disappointed!**



## Recent Sightings

Enjoy these beautiful early summer photos!

Well, it seems like **Reddish Knob** and **Briery Branch Gap** were the hotspots for birding in early June. Here are a few terrific photos from several of our birders highlighting some these "high-elevation" species, as well as a Belted Kingfisher and Alder Flycatcher from local farm lands in southern Augusta County:



Canada Warbler (male)  
*photo by Antonio Martinez*



The highly sought-after Mourning Warbler (male)  
*photo by Garland Kitts*



Red Crossbills  
*photo by Vic Laubach*



Dark-eyed Junco  
*photo by Antonio Martinez*



Belted Kingfisher (female)—McCormick Farm  
*photo by Bonnie Hughes*



Alder Flycatcher—Middlebrook Rd  
*photo by Vic Laubach*



## Recent Sightings (Cont'd)



Eastern Phoebe—Star Trail (across from Wilson ES, Fishersville)  
*photo by Donna Stokes*



Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird feeding  
on native Honeysuckle (*Lonicera sempervivens*)  
*photo by Rich Wood*

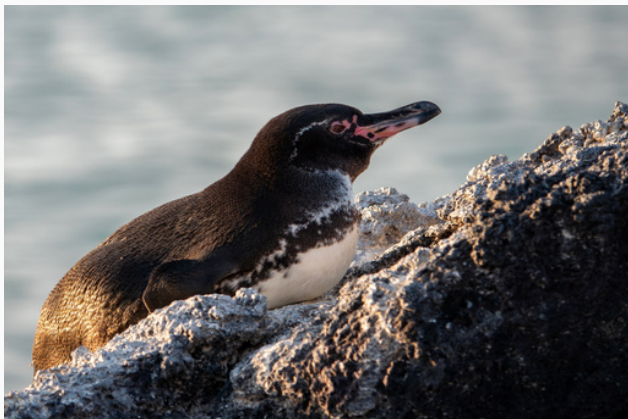
**A few more excellent photos from beyond Augusta County, by some of our club members:**



Black Skimmers—Tangier Island, Chesapeake Bay  
*photo by Ann Cline*



Prothonotary Warbler with a dragonfly snack—  
Newport News Park  
*photo by Sarah Foster*

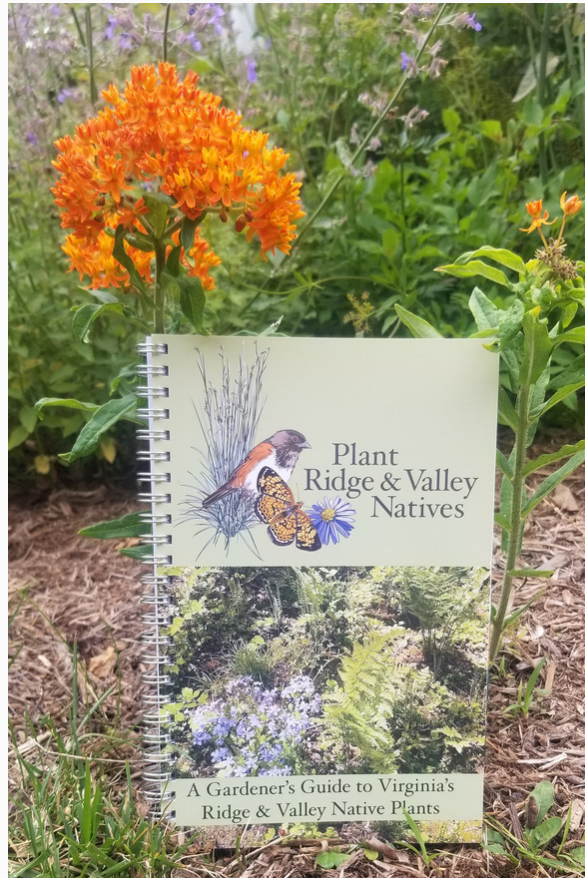


Galapagos Penguins are the  
only Penguin species that live  
north of the equator.  
*photo by Vic Laubach*

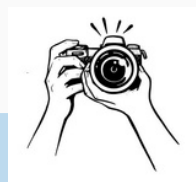


**Want to see more photos from the  
Galapagos? Mark your calendars for  
Vic's presentation from his trip to  
Equador and the Galapagos Islands at  
our January 2024 meeting!**

**Now Available!**  
**New *Plant Ridge & Valley Natives* guide**



The Augusta Bird Club is proud to support the Shenandoah Valley Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society by purchasing several copies of their new guide, *Plant Ridge & Valley Natives*, for resale. They're only \$15 each. This terrific 144-page full-color guide includes more than 150 native plants found in at least 6 of the 11 R & V counties of the Shenandoah Valley. **If you're interested in buying a copy from the ABC, please contact our Treasurer, Mona Bearor. Her contact information can be found on our website: [www.augustabirdclub.org](http://www.augustabirdclub.org), under Club Contacts.** We will also have them for sale in person at our first monthly meeting, Monday, September 11!



**Attention All Photographers!**

**Next month's August issue of *The Meadowlark* will be a PHOTO SPECIAL! The entire issue will be dedicated to your photos! Please send me 1 or 2 of your bird photos from our favorite birding locations in Augusta County, Staunton, and Waynesboro (only). Please make sure you list where the photo was taken and the date. I'll include as many as I can. Many thanks!**

**Rich Wood, President ([beagleboy831@comcast.net](mailto:beagleboy831@comcast.net))**

## President's Message—July 2023

by Rich Wood

As we move into July, many birders take a break and put down their binoculars until the fall migration begins. Some birds are still finishing up their nesting (or second clutch), but the dawn songs are waning, and the forests and fields seem to grow more silent. Many birds look a bit scruffy, no longer sporting their bright breeding colors, and young, recently fledged birds may confuse birders because they don't quite yet look like their parents. Some species, such as American Robins and Red-winged Blackbirds, stop holding territories and start to join flocks—and territorial singing just isn't compatible with flocking. One by one, each species drops out of the morning chorus. Throw in the fact that it's hot and the summer months are peak for mosquitos, ticks, and biting flies. No wonder we may choose to pause our birding for a bit! The Cornell Lab states that July and August are typically the two lowest months for eBird checklist submissions.

However, for some species, such as shorebirds, they've already started their long journeys south, leaving their Arctic breeding grounds by late June. By July and August there may be steady streams of adults and then juvenile birds heading to their wintering grounds. Although Augusta County is located inland and may lack the large water resources that other areas of the state have, migrating shorebirds will drop into many farm ponds, lake shores, wetlands, and even large farm fields (especially recently flooded fields), as they stop to rest and look for food. So until those waves of fall warblers begin arriving, or the raptors start cruising past the Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch, try getting out early morning (or early evening) to beat the heat, and switch up a few of your favorite woodland birding locations to search for a few other species that may be passing through our area! You may be pleasantly surprised at what you might find! Stay Cool, and Good Birding!



Semipalmated Plover—  
Target Distribution Center  
pond (Summer 2022)

photo by Vic Laubach

**Remember to check us out at**

**[www.augustabirdclub.org](http://www.augustabirdclub.org)**



Virginia Society of Ornithology: [www.viriniabirds.org](http://www.viriniabirds.org)

*The Meadowlark*

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**A big THANK YOU to Lucy Ivey for her time and patience in reviewing and editing  
this issue of *The Meadowlark*!**