

THE MEADOWLARK



The monthly newsletter of the Augusta Bird Club

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The Greatest Show on Earth!

As I looked up high above me, I could barely make out with my naked eye tiny dots in the bright-blue sky. I heard what the counters were saying, but I still had difficulty finding them. Then, as I raised my binoculars, there they were—hundreds of them whizzing by, soaring on the northwest winds, heading to their wintering grounds in Central and South America. It was mid-September, and the raptors were moving down from their breeding areas in Canada and the northeastern US. What were these

winged wonders? They were Broad-winged Hawks, and they were taking center stage over the Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch, along the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia! These “Broad-wings,” as they’re nicknamed, are one of 16 species of raptors that have been seen at the hawk watch over the years. Depending on when you go, you may see several species in one day, including the possibilities of eagles and falcons. The “count” takes place from August 15 to November 30 each year, and it is totally contingent on how many volunteer counters are available to sit and search the skies. Experienced hawk watchers will examine the weather forecasts closely, hoping for a day of northwest winds that follow a cold front. These can be the best days to possibly see hundreds, and maybe thousands, of hawks in a single day. Yes, I said thousands! On September 22, 2022, 9,166 Broad-wings were counted on a single day, and that was just one species! Wow! Broad-wings are the only raptors that migrate together, sometimes in huge flocks called *kettles*. Like many other species of raptors, they save large amounts of energy by soaring on thermals and updrafts along high mountain ridges. Less flapping equals less energy used, which can be the difference between living or dying.

If you’d like to give hawk watching a try, you should visit the Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch. The hawk watch is conducted each fall on the grounds of the Inn at Afton (elevation 2,000 ft), just off I-64, exit 99, just east of Waynesboro, VA. The site is easily accessible, and one can literally drive up, park, and hawk watch. It has a 180-degree panoramic view north over Rockfish Gap, west over the Shenandoah Valley, and east over the Piedmont region. Usually, there are several volunteer counters there to help you get started spotting and identifying migrating raptors. For more information, check out the website, www.rockfishgaphawkwatch.org, which is full of useful information. If you want to spend an enjoyable day outdoors, you should “grab a free ticket” to one of the Greatest Shows on Earth! **For a summary of the start of the 2023 season, please see the accompanying article on page 2.**

photos by Vic Laubach



← A large kettle of Broad-wings passes by the hawk watch (left)



Close-up photo of a Broad-winged Hawk (above)

2023 Fall Hawk Watch Is Underway

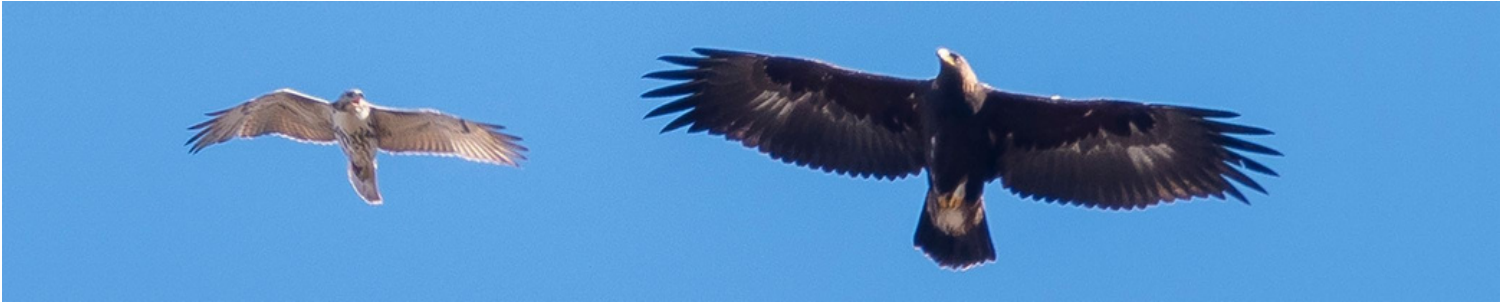


photo by Vic Laubach

The Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch had a great start to the 2023 fall season on August 15, with 15 raptors total and 5 different species (3 Bald Eagles, 1 Cooper's Hawk, 6 Broad-winged Hawks, 3 Red-tailed Hawks, 1 Kestrel, and 1 unidentified)! Although the old Inn at Afton continues to deteriorate, the parking lot and grassy area remain clear. However, **we have decided to cancel the Open House due to the site conditions.** The owner of the Inn and mountain-top property, Phil Dulaney, passed away on July 15, 2023. Phil liked us hawk watchers, and he had graciously hosted our hawkwatch every year since 1976. We do not currently know the fate of the property or our hawkwatch, and we only hope that we'll be able to somehow continue the hawk watch in future years.

If you are planning to visit, please note the following important items:

- (1) The Waynesboro Visitor Center is now closed permanently (so no bathroom). However, we will have a porta-potty on hand for visitors.
- (2) There are no amenities at or near the hawk watch other than the porta-potty. The closest gas station, convenience store, or restaurant is a 10-minute drive into Waynesboro. There is a King's Gourmet Popcorn trailer just off the exit, one or two hundred yards below the Inn.
- (3) You may see some "keep out" or "no trespassing" signs on the drive up near the Inn, and you may even encounter a barrier in the road. These are an attempt to keep out the general public, but hawk watchers will be welcome as usual. If the driveway up the hill is blocked for some reason, you can turn around and enter the parking lot from SR-610 on the other side of the building.
- (4) If you come, bring binoculars (8x minimum, 10x even better), a spotting scope if available, a chair, sunscreen, drinks, snacks, and a hat.
- (5) Please visit our website (www.rockfishgaphawkwatch.org) for any questions about the hawk watch, for contact information, and to view our calendar to see what days are signed up for by our counters.

Thank you, and we look forward to seeing you up there!

Vic Laubach

Coordinator, Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch

UPCOMING MEETING

Monday, September 11, 2023, 7:00 pm

Covenant Presbyterian Church

2001 N Coalter St

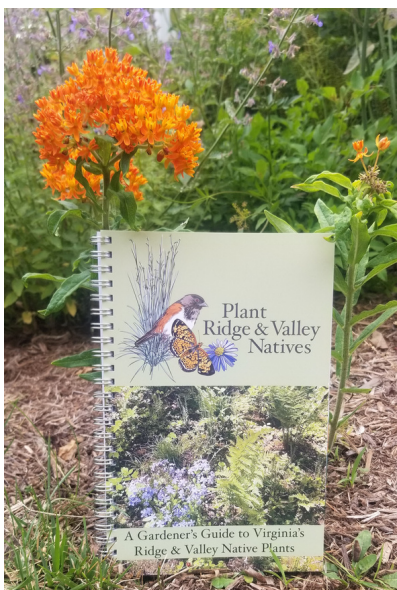
Staunton, VA 24401

Guest Speaker: Sara Hollberg
Keeping Augusta County Bird-Friendly



Sara Hollberg is a land-use planning consultant with a focus on land conservation and development patterns. She has worked in the Valley region for decades. Sara was a founding member of Valley Conservation Council and wrote Better Models for Development in the Shenandoah Valley to illustrate principles for building thriving communities while preserving natural and cultural resources. Recent work includes visioning for rural communities, preparing for utility-scale solar, and succession planning for farm and forest landowners. Sara has degrees from William and Mary and the University of Virginia and is a member of the American Institute of Certified Planners. She and her husband raised their three children in downtown Staunton and at frequent farm-cations at her family's tree farm near Lynchburg. Sara's talk will address the policies and trends at the local level that affect birding habitat. She will cover comprehensive plans, discuss emerging topics and programs, and give positive examples of ways to retain natural areas at various scales.

We'll have a pre-meeting dinner with the speaker at Little Maria's Pizza & Subs in Verona at 5:15 pm. If anyone wants to join us for dinner, please email Vic Laubach (laubach@virginia.edu) by noon that day.



The ABC 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.

**We will have these for sale at the September meeting.
Cash, check, or credit cards will be accepted!**

Upcoming Field Trips



Saturday, September 2—Afton Mtn

Meeting Time & Place: 8:00 am, Visitors Center on Afton (the center is now closed)
Leader: Allen Lerner (larnersky@mindspring.com)

We'll look for early migrants, then stop by the Hawk Watch to see what's heading south. Wear comfortable walking shoes, dress for the weather, and bring water & snacks. Rain will cancel.

Saturday, September 9—Shenandoah Mtn Trail south of Confederate Breastworks

Meeting Time & Place: 8:00 am, Food Lion parking lot on N Coalter St, Staunton
Leader: Andrew Clem (agclem@comcast.net)

Join Andrew as he searches for some of the higher elevation migrants. The hike will be 1.5 mi each way. Please bring a water bottle. Hiking boots recommended, but not necessary.

Saturday, September 16—Augusta Springs Wetlands

Meeting Time & Place: 8:00 am, parking lot along US-250 (2735 Little Calf Pasture Hwy)
Leader: Lynne Parks (v.lynneparks@gmail.com)

We'll walk the wetlands loop at least once (maybe twice). It's on level ground that is a combination of boardwalk, packed earth, and cracked pavement. The loop is 0.8 miles. We circle the pond through mixed woods and open areas. We hope to find migrating warblers, but there should be a variety of vireos, flycatchers, and more. The Red-breasted Nuthatches are usually noisy then. Something interesting often shows up here during migration! Wear comfortable walking shoes, dress for the weather, and bring water & snacks. Rain will cancel.

Wednesday, September 20—McCormick Farm

Meeting Time & Place: 9:00 am, Mill parking Lot
Leader: Jo King (kingbird@yahoo.com, (540) 430-0186)

Jo King will be back at it, looking for a variety of fall migrants, on this easy walk through mixed woods and adjacent two ponds. Please bring water, and wear comfortable walking shoes. McCormick Farm is located 0.5 mile east of I-81 (Raphine exit), just off SR-606.

Saturday, September 23—Bell's Lane

Meeting Time & Place: 8:00 am, kiosk at west end of Bell's Lane
Leaders: Lynne Parks (v.lynneparks@gmail.com) & Allen Lerner (larnersky@mindspring.com)

It's fall migration, and you never know what'll show up! We'll walk past various habitats, including woodland edges, pastureland, scrub, and ponds, up a mile and back along level pavement. We should find a mix of warblers, flycatchers, orioles, sparrows, herons, raptors, and more. Afterwards we can drive up to the high view.

Access to the private pond is dependent on their event scheduling.

Conservation Corner

Working Lands for Wildlife

by Kristin Fuoco
Golden-winged Warbler Conservation Coordinator
USDA—Natural Resources Conservation Service



Working Lands for Wildlife (WLFW) is a program established in 2012 through the partnership of the US Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The program aims to provide private landowners with a "win-win" approach to promote sustainable agricultural and forestry practices as well as wildlife conservation on working lands. Through WLFW, private landowners receive technical assistance from program partners and can choose to apply for financial assistance to implement suggested conservation measures. WLFW has seven national focal species and more than a dozen state- and regional-level initiatives.

One of the national focal species that has received significant conservation focus here in western Virginia is the Golden-winged Warbler. Golden-winged Warblers are increasingly rare throughout the Appalachians and rely heavily on conservation efforts that promote their required breeding habitat. Unlike many backyard birds you may be familiar with, Golden-winged Warblers nest on the ground and require dense cover of shrubs, saplings, and herbaceous plants such as goldenrod, aster, and blackberry. This type of habitat is typically found in young forests after timber harvests, in overgrown pastures and fields, and sometimes even in powerline rights-of-way that have developed significant brushy growth. Golden-winged Warblers also prefer to nest in heavily forested landscapes with elevation over 2,000 ft, thus making western Virginia an ideal region for conservation efforts.



Male Golden-winged Warbler
photo by DJ McNeil



Female Golden-winged Warbler on nest
photo by Renae Veasley

Several agencies, including the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources and the US Forest Service, have invested significant time and effort into breeding-habitat conservation for the species, but the majority of forest land is privately owned in Virginia. So, private landowners in Virginia have the potential to significantly impact Golden-winged Warbler populations by providing potential breeding habitat. Not only does this habitat benefit the warbler, but it can also benefit many other wildlife species including Ruffed Grouse, Wild Turkey, White-tailed Deer, pollinator species like Monarch Butterflies, and many other songbird species. If you are interested in learning more about the WLFW program or the Golden-winged Warbler, please contact Kristin Fuoco at kristin.fuoco@usda.gov or at (540) 319-6465.

Recent Sightings



Cooper's Hawk (photo by Vic Laubach)



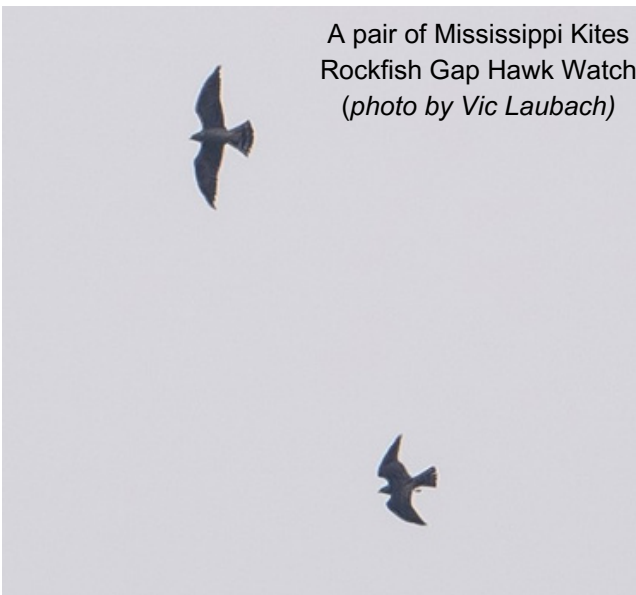
Young Song Sparrow w/ breakfast (photo by Vic Laubach)



Green Heron (photo by Bonnie Hughes)



Eastern Kingbird (photo by Bonnie Hughes)



A pair of Mississippi Kites
Rockfish Gap Hawk Watch
(photo by Vic Laubach)



Juvenile male
Eastern Bluebird
(photo by Jim Hill)

President's Message

by Rich Wood

Saturday, September 23, marks the autumnal equinox, or the official first day of fall in the Northern Hemisphere. As birders, we look forward to fall because it brings a variety of migrants through our area, on their long journeys south. Although your board has been busy behind the scenes planning all summer, activities really start up in September, as we start another program year for the Augusta Bird Club (ABC).

Once again, we start our monthly meetings (2nd Monday of each month), which offer a variety of educational guest speakers, updates, bird reports, and much more. This month we begin our regular field trips and bird walks, and September kicks off our plans and promotions for our Annual Birdseed Sale, held on the first Saturday of November. Speaking of birdseed, we're also reminded that Project Feeder Watch is right around the corner, starting on November 1. Up on Afton Mountain, the Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch is up and running, and counters eagerly await the big numbers of Broad-winged Hawks that will be coming through in mid- to late September. Our Conservation Chair, Lynne Parks, is also busy at this time of year with ongoing planting projects at Montgomery Hall Park in Staunton and assisting a local elementary school with the development of their school nature trail.

Yep, September is definitely an exciting transition month in nature and an active month for the ABC! If you'd like to get more involved in any of our activities, we're always looking for volunteers to help us out! Please reach out to any of the board members, or chat with us at the monthly meeting (we'll introduce ourselves there; our contact info is listed on the ABC website, www.augustabirdclub.org/Contact.html)! Happy September, and Good Birding!

Get Ready: Here It Comes!
ANNUAL BIRD SEED & FEEDER SALE
Online orders should start in late September
Pickup Date: Saturday, November 4
Stay Tuned for Ordering Details!



Remember to check us out at

www.augustabirdclub.org



Virginia Society of Ornithology: *www.viriniabirds.org*

The Meadowlark

Editor: Rich Wood

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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*.

Membership

by Mona Bearor, Membership Coordinator



During our summer hiatus we gained two new members!

Let's welcome Rene Pratt and John Shea!

We look forward to seeing/meeting you at one of our programs or events soon!"

We have grown by over 25 members in 2023, which brings our current membership to 170!



**Give a
Gift Membership
to the
Augusta Bird Club**



Remember that gift memberships are always available for Birthdays, for Holiday gifts—or for no reason at all! An appropriate card announcing your gift will accompany the membership brochure and birding information sent to all new members.

Treasurer's Report

by Mona Bearor, Treasurer

Balance June 1, 2023	\$ 27,752.06
Revenue	
Donations	\$ 155.00
Dues	\$ 15.00
Interest	\$ 6.95
Total Revenue	\$ 176.95
Expenses	
Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas	\$ 500.00
Montgomery Hall Native Plant Garden	\$ 141.17
Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch	\$ 100.00
Memorial donation for Phil Delaney	\$ 45.00
Total Expenses	\$ 786.17
Ending Balance August 24, 2023	\$ 27,142.84