



# THE MEADOWLARK



*The monthly newsletter of the Augusta Bird Club*

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## The History of the Audubon Christmas Bird Count

*Reprinted with permission from the National Audubon Society*

Prior to the turn of the 20th century, hunters engaged in a holiday tradition known as the "Christmas Side Hunt." They would choose sides and go afield with their guns—whoever brought in the biggest pile of feathered (and furred) quarry won.

Conservation was in its beginning stages in that era, and many observers and scientists were becoming concerned about declining bird populations. Beginning on Christmas Day, 1900, ornithologist Frank Chapman, an early officer in the then-growing Audubon Society, proposed a new holiday tradition—a "Christmas Bird Census" that would count birds during the holidays rather than hunt them.



*Historical photo of some of the birds shot on the "Christmas Side Hunt"*

So began the Christmas Bird Count (CBC). Thanks to the inspiration of Chapman and the enthusiasm of 27 dedicated birders, 25 CBCs were held that day. The locations ranged from Toronto, Ontario, to Pacific Grove, California, with most counts in or near the population centers of northeastern North America. Those original 27 Christmas Bird Counters tallied around 90 species on all counts combined. Today there are approximately 2,100 active CBC circles across the US, Canada, and several Latin American and Caribbean countries.

The data collected by observers over the past century allow Audubon researchers, conservation biologists, wildlife agencies, and other interested individuals to study the long-term health and status of bird populations across North America. When combined with other surveys such as the Breeding Bird Survey, the data provide a picture of how the continent's bird populations have changed in time and space over the past hundred years. The long-term perspective is vital for conservationists. It informs strategies to protect birds and their habitat and helps identify environmental issues with implications for people as well.

## History of the Audubon Christmas Bird Count (Cont'd)

All CBCs are conducted between December 14 and January 5, inclusive dates, every year. Each count is conducted on one day only, and each count takes place in an established 15-mile diameter circle and is organized by a count compiler. Count volunteers follow specified routes through a designated 15-mile (24-km) diameter circle, counting every bird they see or hear all day. It's not just a species tally—all birds are counted all day, giving an indication of the total number of birds in the circle that day.



Participants in a Florida CBC  
*photo courtesy of the  
National Audubon Society*

### PLEASE JOIN US!

The Augusta Bird Club has also participated in CBCs for many years. The club coordinates two different counts—the Augusta County CBC and the Waynesboro CBC. **This year's date for the Augusta County CBC will be Sunday, December 17, and the Waynesboro CBC will be Saturday, December 30.** If you would like to participate, please contact Allen Lerner ([larnersky@mindspring.com](mailto:larnersky@mindspring.com)), the Augusta County CBC Coordinator, or Crista Cabe ([cristacabe@gmail.com](mailto:cristacabe@gmail.com)), the Waynesboro CBC Coordinator. All levels of birders are welcome!

### Did You Know?

The greatest number of bird species ever reported by a CBC circle in the world is **531**, observed on December 21, 2013, in the Cosanga-Narupa count (previously known as the Yanayacu count) on the eastern slope of the Andes in Ecuador.

The lowest tally for a CBC is **1**, in the Arctic Bay CBC, led by the coordinator and only participant, Clare Hines. In most years, Clare usually only finds small flocks of Common Ravens where he lives in Arctic Bay, Nunavut, Canada—located nearly 500 miles north of the Arctic Circle.



## ***Mark Your Calendars!***



**December 11, 6:30 pm\***

**\* PLEASE NOTE TIME CHANGE**

**Covenant Presbyterian Church**

**2001 N Coalter St**

**Staunton**

It's that time of the year when we celebrate the holidays with our bird club friends for a potluck meal! Please bring your favorite side dish, bread, salad, or dessert to share with the group. The club will provide ham, turkey, and beverages. We are looking forward to good food and good fellowship on the 11th at **6:30 pm** (time change from our regular meetings). We will have door prizes and our annual slide show extravaganza: *Birds from Far Away Lands!*—photos of birds from a few recent trips taken by some of our club members!

If you have any questions, please contact Linda Matkins at [linda.matkins@gmail.com](mailto:linda.matkins@gmail.com).





# Upcoming Field Trips



**Sunday, December 17**

## **AUGUSTA COUNTY CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT**

Time: All Day

If interested in participating, contact Coordinator Allen Lerner  
(lanersky@mindspring.com)



**Wednesday, December 27—Bell's Lane (Rain Date: Thursday, December 28—same time/same place)**

Meeting Time & Place: 8:30 am, Bird Club kiosk

Leader: Penny Warren (onthewingnow17@gmail.com); (540) 849-9245

We will finish off the last week of the year with a walk on Bell's . . . first to the private pond and then on the lane. Let's hope for snow and swans . . . and more! Rain on rain date will cancel it.

**Saturday, December 30**

## **WAYNESBORO CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT**

Time: All Day

If interested in participating, contact Coordinator Crista Cabe  
(cristacabe@gmail.compring.com)



## **2024 Nature Camp!**

**ABC Nature Camp Scholarships Still Available!**

*There's  
Still  
Time!*

Information about the ABC Nature Camp 2024 scholarship is now on our website! The Nature Camp page includes information about the camp, the scholarship process, this year's essay topic, and a link to the fillable application form. **The deadline for scholarship applications is December 15!** Big thanks to Crista Cabe for redesigning the application and to Andrew Clem for updating the webpage. Please help spread the word to potential Nature Campers. **If you have any questions, contact Sarah Foster (fostercabin@hotmail.com).**

# Recent Sightings



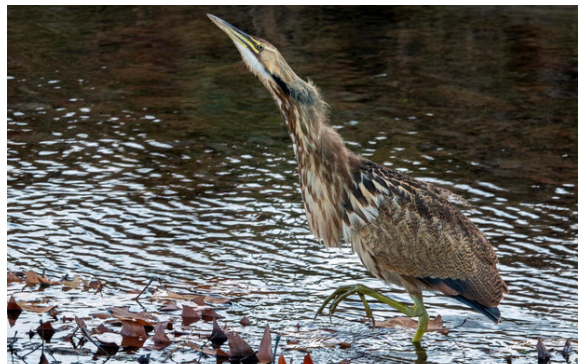
Male Northern Harrier—Bell's Lane  
*photo by Jim Hill*



Mallards & Northern Pintails—Blackwater NWR  
*photo by Eric Pritchett*



Red-bellied Woodpecker—Bell's Lane  
*photo by Bonnie Hughes*



American Bittern—Churchville  
*photo by Vic Laubach*



Merlin—Barren Ridge  
*photo by Ann Cline*



Sandhill Cranes—Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch  
*photo by Vic Laubach*



Willet (l) and Whimbrel (r)—Daufuskie Island, SC  
*photo by Jim Hill*



Cedar Waxwing—Jolivue  
*photo by Warren Faught*





## Spotlight on Community Conservation Organizations

### Headwaters Master Naturalists

by Sarah Foster, Education Cochair



Display photo by Carl Droms

When my daughter was growing up, we did every nature-oriented activity we could find—Earth Day festivals, wildflower walks at Wintergreen, Riverfest, open houses at the Wildlife Center. It was at one of these events that we came across a display table set up by Virginia Master Naturalists, and it was full of nature “stuff”: animal skulls, bird feathers, cicada shells, and snake skins—the same stuff that we collected at home. These people were sharing their knowledge and enthusiasm about the outdoors with others, and kids in particular were eating it up. I am a teacher, and I love working with children, so I knew right then that becoming a Master Naturalist was going on my empty-nester bucket list.

The Virginia Master Naturalist (VMN) program manages 30 chapters throughout the state. These local chapters coordinate volunteer training classes and collaborate with local partners, including schools, nature centers, nonprofits, and local governments. According to the most recent annual report, the VMN program had 2,388 active volunteers in 2022 who made 288,000 contacts through educational outreach and improved more than 703 sites through stewardship. Volunteers also served as citizen scientists, reporting sightings of spotted lanternfly, monitoring vernal pool habitats, and testing water samples in streams and rivers. Augusta and Rockingham Counties both fall under the Headwaters Chapter, which has been around since 2011.

It took a few years, but I was finally able to start the training course this past February. Training for my cohort of 20 students included roughly 45 hours of classroom instruction plus 15 hours of educational field trips. The instructional sessions, held in the evenings at Bridgewater College, were split between spring and fall semesters so that we could experience field trips during different seasons. We had excellent speakers, including the ABC’s own Dr. Robyn Puffenbarger, on topics such as ornithology, herpetology, forestry, ecology, mammals, insects, and invasive species.

In addition, the field trips were well organized and very informative. For example, we had a behind-the-scenes geology tour of Grand Caverns led by JMU’s Dr. Angel Garcia, and a personal tour of Lake Shenandoah in Rockingham County by Jason Hallacher, a Senior Fisheries Biologist with DWR who has been instrumental in the establishment of pollinator gardens and educational displays at the lake. Carl Tugend, a black bear expert, also with DWR, trained us on how to present a “Living with Bears” workshop, a new outreach program designed to facilitate a reduction in human-bear conflicts.

Once the training is complete, a Master Naturalist is expected to accumulate 40 hours of volunteer service and 8 hours of continuing education each calendar year. There are many volunteer projects to choose from, including educational outreach; citizen science, such as Bumble Bee Watch and the Christmas Bird Count; and stewardship, involving such projects as restoring wildlife habitats, installing rain gardens, maintaining trails, etc.

As an educator, I have unfortunately noticed a significant decline over the years in children’s environmental awareness. It is a trend that I hope to help reverse through both community outreach and volunteer service projects as part of the Master Naturalist program. More information can be found at [VirginiaMasterNaturalist.org](http://VirginiaMasterNaturalist.org).

# Field Trip Reports



Female White-winged Scoter  
*photo by Thomas Roberts*

To quote Jo King, we had a “bonanza day” of birding on **Bell’s Lane, on Monday, November 6**: 42 species!!! The remarkable highlight was a White-winged Scoter on the private pond. Per Allen, this is the county’s 5th fall record. We also had a smattering of other duck species —a couple of Wood Ducks, Shovelers, Am. Wigeons, and Ring-necked. Other highlights were 2 Sharp-shinned, 1 Bald Eagle, 1 Peregrine, and 1 Blue-headed Vireo! All in all, it was a beautiful morning to be out and about birding, a great day, great group of birders (13 of us, plus 2 more that we caught up with a bit later). My thanks to everyone!  
—Penny Warren

Allen Lerner led a walk at **Augusta Springs Wetlands on Sunday, November 12**. The morning started out cold, but the birders tallied 21 species, with a highlight being the tiny, but lively, Winter Wren!  
—Allen Lerner



Imm. Red-shouldered Hawk  
*photo by Antonio Martinez*

A group of 10 members of the ABC met on **Wednesday, November 15**, to conduct a field trip to **McCormick Farm** in Raphine. A total of 32 species were recorded. Highlights of the walk were trees filled with over 100 Red-winged Blackbirds and Rusty Blackbirds fluttering around. In another location, a flock of at least 90 Mourning Doves lifting from the ground flying from tree to tree were fun to watch. Two Red-shouldered Hawks in an aerial display delighted us as well. Many thanks to all the participants. It was a time well spent in the field. Hope everyone had a wonderful Thanksgiving Day with family and friends. Looking forward to seeing everyone at the ABC Christmas Party December 11 and the two Christmas Counts, December 17 and 30.  
—Jo King.



The Chimney Hollow Trail Crew!  
*photo by Andrew Clem*

Four club members headed out to **Chimney Hollow Trail on Saturday, November 18**. It was a pleasant, invigorating walk in a beautiful setting, thanks in part to an overnight rain that washed the skies of smoke, but overall, the birds were scarcer than usual. Highlights were seeing Winter Wrens in two separate locations, along with a probable Brown Creeper, and a fleeting glimpse of a Pileated Woodpecker. Things were no better at nearby Braley Pond, so we called it a day. Many thanks to Joel Thompson, Jim Hill, and Wendy Hill for joining me!  
—Andrew Clem

# Species Profile: Snow Buntings

by Rich Wood



I was 12 years old when my dad and I came across a flock of bold, black and white birds flying across a barren field, covered in large patches of snow, in northern Pennsylvania. I had heard about these hardy visitors that breed in the Arctic, but I had never seen them until that cold, wintry morning in early February. My first Snow Buntings! They were constantly on the move, flying for a short distance, then walking quickly along the ground in search of old seeds of grain, accompanied by several Horned Larks. With their striking appearance, they quickly became one of my favorite birds!

Snow Buntings may be the toughest songbirds in North America. These northern residents are well equipped, with a natural down parka of dense white feathers that covers even the birds' ankles and base of the bill—and keeps their exposure to cold to a minimum. The adaptations are more than skin deep. A Snow Bunting's body temperature can dip 30 to 40 percent lower than other songbirds their size before hypothermia sets in. As weather conditions deteriorate, Snow Buntings can adjust their metabolism to quickly turn food into insulating body fat. And when the cold air arrives, they bury themselves in snowdrifts for warmth.

All these adaptations add up for a species that breeds farther north than any other songbird, returning to its Arctic nesting territories in March and singing its heart out when temperatures can still drop well below zero. Snow Buntings are so hardy, in fact, that the only time most people get to see them is during winter, when flocks may move south, where they magically appear and disappear over snow-blown fields, seemingly undeterred by what we call winter. For birdwatchers, the little bird with a toasted marshmallow pattern is a bright spot in a gray winter landscape.

Researchers have found that Snow Buntings wander a lot farther than scientists had previously thought. Even though they travel incredible distances, they consistently come back together at the same places, even if only for a day or two, before lighting out again. Flocks of Snow Buntings set off on foraging expeditions all over the landscape, when conditions—weather, snow cover, and food availability—are ideal. But they consistently appear to return to areas with abundant, reliable food resources, say a cornfield with a ready supply of leftover grain and a clear view of approaching predators. Here in Virginia, they're listed as uncommon and irregular transients inland, and uncommon winter residents along the coastal plain.

No matter where they turn up, Snow Buntings are welcome visitors to birders who enjoy seeing them foraging along the coast, or in farm fields, in search of winter grains. Their striking colors and nomadic habits make them one of our most enjoyable northern visitors!



Male Snow Bunting—breeding plumage  
*photo courtesy of Christoph Moning-Macauley Library*



Male Snow Bunting—winter plumage  
*photo by Rich Wood*



# President's Message

by Rich Wood

As we close another year of birds, birding, and bird conservation, I wanted to take a couple paragraphs in this message to reflect, and give thanks, on the year gone by.

From its roots in 1966, the Augusta Bird Club (ABC) has always strived to bring together people who have a common love of and passion for birds, and to provide opportunities to continue to feed our knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of these beautiful critters. We pride ourselves in being a community conservation organization that provides public education and opportunities for youth, and we do our best to give back to the communities we live in with conservation projects that benefit both the environment and our residents.

These opportunities and actions couldn't be accomplished without the strong support of our club members: You regularly support our activities by participating in a variety of monthly field trips, by taking time out of your busy schedules to attend our monthly meetings, by assisting at special events, by purchasing bird seed and feeders through our annual sale, and by sharing your wonderful photos and sightings on Facebook for everyone to enjoy! Moreover, you give us your feedback on how we're doing overall as a bird club, and you make suggestions on new ideas and initiatives we might consider pursuing.

And our membership continues to grow as well! In 2023, we added 36 new members—approximately a 23 percent increase over 2022! We're superexcited about everyone who has joined the ABC, and we hope we can attract even more people in 2024!

It's for these reasons, and many more, that I chose to join the bird club and volunteer my time to help guide our direction. Why? Because I enjoy birds, and enjoy connecting with others who enjoy birds! I appreciate the value of providing a little community service, and, honestly, it's good for my spirit!

So, for 2023, I say **THANK YOU** to all our members for what you do for bird conservation and for our communities! Despite the unsettling times we live in, we make a positive difference, and I look forward to 2024!

Happy Holidays and Good Birding!

## Membership

by Mona Bearor, Membership Coordinator



The Stephen Talley Family

## Check us out on the web

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



*The Meadowlark*  
Editor: Rich Wood

Augusta Bird Club Monthly Meeting  
November 13, 2023  
Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 pm by President Rich Wood. He welcomed all and introduced board members and committee chairs.

**Recent Sightings:** Nashville Warbler, Cedar Waxwings, Ross's Goose, Short-eared Owls, Purple Finches, Fox Sparrows, Red-breasted Nuthatch. A flock of approximately 300 American Pipits were located, as well as 34 Rusty Blackbirds. A Ruby-throated Hummingbird remains. It seems they are staying later every year.

**Field Trip Reports:** (1) 32 species were found at the recent McCormick's Mill hike. (2) The Augusta Wetlands trip found 21 species, including a Winter Wren. (3) The Bell's Lane hike found 42 species, including a rare White-winged Scoter. (4) The Boy Scout Camp hike was quiet but did find Catbirds, Palm Warblers, and Savannah Sparrows.

**Bird Seed Sale:** Crista Cabe reports 16,700 pounds of seed were sold. She thanked all the excellent volunteers. The final money results will be available soon. She reports the last 3 years have maintained excellent sales.

**Christmas Bird Counts:** The Augusta County CBC is December 17. Contact Allen Lerner if you'd like to participate (larnersky@mindspring.com). The Waynesboro count is December 30, with a tally dinner following. Crista Cabe is coordinating this count (cristacabe@gmail.com).

**December Holiday Party:** Our annual potluck dinner will be December 11 at 6:30 pm upstairs at Covenant Presbyterian Church. Meat and drinks are provided. Bring a side dish to share.

**Program:** Bobby Whitescarver discussed "Environmental Issues in the Shenandoah Valley."

*Submitted by Marilyn Nash, Secretary*