



THE MEADOWLARK

The monthly newsletter of the Augusta Bird Club



In This Issue

- Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch: 2023 Season Summary
- January Guest Speaker
- Upcoming Field Trips
- Membership Renewal Reminder
- Book Review: *The Comfort of Crows*
- Recent Sightings
- President's Message

Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch: 2023 Season Summary

By Vic Laubach, Coordinator

This year was the 47th season of fall-raptor migration counting at Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch—one of the longest-running hawkwatch sites in North America! Our small group of volunteer counters was able to cover 91 out of a possible 108 days this season (10-year avg = 90 days), totaling 528 hours of effort (avg = 590). Poor weather canceled the count on 8 days, and 8 days went uncounted due to unavailability of counters. In total, we recorded 32,647 migrating raptors this season, which is above our 10-year average of 27,930 raptors.

We had a mixed bag regarding raptor species numbers this year (some high, average, or low). The biggest highlight this year was the record Bald Eagle—count. We counted 480 BALD EAGLES, which is a new season record, surpassing the previous record of 426 in 2020 (the 10-year avg = 316). OSPREY numbers were quite a bit lower than average, with only 145 (avg = 259). Our NORTHERN HARRIER—count of 57 was also below average (avg = 67). Our count of 2,064 SHARP-SHINNED HAWKS was above average (avg = 1,828); however, our count of 255 COOPER'S HAWKS was below average (avg = 325). Of the buteos, our count of 792 RED-TAILED HAWKS was a little less than average (avg = 917), and our count of 104 RED-SHOULDERED HAWKS was a



Broad-winged Hawk
photo by Vic Laubach

little above average (avg = 97). Our BROAD-WINGED HAWK—count of 28,462 this year was fabulous (avg = 23,729)! We had 8 count-days in a row (Sep 16–24) with over 1,000 Broad-winged Hawks, with the three biggest days being 5,518 on Sep. 16; 4,068 on Sep. 18; and 8,497 on Sep. 21, bringing us many kettles and rivers of raptors to admire! Of the falcons, our counts of 139 AMERICAN KESTRELS (avg = 199) and 30 PEREGRINE FALCONS (avg = 42) were below average, but the MERLIN—count of 56 was above average (avg = 51).

Among the uncommon raptors, we did not see a single AMERICAN GOSHAWK this year (avg = 7), and I heard that several other sights up north were also low on goshawks. Our count of 9 GOLDEN EAGLES was notably below average (avg = 22). Our MISSISSIPPI KITE—count of 5 was one more than average (avg = 4). Unfortunately, we were not visited by any ROUGH-LEGGED HAWKS or SWAINSON'S HAWKS this year.

In terms of nonraptors, we had a fair number of waterfowl, including a flock of 15 Snow Geese on Nov. 27 and 18 Tundra Swans on Nov. 26. A total of 324 Double-crested Cormorants were counted in 12 different sightings, with the largest group containing 100 birds. A few Herring Gulls, Ring-billed Gulls, and Common Loons flew through heading southeast. An exciting, rare sighting was a pair of Sandhill Cranes that flew through the Gap on Nov. 22. A single group of 12 Great Egrets flew over on Oct. 15. We counted 46 Red-headed Woodpeckers migrating through, as well as many Northern Flickers and numerous Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers. Migrating warblers included only 6 species (Magnolia, Cape May, Black-throated Blue, Common Yellowthroat, Yellow-rumped, Palm). Other notable sightings included a group of Short-billed Dowitchers, Rusty Blackbirds, American Pipits, Horned Larks, Eastern Meadowlarks, Kingfishers, Killdeer, and Winter Wrens.

Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch: 2023 Season Summary (Cont'd)

Other notable migrants counted this fall included 154 Ruby-throated Hummingbirds as well as 1,568 Monarch Butterflies (with the last 2 spotted on Nov. 4). Finally, this is the first year that we had to deal with the nasty, invasive Spotted Lanternfly, native to China, which is a threat to many fruit crops and trees. Many days in September contained hundreds of Lanternflies all over the sky and ground, often landing on hawkwatchers and equipment. We stomped on as many as we could!

We decided not to host our annual Open House event this year due to the poor conditions of the Inn, parking lot, and access. The Inn closed a number of years ago and has rapidly deteriorated since then, and all electricity, water, and sewer has now been cut off. The future of this site remains unknown.

SEASON:	2023	10-yr AVG
Observ. Hours:	528	590
Osprey	145	259
Bald Eagle	480	316
N Harrier	57	67
Sharp-shinned	2,064	1,828
Cooper's Hawk	255	325
A Goshawk	0	7
Red-shoulder	104	97
Broad-winged	28,462	23,729
Red-tail	792	917
Rough-legged	0	1
Golden Eagle	9	22
Am Kestrel	139	199
Merlin	56	51
Peregrine	30	42
Unidentified	49	68
Mississippi Kite	5	4
TOTAL	32,647	27,930

UPCOMING MEETING

Monday, January 8, 7:00 pm

Covenant Presbyterian Church

2001 N Coalter St

Staunton, VA 24401

Guest Speaker: Vic Laubach

Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands



Vic Laubach grew up in central Pennsylvania and discovered birding as a young teen. After receiving a BS in Biology at Penn State and a PhD in Genetics from the George Washington University in DC, he did a postdoc at Glaxo Wellcome Pharmaceuticals. In 1996 he came to the University of Virginia, where he is now a tenured Professor of Surgery and runs a lab doing research in acute lung injury after transplantation. He and his wife moved to Waynesboro in 2002, where they reside today. Vic spends as much time as he can out birding locally in the Shenandoah Valley and beyond, and he is currently Vice President of the Augusta Bird Club and Coordinator of the Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch. He loves the camaraderie of birding, the challenge of finding new and rare birds, outdoor photography, and hiking.

Vic will give us a presentation about his recent trip to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands. He'll show plenty of photos of birds and animals as well as information about the uniqueness of the Galapagos animal life and Charles Darwin's visit in 1835.

Upcoming Field Trips



Saturday, January 6—Highland County

Meeting Time & Place: 7:30 am, Food Lion, North Coalter St, Staunton

Leader: Allen Lerner (lanersky@mindspring.com)

Start your New Year off with a bang, as we search the mountains and valleys of western Virginia for Golden Eagles, Rough-legged Hawks, Pine Siskins, Black-capped Chickadees, and more! If time allows, we'll head over to Bath County to look for wintering waterfowl. Dress appropriately for the weather, and bring water and snacks. Rain or snow will cancel.

Wednesday, January 17—McCormick Farm (Rain Date: January 24—same time/same place)

(McCormick Farm is located 0.5 mi east of I-81 (Raphine exit), just off SR-606)

Meeting Time & Place: 9:00 am, Mill Parking Lot

Leader: Jo King (kingbird@yahoo.com); (540) 430-0186

Throw on a coat and join Jo for her monthly bird walk! She'll be looking for some of the winter residents like woodpeckers and sparrows, as well as searching for a few of our winter finches, and Northern Harriers that may be hunting in the surrounding fields. Be on the lookout for wintering waterfowl on the ponds, including the rare Eurasian Wigeon, which has showed up for a 2nd consecutive winter!

Please dress appropriately for the weather, wear comfortable walking shoes, and bring water.

REMINDER! It's Time To Renew Your Membership



(all memberships expire 12/31)
by Mona Bearor, Membership Coordinator

Click the Link Below to Download the Membership Form

http://www.augustabirdclub.org/Docs/ABC_2024_Membership_form.pdf



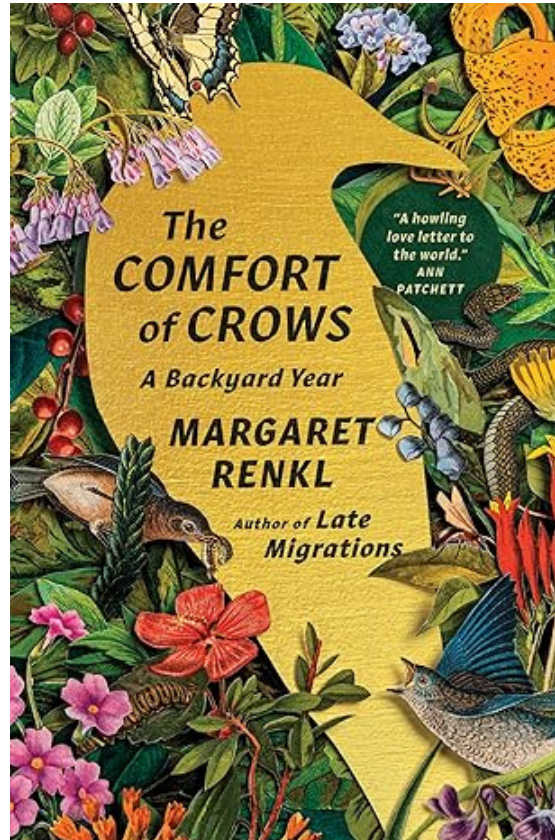
- Baron Schwartz
- Julia Rainville
- Lynn Rainville

Book Review

by Penny Warren

The Comfort of Crows : A Backyard Year

by Margaret Renkl



Some may be familiar with Margaret Renkl from her previous books, or perhaps from her much beloved nature columns in the *New York Times*. Whether you are familiar or not, I think you will find much delight in her newest book, *The Comfort of Crows*.

The book is made up of 52 expressive essays divided into the seasons, offering reflections from her backyard, neighborhood trails, a tiny cabin in the Cumberland Plateau, and her childhood home in Alabama. She blends and braids parallel stories of herself, her family, the rhythms of life with nature sightings. Her writings are somewhat wistful, moving gently but also deeply, and sometimes lamenting as to what has been lost, what is being lost, whether it is a family member, toads, birds, or a pond in the world.

Accompanying each essay is a page with beautiful, collaged artwork by her brother, Billy Renkl, reflecting the seasons and the essays themselves. One can spend much time just enjoying and soaking in the artwork.

I very much enjoyed lingering with this beautiful book, a wonderful ode to the world in which we live and which share with others ... humans and nature's creatures!

Recent Sightings



Cooper's Hawk—Jolivue
photo by Warren Faught



Short-eared Owl—Bell's Lane
photo by Antonio Martinez



Eastern Bluebird
photo by Bonnie Hughes



Red-winged Blackbird
photo by Vic Laubach



Loggerhead Shrike impaling its prey (grasshopper) on a sharp twig—Swoope
photos by Vic Laubach



Black Vultures—Broad Run Rd
photo by Rich Wood



Barred Owl—Bell's Lane
photo by Mark Kosiewski

Field Trip Reports

The late December Bell's Lane walk and a complete summary of the Augusta County and Waynesboro Christmas Bird Counts will appear in next month's issue of *The Meadowlark*.



President's Message

by Rich Wood

A Simple New Year's Resolution



I consider myself a Naturalist. I enjoy all things in nature, and, of course, birds always catch my attention. I believe I became a naturalist long before I even knew what a naturalist was or even later, in college, during my formal studies of Environmental Education. As a young boy growing up in northeast Pennsylvania, my father taught me, and my siblings, about the many things we encountered on our weekly outdoor hikes. Nothing we saw or found during these outdoor “discovery walks” was out of bounds—birds, salamanders, deer, fungi, bugs, flowers, rotten logs, or funky-looking rocks. It was all an “open book,” and my father always encouraged us to keep looking and be aware of things all around us! But perhaps one of the most important things I learned during these outdoor adventures was that my dad didn’t know everything out there! He couldn’t answer all of our curious, nonstop questions, and that was ok.

I think one of the best qualities of a naturalist, whether self-taught or professionally trained, is their thirst for knowledge, their constant curiosity about the natural world, and how it all fits together! We all know many of those famous names in history, those people whose inquisitive passion for knowledge changed the way humans looked at nature, interacted with our environment, and preached, practiced, and wrote about conservation—people like Charles Darwin, John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Roger Tory Peterson, Jane Goodall, and David Attenborough. One thing they all had/have in common was/is their love of flora, fauna, and the natural world.

As a birder, I often get distracted by other things around me while I’m enjoying one of my favorite pastimes. Rarely do I pass up the chance to check out some of the wildflowers growing nearby or ignore the opportunity to snap a photo of some fallen autumn leaves. I confess that I use my binoculars to watch butterflies or look at a Painted Turtle sunning itself on a log. I’m not embarrassed to admit that I’ve paused to take a closer look at a caterpillar crawling along the forest floor, even as other “birders” around me were stretching their necks searching for a Blackburnian Warbler in the treetops far above us. That’s what naturalists do! And I know many of you may be “closet naturalists” as well! Along with the many terrific bird photos I see posted, I pay attention to those other photos you throw in there too: a blooming Mountain Laurel or a Monarch Butterfly resting on a Goldenrod. We can’t help ourselves! As birders, we understand the important connections birds have to many other things: that whole web-of-life thing! We appreciate birds and, therefore, appreciate all things in nature, in every season, and wherever we go! So, for my New Year’s resolution this year, I resolve to continue learning about the many wonderful natural things around me, and to help out when and where I can. I’m a Naturalist, and proud of it!

Happy New Year and Good Birding!



We need your help to staff our exhibit tables at these upcoming spring events:

- Earth Day Staunton—Saturday, April 20, 2024 (11am–3pm)
Gypsy Hill Park Bandstand area
- Riverfest—Saturday, April 27, 2024 (9am–4pm)
Constitution Park, Waynesboro

If you can help for a couple of hours, please email Rich Wood:
(rwood@beagleboy831@comcast.net)

Check us out on the web

www.augustabirdclub.org



The Meadowlark
Editor: Rich Wood