

THE MEADOWLARK

The quarterly newsletter of the Augusta Bird Club



In This Issue

- Nocturnal Toots
- Holiday Party & 2nd Annual Wildlife Center Donation Drive
- Upcoming Monthly Programs
- Fall Sightings
- Fall Field Trip Reports
- Winter Field Trips
- 2026 Nature Camp
- Putting a Name with a Face Bird ID Quiz



photo by Rich Wood

Nocturnal Toots

Special Field Trip Report

by Rich Wood

It was a cool, clear evening when 12 members of the Augusta Bird Club (ABC) met at the park-and-ride lot in Verona in early November. As we decided our carpooling arrangements, there was a chatter of excitement. Our destination for the night was the Highland Retreat, a camp located in northwestern Rockingham County, close to the WV state line. This special field trip was coordinated by Robyn Puffenbarger and Bill Benish. As darkness fell and

the temps dropped, our anticipation grew! Our goal (with fingers crossed) was to observe the banding and data collection of one of the most mysterious and captivating nocturnal birds in nature, the Northern Saw-whet Owl.

Northern Saw-whet Owls are the smallest owls found in the Eastern US. A tiny owl with a catlike face, oversized head, and bright-yellow eyes, the Northern Saw-whet Owl is practically bursting with attitude. Where mice and other small mammals are concerned, this fierce, silent owl is anything but cute. One of the most common owls in forests across northern North America (and across the US in winter), saw-whets are highly nocturnal and seldom seen. Their high-pitched *toot-toot-toot* call is a common evening sound in evergreen mountain forests from January through May. The Northern Saw-whet Owl banding station at Highland Retreat was established by Dr. Clair Mellinger in 2001, a biology professor at Eastern Mennonite University. Two years later Clair was joined by Charles "Zig" Zignenfus, professor at James Madison University. Along with many university student volunteers, they have banded thousands of owls over the past 25 years. Sadly, Zig passed away in 2023, but he leaves a rich legacy of countless lives impacted through his gift of teaching mathematics and ornithology.

As stated by Zig, "In 2001, we began banding migrating Northern Saw-whet Owls at Highland Retreat Camp during the month of November. This banding station is a part of a larger research effort called Project OwlNet, which now includes over 100 banding stations from Alabama to Ontario and New Brunswick to British Columbia and Washington. That Northern Saw-whet Owls migrate in large numbers has only been documented within the past 30 years. The aim of our research is to learn about and document this movement of saw-whets from their more northern breeding grounds to their more southern wintering areas. The exact extent of their southern wintering grounds has not been precisely defined and the distribution of saw-whets within the wintering area is even more vague. By banding and recapturing those banded birds we are learning much valuable data about their life cycle and population dynamics."



Clair & Zig

photo courtesy of EMU

Nocturnal Toots

(Cont'd from page 1)

As we pulled up to our meeting location, a small building that serves as a kitchen for the camp, the only light that guided us inside was the soft glow of a porch light. We were greeted by Ben Sporey, one of the current coordinators, along with a small team of volunteer assistants. Ben began to discuss the history of the site and what they do overall during the evening. Although visitors can't go to see the actual mist nets, Ben described that they usually check the nets about 3 to 4 times each night, with about an hour in between each check. Along the wooded ridge above our location, they erect a row of six 12-meter nets, strung end to end. In the middle of the net row are 2 speakers that run a looped recording of the *toot-toot-toot* call of the male



Ben explains the protocol for collecting data.

Saw-whet Owl. Migrating birds hearing the taped call fly into the net. They are carefully removed from the nets, then brought back to the building to collect the data. They were getting ready to head out for their first check of the evening when we arrived, and Ben politely let us know that it wouldn't be unusual for no owls to be in the nets the first time around. After our 20-minute introduction, Ben and the volunteer team scooted out the door into the darkness-five dimly lit lights disappearing into the night. Ten minutes later, to our delighted surprise, the team returned with five, small cloth bags, each one holding one of the targeted birds. We were all eager to see the contents inside each bag! Owls!

The data collection process starts by weighing each bird in the bag. The bird's sex can be determined by using a wing-and-mass metric. Heavier birds are usually determined to be females, based on this metric. Throughout the evening, we discovered all the owls that were processed and banded that night were females, which made sense since they were attracted to the nets by the call of a male owl. After weighing, their wings are carefully measured. Then comes banding. Each bird is banded with its own small metal band, with an assigned number specific to that individual bird. The bands are provided by the Bird Banding Lab at Patuxent, MD, and the data are submitted to them.



L-R: Weighing the birds; placing a band on the owl's left leg; measuring the bird's wings
photos by Rich Wood

The final data collection is determining the bird's age, and it's the coolest method of all! To assess its age, they examine the bird's flight feathers. Banders look for wear and fading to distinguish old from new feathers, the pattern of which changes with the bird's age. Yet such wear can be subtle and hard to see . . . but owl banders have a secret weapon!

(Cont'd on page 3)

Nocturnal Toots

(Cont'd from page 2)

Glow-in-the Dark Owls

Their feathers glow in the dark! Owls fluoresce (shine) in the presence of ultraviolet light. Flick on a UV black light and the undersides of the flight feathers on almost all owls glow a brilliant neon raspberry, the result of porphyrins, a class of pigments that many birds use to color their eggs and that owls (along with about a dozen or so other orders of birds) add to their feathers. As the feather ages, the porphyrins break down, so the older the feather, the less brightly it glows. Open the wing of a newly caught autumn saw-whet, shine a UV flashlight on the underside of its wing (being careful to avoid the bird's eyes), and you may see that the outermost three or four primaries, and innermost two or three secondaries, glow brilliantly, while the feathers in the middle of the wing are much duller. Older, second-year birds, born the previous year and beginning to replace their juvenal flight feathers, will shine with brilliantly fluorescing new ones. An owl on its first migration, just a few months old, would have a nice, even purple glow across all of its wing feathers, which are the same age. Pretty cool! The birds that were aged the night we visited were either all hatch-year birds (born this year, in the spring) or two-year old birds.



photo by Andrew Clem

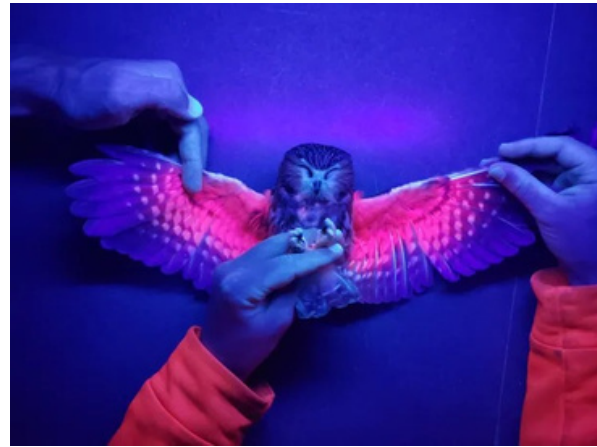


photo by Eastern Mennonite University

After explaining each step with our group, and patiently answering all our questions, the team marched back outside to check the mist nets once again. They wasted no time hiking up to the ridge to gather any additional captured owls, as we all waited in the building talking birds, trading stories, and describing recent trips that some of us took this year. In just a few minutes the volunteers came back in, with lots of smiles and enthusiasm, and holding five more stuffed bags-an additional five Northern Saw-whet Owls that were about to meet all of us, and get a new piece of “jewelry” they would wear for the rest of their lives. Ten birds banded, and the team wasn't done yet. They had one more check of the nets before calling it a night. However, it was getting late, and we had a long ride back to Augusta County, so we wished them more success and said our goodbyes.

It was a fantastic night, and we left with the lasting memories of these fascinating tiny owls, staring at us with those mesmerizing yellow and black eyes! A special thanks to Ben and his volunteer banding team at Highland Retreat for hosting us, and especially to Robyn and Bill for setting up our visit. Lastly, many thanks to our entire ABC group! It was a real “hoot” experiencing the Nocturnal Toots on a November night with all of you!



Some information for this article provided by Eastern Mennonite University and Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.



Our Owl Crew!



Upcoming Reminders

Holiday Party & 2nd Annual Wildlife Center Donation Drive



Monday, December 8 (6:30 pm)

Join us as we celebrate the holidays with ABC friends with a potluck meal. Please bring your favorite side dish, salad, bread, or dessert to share with the group. ABC will provide meat and beverages.

Once again, we will be collecting donated items for the Wildlife Center of Virginia at our holiday party. Last year was a great success, and we hope to top our 2024 total with this year's donations! The Wildlife Center is located right here in Augusta County, and it treats thousands of birds and other wildlife every year. Here's a list of its most needed items:

FEEDING SUPPLIES

eggs, baby rice cereal, baby food (fruit & meat), canned dog food, dry dog food (high quality/high protein), dry cat food (high quality/high protein), *Exact* bird food (available on Amazon), 1 mL and 3 mL syringes (available on Amazon).

CLEANING SUPPLIES

antibacterial liquid soap, Dawn dishwashing liquid (blue), kitchen-size (or larger) trash bags, Scrub Daddy sponges, contractor bags

For questions about the holiday party, email Linda Matkins (linda.matkins@gmail.com).

For questions about the Wildlife Center Donation Drive, email Ramona Bearor (conservebirds@gmail.com).



ABC Christmas Bird Counts

Augusta County CBC: Sunday, December 14, 2025

For more information and to participate, contact Allen Larner (larnersky@mindspring.com).

Waynesboro CBC: Sunday, January 4, 2026

For more information and to participate, contact Crista Cabe (cristacabe@gmail.com).

Upcoming Monthly Programs

January 12, 2026, 7:00 pm

When Birds Collide: Carla Dove

Carla J. Dove is Program Director of the Feather Identification Lab at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. Her expertise is in the specialized field of microscopic identification of feathers. As Director of the Feather Identification Lab, Carla leads one of the only laboratories in the world that specializes in the identification of 'snarge' (bird ick). The lab processes over 12,000 cases each year and mainly specializes in the identification of bird strikes (bird/aircraft collisions). The lab is supported by interagency agreements with the US Air Force, US Navy and the FAA to identify birds that are hazardous to aviation safety. Current identification methods include microscopy, museum specimen comparisons, and DNA "barcoding."



Carla grew up in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and began working at the Smithsonian in 1989 as a Museum Technician. She then went on to complete her PhD in Environmental Science and Public Policy at George Mason University in 1998 under the direction of Roxie Laybourne. She holds a MS in Systematics, Evolution, and Population Biology from George Mason University and a BS in Wildlife Biology from the University of Montana. Dr. Dove also completed studies in Natural Resource Management at Lord Fairfax Community College.

Carla will present to the ABC club virtually via Zoom during our regular January meeting. She will review the activities of the Feather Identification Lab at the Smithsonian Institution and cover the processes involved in Forensic Ornithology.

February 9, 2026 (7:00 pm)

Coastal Virginia Wildlife Research - Andrew Rapp

Andrew Rapp has been a lifelong birder and naturalist currently based primarily out of Virginia. He grew up in the Blue Ridge Young Birders Club as one of the founding members. Andrew continued his education at the College of William and Mary, receiving a double major in Biology and Environmental Science & Policy. Once out of college, Andrew worked for three years in a variety of wildlife field jobs across the mid-Atlantic as well as in Texas and Louisiana.

Andrew currently works as a Field Zoologist for the Virginia Natural Heritage Program, where he monitors populations of state rare animals. His inspiration for the presentation came from working two seasons as a Kiptopeke Hawkwatcher and Migratory Entomologist for the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory (CVWO).

During these two seasons, Andrew grew passionate for the work and research conducted by CVWO in Virginia and now coordinates the Morning Flight Project on the Eastern Shore and acts as a board member for CVWO. He is excited to return to the Valley and share the ongoing research conducted by the Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory with the ABC.



Count your birds. Make your birds count.
Be a FeederWatcher!

Join Project FeederWatch
Help scientists track feeder
bird populations.

Join Now!

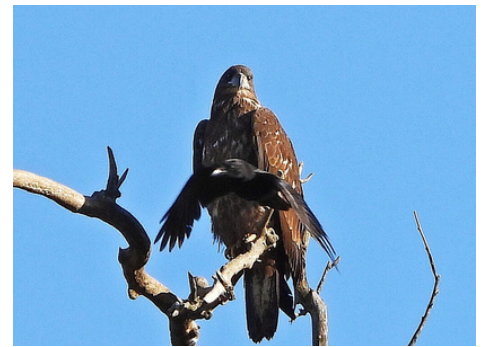
To learn more and to sign up,
go to: <https://feederwatch.org/>

Fall Sightings

It's been a very active fall season for our local and migratory birds. Here's a look at just a few that our talented club photographers have caught on camera! Enjoy!



L-R: Northern Waterthrush; Broad-winged Hawk; Vesper Sparrow (photos by Vic Laubach)



L-R: Male Hooded Mergansers (photo by Andrew Clem); Northern Mockingbird (photo by Joel Stauffer); Immature Bald Eagle w/American Crow (photo by Al Wolf)



L-R: Loggerhead Shrike (photo by Antonio Martinez); Blue-headed Vireo (photo by Tom Roberts); Cape May Warbler (photo by Tom Roberts)



L-R: Purple Finches (photo by Ann Cline); Hermit Thrush (photo by Anna Maria Allard);
RARE BIRD: Inca Dove, Mt Crawford (photo by Vic Laubach)

Fall Field Trip Reports

It was a very busy fall season for field trips! Many thanks to all our trip leaders!

We had a nice variety of warblers and other neotropical migrants on our field trip up in the **Blue Ridge on September 13**. Many of them were either too fast or too well hidden to properly identify, but the ones here are fairly certain: Magnolia Warbler, Yellow-bellied Flycatcher, Yellow-throated Vireo, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Scarlet Tanager (male, in nonbreeding plumage), Tennessee Warbler, Red-bellied Woodpecker, and Blackpoll Warbler. We also saw a probable Blackburnian Warbler, Nashville Warbler, and Least Flycatcher, as well as an Eastern Phoebe, a Cedar Waxwing, and several American Goldfinches and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. Just wonderful! Thanks to everyone!

—Andrew Clem



It was another beautiful morning for 16 members of the ABC to gather and explore parts of **Bells Lane on September 16**. It was not a very birdy morning but we made the most of it and tallied 34 species.

There was not much happening at the private pond except for a nice group of Barn Swallows, one Rough-winged and some Chimney Swifts overhead and over the pond. An interesting call note caught our attention as we approached the pond but no one was quite certain what it was, and no one saw anything.

Merlin suggested a Blue Grosbeak but we did not include it in our list. Back on the lane near the first farm a large group of Cowbirds flew to the distant pasture.... A little too far to discern if anything else was in the flock. Between the first wetland area down to "Cujo Corner" we had a few warblers, including American Redstarts, Magnolia and Northern Parulas. We also found a couple Red-eyed Vireos. Mark caught a glimpse of a thrush and was pretty sure it was a Veery, but we didn't catch sight of it again and thereby, we did not include in our list.



As the saying goes, "A good day of birding is any day you go birding." I thank everyone who attended and added to the enjoyment of the morning! Happy migration!

—Penny Warren



On **September 24** 8 intrepid birders met to conduct a field trip to **McCormick Farm**. Some 37 species were recorded. A good assortment of warblers, woodpeckers, phoebes, and pewees were welcomed, along with a Scarlet Tanager and Eastern Meadowlarks. Many thanks to all the participants. Your enthusiasm and camaraderie touches my heart.

Cheers!

—Jo King

Fall Field Trip Reports (Cont'd)

In contrast to Saturday, September 27, when our field trip to **Augusta Springs Wetlands** was originally scheduled, the weather this morning, **October 4**, was almost perfect. Thanks to Wendy Hill, her daughter Cindy, Jeff Overholt, and Stephen Pietrowski for coming along on today's outing!
—Andrew Clem



We started hearing lots of birds soon after we began our hike on our field trip to **Madison Run** on **Saturday, October 11**, but for the most part they remained extremely elusive all morning. In particular, we kept hearing Ruby-crowned Kinglets, but never had a clear view of any of them. At one point the Merlin app on 2 of our phones indicated that a Brown Creeper was present, but the calls were probably too high-pitched for us to hear. We heard a variety of woodpeckers, including Pileated, but the only clear sighting was that of a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. There was a lot of bird activity at the Austin Mountain trail crossing, and we finally had decent looks at a Blue-headed Vireo, one of the late fall migrants, along with Carolina Chickadees, etc. As a reflection of the nice weather conditions, the trail was full of human hikers and their canine companions. Thanks to David Chernoff and Stephen Pietrowski for coming along!

—Andrew Clem



Jo and Bill check their Merlin app

On **October 15**, 10 members of the ABC conducted a bird walk to **McCormick Farm** in Raphine, VA. A total of 37 species were recorded. Highlights were the Merlin sighting and the numerous Cedar Waxwings and Yellow-rumped Warblers. The croaking Raven welcomed us as we began our walk. Many thanks to all the participants. Your enthusiasm and camaraderie is most appreciated. Happy birding.

—Jo King



Fall Field Trip Reports (Cont'd)

The 10 ten intrepid members of the ABC observed 34 species on **November 12** at **McCormick Farm**. Despite the cold and wind, many great sightings were observed: A flight of sparkling Killdeer rising from the field into the sunlight, to Cedar Waxwings throughout the walk; beautiful views of the Hermit Thrush, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Golden-crowned Kinglet enthralled the group. Ducks, hawks, and woodpeckers completed the walk. Many thanks to all the participants for your exceptional skills and camaraderie. Love all of you. Cheers!

—Jo King



I am going to begin my report with the exciting ending of our trip to **Bells Lane** on **November 14**, when we saw a Barred Owl!!! It's a bit uncanny in that on Dec. 28, 2023, we had a Barred Owl in almost the exact location and the same scenario of a Cooper's Hawk sounding off with its alarm call and harassing the Barred Owl. The owl stayed in one spot and moved its head now and then in response to the hawk. Several members were able to get some good shots, and I'm sure those will be posted on the club's webpage. An "innocent bystander," a young guy just walking on Bells got roped in by our group to see the owl! The owl was not easy to find, but he hung in there until he spotted it! He asked how often we did a bird walk! As an aside, there were 2 posts on the kiosk from earlier in the month of the Barred Owl sightings.

Back to the beginning of our day..... sunny, crisp and cool, not much wind at all which provided for a great outing. There were three Canadas on the private pond and no other waterfowl. In addition to the owl and the Coop, we had N. Harrier, RT hawk, Kestrel, several Sapsuckers, Red-bellied, Downy, Flicker, both WC and WT Sparrows, Grackle, YR warbler and others for a list of 34 species. Bill Benish got on a group of Rusty Blackbirds but they took off before most of us had a chance to see and I did not include them in my list.

As always, I thank the group of 9 bird devotees who joined me and for their great ears and eyes! A delightful morning! Good birding!

— Penny Warren

Our **November 15** field trip to the **Chimney Hollow trail** was sparsely attended (just David Chernoff and me), but proved to be well worth the effort from hiking. We saw/heard at least 7 Winter Wrens in separate locations along the way, but most of them were camera-shy. Likewise, there were many Red-breasted Nuthatches (est. 6 total), but they stayed high up in the trees, and the photos I got were only so-so. The biggest surprise of the day was when I heard an odd, persistent "chip" call, and I scoffed when Merlin indicated that there was an Eastern Phoebe present. (This was at the stream crossing where I usually turn back.) In a deep forest? NO WAY! Everybody knows that Eastern Phoebes are found exclusively in open countryside. But just to be sure, I did my "sfee-bzee" whistle, and a dark bird soon buzzed us, evidently rather annoyed. David got a very good photo, confirming that Merlin was correct. We noticed there were actually *2* Eastern Phoebes chasing each other, and later I got a fairly good photo of one of them. We hit a hot spot on the way back, confirming that some of the small birds in the tree tops were Golden-crowned Kinglets. As I was looking at one of the photos David took on his camera screen, I noticed a down-curved bill, indicating that it was a Brown Creeper, not a Red-breasted Nuthatch as we had both thought. BINGO! That was our #1 target bird. Finally, we saw 2 medium-large birds flying around the trees on the return leg of the hike, and I'm pretty sure that they were Ruffed Grouse. We also caught glimpses of Pileated Woodpeckers and heard a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker as well as a Pine Siskin. The species total of 13 was not impressive, but we were quite satisfied by getting some very good sightings.

— Andrew Clem

Winter Field Trips

For all field trips, dress appropriately for the weather, wear comfortable walking shoes, and bring your water bottle.

Saturday, January 3, 2026 - Highland County (bad weather date, Saturday, January 10, 2026)

Meeting Time & Place: 7:30 am, Food Lion parking lot, 600 N. Coalter St., Staunton

Leader: Allen Larner (larnersky@mindspring.com), (540) 280-3423

Join Allen for his annual winter trip, west, to Highland County. We'll be searching for winter specialties such as Golden Eagle, Black-capped Chickadee, American Tree Sparrow, Pine Siskin, and maybe Evening Grosbeak. Who knows what we will find for the day! If we have enough time, we'll travel over to Bath County to check out the lakes for waterfowl.

Wednesday, January 21, 2026—McCormick Farm (bad weather date: January 28)

Meeting Time & Place: 9:00 am, Mill parking lot

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

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

Bundle up and join Jo to explore the fields, forests, and ponds of McCormick Farm, and discover the birds that make the farm their winter home.

Wednesday, February 18, 2026 (bad weather date: February 25)

Meeting Time & Place: 9:00 am, Mill parking lot

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

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

Jo's winter birding at McCormick Farm continues. Wear warm clothes, and and join her to discover our winter feathered friends!

Friday, February 20, 2026—Bells Lane

Meeting Time & Place: 8:30 am, ABC kiosk at west end of Bells Lane

Leader: Penny Warren (onthewingnow17@gmail.com)

Join Penny for a winter walk on Bells Lane. A leisurely visit to the private pond, walk some of the lane, check the wooded areas, the marshy ponds, the grasslands, head up to the top of the lane, check the beaver ponds and see what ol' man winter brings us.... snow and swans?!?

Membership

We would like to welcome our new members, and very much appreciate you joining, and supporting ABC!



Ana Maria Allard
Lysanne Taylor
Margaret Romanik
Mary Sproles Martin
Luanne Goodloe



Now Accepting 2026 Nature Camp Applications



Last chance to apply for full or partial scholarships to Nature Camp Summer 2026 in Vesuvius, Virginia (www.NatureCamp.net). Great opportunity for students in rising grades 6–12 who like to be outside and are interested in the environment & conservation. Scholarship applications are available on the Augusta Bird Club website at [Add a little bit of body text](#). Deadline for submission is December 15, 2025. For more information on scholarships, contact Sarah Foster at FosterCabin@hotmail.com or visit <https://augustabirdclub.org/nature-camp/>.

Copies of *Birds of Augusta County, Virginia* (fifth edition) still available to purchase.

The book is a permanent record of the 324 species seen in Augusta County to date, listed in taxonomic sequence. Each listing includes abundance and habitat information along with extreme dates, peak counts, and breeding status. The listings are current as of August 2025. This will be a great addition to your resource library!

The price is \$14. If you're interested in purchasing a copy, please email Ramona Bearor, treasurer@augustabirdclub.org.

Birds of Augusta County, Virginia



Fifth Edition
Augusta Bird Club 2025

Herbert Allen Lerner III, Editor

"The greatest gift of birds is their ability to bring a sense of wonder and joy into our lives." – Unknown

Putting a Name with a Face

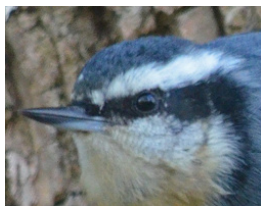
Take the Winter Backyard Bird Face Quiz

Can you ID these backyard species by just their faces/heads? (answers in the Spring, 2026 issue)

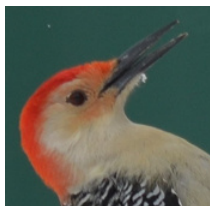
Photos taken from my backyard, and heavily cropped — Rich Wood



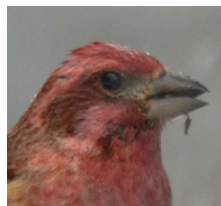
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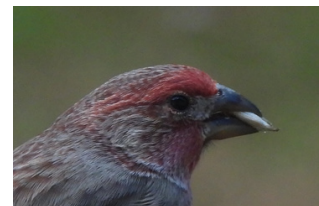
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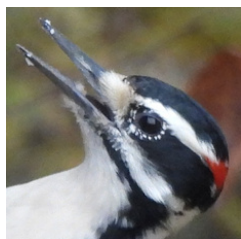
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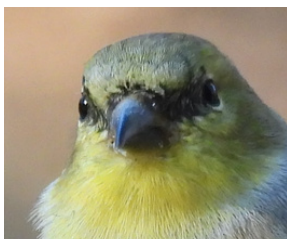
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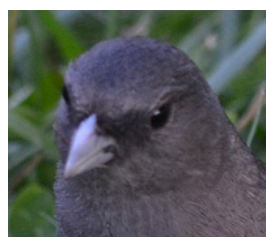
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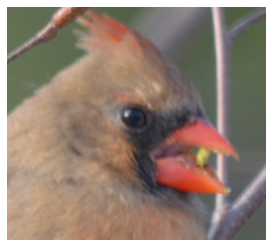
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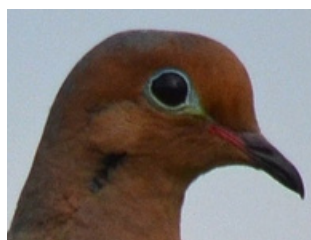
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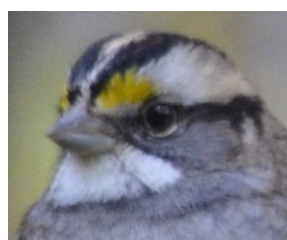
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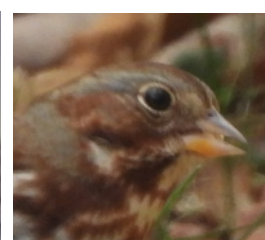
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14



15



16

Answers to Owl Quiz from the Fall Issue



- 1.a – Great-horned Owl
- 2.c – Northern Saw-whet Owl
- 3.b – Flammulated Owl
- 4.b – Snowy Owl
- 5.c – Northern Spotted Owl
- 6.c – Burrowing Owl
- 7.a – Northern Pygmy Owl
- 8.b – Short-eared Owl

Check us out on the web
www.augustabirdclub.org



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Editor: Rich Wood