



THE MEADOWLARK

The quarterly newsletter of the Augusta Bird Club



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Providing Water for Birds

Reprinted from *Bird Notes*

Like all animals, birds need water to survive. Though they can extract some moisture from their food, most birds drink water every day. Birds also use water for bathing, to clean their feathers and remove parasites. After splashing around in a bath for a few minutes,



photo by Rich Wood

a bird usually perches in a sunny spot and fluffs its feathers out to dry. Then it carefully preens each feather, adding a protective coating of oil secreted by a gland at the base of its tail. For these reasons, a dependable supply of fresh, clean water is attractive to most birds. In fact, a birdbath will even bring to your yard birds that don't eat seeds and wouldn't visit your feeders. Providing water for birds can also improve the quality of your backyard bird habitat and should provide you with a fantastic opportunity to observe bird behavior.

What's Wrong with a Good Old-fashioned Birdbath?

Say "birdbath," and most people think of a concrete basin mounted on a pedestal, the kind often sold in lawn and garden shops. Though these baths make nice lawn ornaments, they aren't the best setup for most birds. For one thing, they're often too deep. A good birdbath mimics shallow puddles, which are nature's birdbaths. Concrete baths are also hard to clean; the tiny nooks and crevices must be scrubbed extra hard to dislodge algae and sediment. And finally, concrete basins often crack if they freeze during winter.

Find a Better Birdbath

When you're choosing a birdbath, look for one with a basin that you can clean easily. It should also have a gentle slope to allow birds to wade into the water. You can make your own bath out of a garbage can lid, a saucer-type snow sled, or even an old frying pan. But if you'd rather buy one, look for a birdbath made of tough plastic that won't break if the water freezes or if your dog knocks it over. For the ultimate birdbath, set up a permanent pool in your backyard. Just dig a shallow hole in the ground and line it with plastic or cement to make it watertight. Plant ferns and other native plants around the pool to make it more attractive. You can add a pump to circulate the water if you want to create elaborate multilevel pools.

Setting Up a Birdbath

Try to imitate a natural puddle as much as possible when you're installing your birdbath. Birds seem to prefer baths that are at ground level, but if you are concerned about cats, raise the bath two or three feet off the ground. And don't forget to put it where you'll have a good view of the birds. It's a good idea to put some sand in the bottom of the bath, to give the birds sure footing. If the bath is on the ground, arrange a few branches or stones so that they emerge from the water, so birds can stand on them and drink without getting wet (this is especially important in the winter). Place your birdbath in the shade, near trees or shrubs if possible.

(Cont'd on page 2)

Providing Water for Birds

(Cont'd from page 1)



photo by Rich Wood

A shady location slows evaporation and keeps the water fresh longer. Furthermore, birds can't fly well when they're wet, so they're vulnerable to predators when they're bathing. With cover nearby, they'll feel safe—they can escape quickly if their splashing is interrupted by a cat or a hawk—and they'll be more likely to venture into the water. One of the best ways to make your birdbath more attractive is to provide some motion on the water's surface. Water dripping into the basin catches the attention of birds. You can buy one of the commercially available products that drips or sprays water into a birdbath. Or recycle an old bucket or plastic container by punching a tiny hole in the bottom, filling it with water, and hanging it above the birdbath so the water drips slowly down.

Keeping the Water from Freezing

Immersion-style water heaters have improved greatly in the last few years, and they're perfect for keeping the water from freezing in a birdbath. More important, they're safe to operate. The latest immersion heaters turn off if the water in the bath dries up. Put your heater on a ground-fault interrupted circuit (available from any hardware or electrical supply store) to eliminate the danger of electrical shock. These heaters cost pennies a day to operate and they're available at most places where bird feeders are sold. Though some people advocate adding glycerin to a birdbath to act as an antifreeze, we do not recommend it. Glycerin is a low-level toxin and has a sweet taste. Ingesting large amounts of glycerin elevates the blood sugar level of a bird, which can be harmful or fatal. And if a bird bathes in a glycerin solution, its feathers may become matted. Birds bathe and preen to enhance the insulation value of their feathers. Matted feathers are poor insulators, leaving a bird susceptible to cold temperatures. So, use an immersion heater instead.

Maintaining a Birdbath

The key to attracting a large number of birds is to keep your bath full of water at all times. In the natural environment, most sources of shallow water are intermittent. Although puddles form after a hard rain, reliable pools are rare and birds will travel great distances to visit them. Keep your birdbath full and you'll be well rewarded. But remember to clean your birdbath every couple of days. Don't let the water become stale; clean off the bottom of the bath immediately if green algae starts to form. Remember: if you're trying to make your backyard a better place for birdlife, few things are more attractive than a well-maintained birdbath. Just add water and watch the fun!

Fun Facts About Ruby-throated Hummingbirds

1. A hovering Ruby-throated Hummingbird beats its wings around 50 times a second.
2. Ruby-throats weigh only about as much as a penny, around 3 grams.
3. Despite their diminutive size, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds are endurance champions. In the fall, some may cross the Gulf of Mexico in one nonstop, 500-mile flight.
4. A Ruby-throat's heart races as fast as 20 beats a second, and its resting body temperature sits at about 102 Fahrenheit.
5. During cold temps, they enter a kind of short-term hibernation called *torpor*, dramatically lowering their body temperature and heart rate to preserve vital energy.



photo by Rich Wood

Spring Sightings

It's been a fantastic spring season, with lots of super bird sightings and even better photos! Check a few of them out!



L-R: Nashville Warbler (by Sarah Foster); Pileated Woodpecker (by Matt Diley); Mourning Warbler (by Vic Laubach)



L-R: Great-crested Flycatcher (by Andrew Clem); Black-billed Cuckoo and Yellow-billed Cuckoo (both by Scott Priebe); Tree Swallows (by Bonnie Hughes); Worm-eating Warbler (by Joel Stauffer)



L-R: Ruffed Grouse (by Vic Laubach); Pine Warbler (by Andrew Clem); Wilson's Phalarope (by Vic Laubach)



L-R: Cedar Waxwing eating Serviceberry (by Ann Cline); Hudsonian Whimbrels flying (by Mark Kosiewski) & standing (by Vic Laubach)



New Augusta County Breeding Bird Discovered!

On May 12, Vic Laubach birded Augusta Springs Wetlands, where he observed a female Hooded Merganser with 7 tiny ducklings. According to our club's avian records keeper, Allen Lerner, this is the first documented breeding record for Hooded Merganser in Augusta County! Well done, Vic! (photo by Vic Laubach)

New American Barn Owl Nest Box Program

Ghostly pale and normally strictly nocturnal, American Barn Owls are silent predators of the night world. In Virginia, these owls are uncommon-to-rare permanent residents that breed in select locations throughout the Commonwealth. An important threat to Barn Owls is the lack of suitable nesting and hunting sites. Tree cavities, particularly those in large, old trees, are likely less abundant today than in the past. Additionally, the loss of old barns and silos for nesting and their replacement by newer structures that are less accessible to owls have contributed to their decline.



photo by Vic Laubach

Addressing the conservation of this species by installing nest boxes and monitoring the boxes has shown great promise. Landowners can contribute to conservation efforts by installing (or allowing to be installed) nest boxes on their properties and by preserving old barns and silos that can serve as nesting sites.

Based on this information, and knowing that Augusta County has a large amount of excellent habitat in agricultural land, the Augusta Bird Club (ABC) is beginning a new **American Barn Owl Nest Box Program**. We are looking for interested farms that would be willing to allow us to install and monitor nest boxes. The bird club will cover the cost of purchasing/constructing the boxes, installing the boxes and monitoring the boxes.

If you own a farm, or a large property, or know someone who does, that may be a suitable site for a new nest box please contact us through email. A site that has an old barn/silo would be ideal, but not required. We would love the opportunity to visit the property and speak to the landowner. Please contact any of the following club members:

- Lynne Parks (Conservation Committee Co-Chair), v.lynneparks@gmail.com
- Ann Cline (Conservation Committee Co-Chair), anncline1443@yahoo.com
- Rich Wood, beagleboy831@comcast.net
- Antonio Martinez, middleriverstudio@gmail.com



Two of the Barn Owl nest boxes we'll be using in the new program.

L: wooden box (this one built by Antonio Martinez & Marion Bittinger), promoted by Cornell NestWatch and designed by Steve Simmons

R: plastic box sold by the Barn Owl Box Company and designed by Mark Browning

Spring Field Trip Reports

It's been a super busy, but enjoyable and rewarding, spring field trip season! Many thanks to all our trip leaders!

Jo King's McCormick Farm Series

March 11

It was a warm sunny morning when 22 members and guests of the ABC met to conduct a bird walk at McCormick Farm. A total of 35 species were recorded. We were welcomed in the parking lot by a Red-tailed Hawk sitting high in a tree and a Bald Eagle gliding over the pond. Singing Eastern Towhees, Eastern Meadowlarks, and Song and Field Sparrows made for a most pleasant walk. Many thank to all the participants. The warm-hearted birders made for a most congenial occasion.

April 22

A group of 16 congenial birders conducted a field trip, during which we tallied 40 species. An Eastern Warbling Vireo welcomed the group with its melodious song, along with Eastern Bluebirds, Song Sparrows, an Orchard Oriole, and a Baltimore Oriole, singing his flute-like whistles in the old Willow Tree. Spotted Sandpipers, a lone Wild Turkey hen, numerous American Goldfinches, Eastern Towhees, and many Yellow-rumped Warblers made for a most pleasant morning. A big thank you to all the participants. Your camaraderie is very much appreciated.

May 20

A total of 14 members and guests attended this month's McCormick bird walk. All in all, 42 species were recorded. Species of note included: Blackpoll Warbler, Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers, and a Green Heron. We experienced a great sighting of two Brown Thrashers (sexes are alike) shaking off water from their stream bathing, as well as lovely vocalizations from Song and Field Sparrows, Eastern Towhees, Northern Cardinals, a Great-crested Flycatcher, and an Eastern Wood Pewee. It was a lovely morning spent with friends and all the bounty of nature to behold. My thanks to all the participants. Have a great summer see in all in August!



March 11



April 18



May 20

It was a beautiful morning on **April 18**, as 19 members of the ABC met at **Augusta Springs Wetlands** for a Birds & Blooms walk. We discovered lots of nature during our 2-hour walk, which included birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, lots of butterflies, and, of course, blooms! The group tallied about 31 species of birds, with a couple other members seeing/hearing a few more. Our bird highlights included several Blue-gray Gnatcatchers, 3 soaring Broad-winged Hawks, Eastern Towhees, a singing Ovenbird, and a very vocal Northern Flicker. Our wildflower finds included Rue Anemone, Wild Geranium, May Apple, Bristly Buttercup, Star Chickweed, native Coral Honeysuckle, and three species of violets. It was a great morning, with a terrific group of people! Thanks to everyone who participated and joined in our discoveries!

—Rich Wood



Spring Field Trip Reports

(Cont'd from page 5)

May 2 was an amazing day of birding for our field trip up on the **Blue Ridge Parkway and adjacent Route 610**. Attendance was sparse, no doubt reflecting the cloudy and chilly weather, but conditions improved later on. Highlights included Hooded Warbler, Yellow-throated Vireo, White-eyed Vireo, Wood Thrush, Cerulean Warbler, American Redstart, and Indigo Bunting. Thanks to Marilyn Palmer Nash, her daughter and friend, Tom Roberts, Lynne Parks, and Chis Siron for joining us!

- Andrew Clem

It was a beautiful morning to be on **Bells Lane** on **May 4**, as 13 club members took a very leisurely 3½ -hour walk, enjoying the sights and sounds of spring. The group tallied 50 species.

At the pond, some of the highlights were a nice showing of Chimney Swifts (approximately 43), soaring around, and then a large group of them began skimming the surface of the pond ... cool thing to watch! We also saw 2 Spotted Sandpipers, a Green Heron, Belted Kingfisher, Eastern Kingbird, and had great looks at White-crowned Sparrows and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles. Back on the lane, we had a few warblers, including Common Yellowthroat, Yellow, Palm and Yellow-rumped Warblers

Two birds I did not include in my list were a Northern Parula, heard by one person, and a Veery, seen by one person. A complete list of birds can be found on eBird. A delightful morning with a group of delightful birders! I thank everyone who attended and added their enthusiasm and expertise! Happy Birding!

—Penny Warren



Spotlight on a New Field Trip Opportunity—Springdale Water Gardens

This past winter, Tish Folsom, owner of **Springdale Water Gardens** near Greenville, proposed to ABC's Field Trip Committee about offering her site for regular monthly bird walks. Tish has been a longtime club member, and Springdale Water Gardens a big supporter of the club and the Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch. Tish will lead the walks around the variety of habitats that surround the gardens the second Friday of each month at 8:00 am (before she opens to the public at 9:00 am). The rain dates are the third Friday of the month.

So far, 3 field trips have been run: March 13, April 10, and May 8. Participation has ranged from 6 to 12 birders. Some folks have birded as little as ¾ of a mile, and some have walked much further along Old Quarry Lane. Tish said the first group spent as little as 1 hour birding, on a chilly, 22 degree morning in March, with the May group enjoying 3 hours on a beautiful spring morning. So far, participants have spotted 8 warbler species (including a VERY cooperative Wilson's Warbler up close), 3 swallow species, Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, Wild Turkey, and 5 different species of woodpeckers. With nesting season now in full swing, Tish reports that Cedar Waxwings are now building nests at the parking area, and Catbirds, Mockingbirds, and Brown Thrashers are nesting in many thickets. In addition, both Orchard and Baltimore Orioles are singing daily. Some 71 species have been recorded on Springdale Water Gardens checklists this year, with 115 different birds recorded since 2010, when the hotspot was created. Some may remember that Penny Warren led field trips here in those early years.

Tish would like to invite you to join us as we search for birds along the ponds, stream, fields, woods, and thickets in all of the seasons. Go to the next page (Summer Field Trips) for the upcoming Summer dates.

Summer Field Trips

Don't put away those binoculars just because it's a bit warmer outside! There are many resident birds waiting to be spotted, and even some early migrants! A few leaders will still be offering summer walks. **For all field trips, dress appropriately for the weather, wear comfortable walking shoes, and bring your water bottle and a snack.**



Springdale Water Gardens Friday Birding Series

Join Tish on the second Friday of each month to explore the variety of habitats, and birds, that call Springdale Water Gardens home! All walks meet at the main parking lot, and begin at 8:00 am. Rain dates are always the third Friday of each month. Springdale Water Gardens are located at 340 Old Quarry Rd, Greenville, VA 24440. Beginning birders are encouraged to join us! For more information, email tishspringdale@gmail.com.



Upcoming Summer Dates!

- Friday, June 12
- Friday, July 10
- Friday, August 14



Saturday, June 20 (rain cancels)—Bother Knob & Reddish Knob

Meeting Time & Place: 7:00 am, Food Lion Parking Lot, 600 N. Coalter St, Staunton
Leader: Andrew Clem (agclem@comcast.net)

Join Andrew as he ventures in search of some of the uncommon resident birds that live at higher elevations. The group will probably hike 1.5 to 2 miles each way, but if enough people have suitable 4-wheel drive vehicles, they could start the hike closer to the destination.

Wednesday, August 19 (rain date August 26)—McCormick Farm

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

Don't sweat the summer heat! Join Jo King as she searches the cool fields, forests, and ponds of McCormick Farm for resident breeding birds and early migrants . . . and maybe a surprise or two! This is a great walk if you're just starting out in birding! Are you new member? This is the bird walk "to get your feet wet!"

Peak Birdwatching Times in Your Garden This Summer

By Vince Santacroce (reprinted from the Feathered Guru)

- Early morning, 30 min before sunrise to 9:00 AM, is peak activity.
- Morning activity comes from feeding nestlings, singing, and defending territory.
- Midday activity drops due to heat, predators, and satiety.
- Water and shade attract birds during midday inactivity.
- Late afternoon and early evening show a smaller activity peak.
- Hummingbirds, raptors, and waterbirds often stay active midday.
- Extreme heat limits activity to dawn and dusk hours.
- Early summer is peak breeding; midsummer has fledglings; late summer is dispersal.
- Adjust timing by temperature, weather, and species for best results.

Why Are American Kestrels Declining?

New Insights from a Continental Study

By Robyn Bailey, NestWatch Project Leader

Reprinted from *Cornell Lab NestWatch*

The American Kestrel is a small, cavity-nesting raptor that breeds from Alaska and Northern Canada to the southern tip of South America. It is one of many grassland-nesting species that share a troubling trend: widespread population declines across North America since the mid-1960s. Although kestrels have been studied more than many other grassland birds, scientists still don't fully understand the causes of their long-term decline.



American Kestrels by Jerry Liguori / Macaulay Library

From 2022 to 2024, NestWatch participated in a study led by a national working group that brought together numerous long-term datasets on American Kestrels from across the United States and Canada. Many of these data sources were made possible by participatory scientists, including contributors to NestWatch, The Peregrine Fund's American Kestrel Partnership, Breeding Bird Survey, and those who band birds or report encounters with banded birds. By combining these datasets, researchers were able to examine how demographic factors relate to population trends at a continental scale. The results of this multi-institutional collaboration were recently published in the journal *Ecosphere* and are publicly available.

The study found that the American Kestrel population declined by 29% between 1986 and 2019 (Howell et al. 2026). Over these three decades, the average annual brood size—about 2.84 young, including failed nests—did not show a corresponding decline, though it did vary from year to year. Instead, the authors found that adult survival rates had a stronger influence on population growth than breeding-related factors.



What does this mean for improving population trends in American Kestrels? The findings suggest several challenges that cannot be solved by nest box provisioning alone. Factors likely affecting adult and juvenile survival include declines in arthropod prey, the use of rodenticides, exposure to neonicotinoid insecticides, and predation pressure. These results may also shed light on broader patterns affecting other grassland birds that share habitat with kestrels.

People can help kestrels by installing nest boxes in safe, pesticide-free areas and adding predator guards to protect both incubating adults and their young. Reducing or advocating against the use of rodenticides can also benefit kestrels and other raptors by improving survival rates.

We are grateful to the many NestWatch participants who contributed nesting data on American Kestrels, making this study possible.

This map shows the cumulative change in estimated relative abundance from 2012 through 2022. Red dots indicate decline and blue dots indicate increase. The darker the color, the stronger the trend

Spring Event Wrap-Ups!

We've had a great spring season of promoting the ABC at local events, as well as getting together at a few club activities. We want to thank everyone who volunteered at the events and took the time to attend our social gatherings!

Community Events



Earth Day Staunton



Riverfest–Waynesboro



Birds & Brews

Ann Cline, Barrenridge



Stable Craft

Spring Bird Walk & Brunch, McCormick Farm



Membership

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



Jenny Johnson
Tyler Fischer
Janelle Weaver



Monthly Meeting Minutes

PLEASE NOTE: To read the meeting minutes from each monthly meeting, please go to the website (www.augustabirdclub.org), and click on "HOME."



2026 Raptorthon Summary



Our 2026 Raptorthon on May 8 was a big success! Our team of 4 (Vic, Rich, Robyn, and Bill) was actually rained out on our planned date of May 7, so we did our Raptorthon the next day (unfortunately Robyn was unable to join us). Thus Vic, Rich, and Bill spent the day birding in Highland County, Virginia, and had a really fun and productive Raptorthon that ended with 83 bird species, including 4 raptor species!

This year, we received \$1,960 in donations! These funds will be used to support our Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch as well as Hawk Migration Association research grants! A BIG THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO DONATED!



Our day was long: from 6:00 am to 4:00 pm. It started out quite chilly at 38F and cloudy, but ended at 64F and partly sunny. Our first major stop was Paddy Knob (elevation 4,478 ft) where we spent a mesmerizing 3 hours! Here we were greeted by multiple Least Flycatchers singing (several building nests!). Other birds here included Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a Blue-headed Vireo on nest, Veery, Dark-eyed Junco, and lots of warblers (Ovenbird, American Redstart, Worm-eating, Black-and-white, Nashville, Northern Parula, Magnolia, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, Black-throated Blue, Black-throated Green, Yellow-rumped, and Canada). We watched a Worm-eating Warbler building a nest on the ground near a stump, under some big leaves. Lots of other birds were also seen carrying nesting materials. It was a busy place! Up near the Knob we found our primary target of the day; a cooperative Mourning Warbler singing and moving about a lot along with Rose-breasted Grosbeak and Veery.

We then spent the rest of the day around Monterey and Blue Grass, which contained more sheep and lambs than we could count! Highlights in this area included Wood Duck, Black-billed Cuckoo, Killdeer, Spotted and Solitary Sandpipers, Red-headed Woodpeckers, Warbling Vireos, Cliff Swallows gathering mud for nest building, lots of Bobolinks, and Orchard and Baltimore Orioles as well. Raptors included 3 American Kestrel, 4 Red-tailed Hawk, and 9 Bald Eagles, including a nest with 2 adults and 2 chicks. At one point 3 adult Bald Eagles were circling above us and doing some airborne acrobatics! Other sightings during the day included Northern Yellow Warbler, Savannah Sparrows, and Eastern Kingbirds. Once again, we thank everyone for supporting our Raptorthon! It was very much appreciated!



Highland County on a beautiful May morning.



Left-Blue-headed Vireo on nest
Right (top) - Least Flycatcher,
Scarlet Tanager



(bottom)-Singing Mourning
Warbler, Worm-eating
Warbler w/nesting
material

(photos by Vic Laubach)



Another hawkwatching season will soon be upon us! The **2026 season starts August 15** and continues through November 30. The hawkwatch 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. Our site is easily accessible, and one can literally drive up, park and hawkwatch. We have a 180 degree panoramic view north over Rockfish Gap, west over the Shenandoah Valley, and east over the Piedmont Region.

Please join us for our 51st season of counting raptors!

September Meeting: Welcome-Back Social Hour

Each September we begin our new “program year,” including our regular monthly meetings. For this year’s first meeting on **Monday, September 14**, we’ll begin at **6:00 pm**, instead of normal starting time of 7:00 pm. We plan on welcoming back all members with a relaxing “social hour” that will include light refreshments. Our goal is for everyone to come early, meet our board members, chat with old friends, meet and greet new members, and share summer stories! We hope you mark calendars to attend our September meeting and get-together! All ABC meetings are held at the Covenant Presbyterian Church, 2001 North Coalter St, Staunton, VA.

**SOCIAL
HOUR**

September 14
6:00 pm-7:00pm



Check us out on the web
www.augustabirdclub.org



The Meadowlark
Editor: Rich Wood

Summer Bird ID Quiz: The Sparrows

OK, it's sparrow time! These small songbirds love to stay hidden in the fields, hedgerows, and thickets. Some are with us year-round, some are here only in the summer, and some are here only in the winter. Can you tell them apart?

Good Luck! Answers in the fall issue.

(Many thanks to Vic Laubach for providing all these terrific photos.)



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12

Answers to Warbler ID Quiz from the Spring Issue

- | | |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Ovenbird | 7. Hooded Warbler |
| 2. Prairie Warbler | 8. Canada Warbler |
| 3. Yellow-rumped Warbler | 9. Chestnut-sided Warbler |
| 4. Yellow Warbler | 10. Common Yellowthroat |
| 5. Wilson's Warbler | 11. Cape May Warbler |
| 6. Prothonotary Warbler | 12. Blackburnian Warbler |