



THE MEADOWLARK

The quarterly newsletter of the Augusta Bird Club



In This Issue

- *Helping the Ghost Bird*
- Upcoming Monthly Programs
- Summer Sightings
- Summer Field Trip Reports
- Fall Field Trips
- 2026 Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch
- Reminders
- Invasive Species Focus-House
- Sparrow
- Fall Bird ID Quiz-Raptors
- 2027 Nature Camp

“Helping the Ghost Bird”

Portions of this article have been taken from the Second VA Breeding Bird Atlas, and Cornell Lab.

Ghostly pale and normally strictly nocturnal, American Barn Owls are silent predators of the night world. Lanky, with a whitish face, chest, and belly, and buffy upperparts, this owl roosts in hidden, quiet places during the day. By night, they hunt on buoyant wingbeats in open fields and meadows. In Virginia, these owls are uncommon-to-rare permanent



Photo by Vic Laubach

residents that breed in select locations throughout the Commonwealth. Based on population studies and the most recently completed *2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas*, their overall population in Virginia is on the decline. American Barn Owls face the same plight of habitat loss and degradation shared by many grassland birds, and with their dwindling numbers, they are at risk of becoming actual ghosts. The main causes for the bird's population decline are loss of suitable nesting sites and loss of appropriate hunting habitat. Historically, American Barn Owls nested in tree cavities. However, 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 population decreases. Another factor in lower numbers is the loss of sustainable hunting areas. Changes in agricultural practices, specifically the conversion of old fields, grasslands and hayfields to more row crops, such as corn and soybean, or the loss of these landscapes altogether, has had adverse effects to the American Barn Owl. These grassland habitats support the needed diet for these night hunters, mainly small rodents such as voles, mice, moles, and shrews, whereas corn and soybean fields do not. With its large amount of agricultural lands, the Shenandoah Valley still has good concentrations, including many areas of Augusta County. Although the breeding timeline covers the entire year, most nesting activity was observed in May. The concern about their declining overall population, combined with the fact that we still have a lot of good habitat here in Augusta County, motivated the Board of Augusta Bird Club (ABC) to start a new **American Barn Owl Nest Box Project**.

Two deciding factors in launching this project were (1) the opportunity for us to possibly increase (and sustain) the breeding population of one of our beautiful, native raptors; and (2) a hands-on project that many volunteers can actually participate in, whether it's the installation, observations, and/or monitoring. As a bird club, we feel strongly that our conservation efforts can have a positive impact on the American Barn Owl!

Our strategy is simple: With the permission and cooperation of farmers and other landowners, deploy as many new Barn Owl nest boxes throughout Augusta County as we can, based on suitable habitat, historical nesting information, sightings entered into eBird, and what our budget can allow. Two different nest box designs were chosen. A “traditional” wooden box design promoted by *Cornell Lab's NestWatch* program has been used inside two separate barns, and a plastic, pole-mounted box design sold by the *Barn Owl Box Company* has been put up in open fields and pastures. So far, 16 pole-mounted boxes have been installed in 12 different locations (a few large farms received 2 nest boxes). Our total number of new nest boxes installed has been 18.

(Cont'd on page 2)

Helping the Ghost Bird

(Cont'd from page 1)

WHY DID WE CHOOSE THIS BOX DESIGN?

- Lightweight
- Long-lasting
- Easy to install (it's very difficult to install the in-barn boxes since they involve careful climbing and mounting)
- Several states are now using this design, with great success
- Easy to move to a new location, if no birds occupy the box

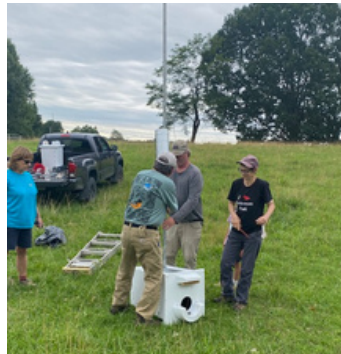


Plastic Nest Box (above)
Wooden Nest Box (below)

A Look At Our Progress



The team assembles our first box (L); assembled nest boxes (C); preparing the in-ground pole (R)



Ann Cline pounds in the first pipe

Installing the predator guard

....Up It Goes!

1 down, (15) to go!



Antonio prepares one of the nest boxes in the top of a barn



Marion belays Antonio while Rich secures the box



Two happy landowners w/ their new Barn Owl nest boxes!



Currently, our Barn Owl Nest Box team includes Lynne Parks, Ann Cline, Marion Bittinger, Antonio Martinez, and Rich Wood. We're always looking for more volunteers to help us out! If interested, please contact one of the team members.

If you would like to donate to our new Barn Owl Nest Box, please contact our Treasurer, Mona Bearor (conservebirds@gmail.com). Each box installation costs \$400, but any contribution will allow us to expand our program to many other farms! We want to make sure the Ghost Bird continues to thrive here in Augusta County!

Upcoming Monthly Programs

Monday, September 14, Starting at 6:00 pm for social hour

Helping the Ghost Bird:

American Barn Owl Nest Box Project—Update

Antonio Martinez, Lynne Parks, Ann Cline, Rich Wood

Early in 2026, ABC decided to begin a new, conservation project—the American Barn Owl Nest Box Project. The overall goal of this project is to increase the population of this declining species by installing dozens of nest boxes throughout Augusta County. The nest box team will give a brief update on the biology of this night hunter, how we got started, why we chose the box design we did, general locations of the nest boxes, and how you can help! This is one of the most exciting bird conservation projects ABC has ever initiated!



Monday, October 12, 7:00 pm

Forest Forensics: Finding Clues to the Past in Our Woods

Today

Chris Bolgiano

Chris joined the Library Faculty of then-Madison College in 1974. Upon getting tenure, she resigned to become a freelance writer and worked at James Madison University as Adjunct Faculty to develop a Library Special Collections Department, which gave her authority to identify, collect, and study the historical resources that inform her writing. Now long retired, she exploits her Faculty Emerita status to access JMU's excellent resources of all kinds. Well over a century after the establishment of national forests across the Appalachian Mountains, their origin story has faded from common memory. After all, trees blanket our mountains down into hollows and up over ridges far into the blue distance. But as William Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The past of our forests remains very much present today, and will remain so for centuries to come. Chris's talk will illustrate why.



Monday, November 9, 7:00 pm

Wildlife Corridors and Road-Stream Crossings in the Upper South River Watershed

Tom Benzing

Tom is Professor Emeritus at James Madison University's School of Integrated Sciences, where he taught courses and conducted research on water quality and watershed management. He earned his PhD from Michigan State University in Crop and Soil Sciences and Environmental Toxicology. Currently, he serves on the boards of the Virginia Museum of Natural History, the Virginia Council of Trout Unlimited, and the South River Watershed Coalition. Tom will speak about important issues regarding when roads cross wildlife corridors, which can become barriers to natural migration and movement. Trout Unlimited volunteers have surveyed over 85 road-stream crossings in Augusta County on Afton Mountain and in the upper South River watershed. These surveys determine whether crossings such as culverts and bridges allow safe passage for trout and other aquatic organisms like salamanders. Larger road-stream crossings are commonly used by bears, deer, and smaller terrestrial animals as well. In Virginia, recent legislation established a Wildlife Corridor Action Plan and a fund to remove or replace poorly designed bridges and culverts to improve passage. Trout Unlimited and several partner organizations are advocating for improvements to crossings on I-64 to protect wildlife moving along the Blue Ridge, and through Shenandoah National Park in the Afton Mountain Wildlife Corridor.



Summer Sightings

It may have been hot and hazy summer, but that didn't stop many of our ABC members from snapping some great photos! Enjoy!



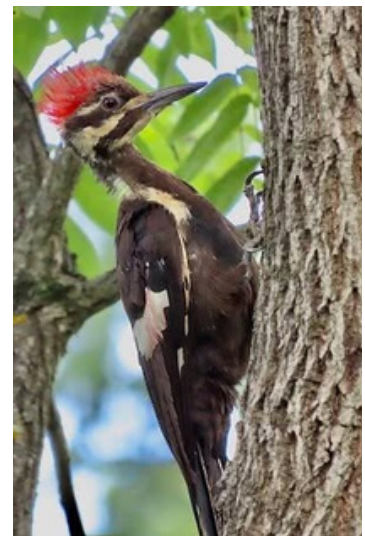
L-R: Wilson's Phalarope (*Vic Laubach*); Worm-eating Warbler (*Joel Stauffer*); Vesper Sparrow (*Scott Priebe*); Wild Turkeys (*Sarah Foster*)



L-R: Swallow-tailed Kite (*Antonio Martinez*); Female Ruby-throated Hummingbird on nest (*Joel Stauffer*); Indigo Bunting (*Vic Laubach*); Red Crossbills (*Scott Priebe*)



L-R: Flock of Hudsonian Whimbrels (*Vic Laubach*); Black-throated Green Warbler (*Ana Allard*); Dickcissel (*Vic Laubach*)



L-R: Molting Male Scarlet Tanager (*Andrew Clem*); "Humming-peckers" (*Ann Cline*); Juvenile Pileated Woodpecker (*Andrew Clem*)

Summer Field Trip Reports

The warm, muggy weather didn't stop a few of our leaders from offering some summer field trips. Here's what they discovered. Many thanks to all of them!

The monthly walk on **Friday, June 12, here at Springdale Water Gardens** was enjoyed by 4 hardy birders. We spent 2 hours looking in the wooded area of Old Quarry Lane. The cool shade made for a pleasant experience and we enjoyed lots of "birdy" conversation as we tallied 30 species. Highlights included a nice view of a Yellow-billed Cuckoo and 2 others heard farther away; Northern Flicker calling and 2 Eastern Wood-Pewee were heard, with 1 seen. A Wood Thrush melody was heard and an Ovenbird called out to us. Most birds were shy and only heard, except for all the Catbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds that were everywhere. Thanks to Huck, Stan, and Ann for joining me on the monthly walk.

—Tish Folsom



On **June 20**, we had a truly spectacular day of birding up in the area between **Reddish Knob and Bother Knob**! Turnout for the field trip was light, but there were more birds than we could keep track of. I had never seen so many Red Crossbills (over 40, I'd say) in 1 day! Many of them were at the pullover located 1/4 mile before you get to the main intersection at Briery Branch Gap. We hiked from there to the area full of tall spruce trees just past the intersection, a little over a mile each way. The best views we had of warblers are shown here: Chestnut-sided, Yellow-rumped, American Redstart, and Black-throated Green.

Thanks to Jeffrey Roberts and Dianne Adrian Byrer for coming along and helping to spot all those birds!

—Andrew Clem



On **Wednesday, August 19**, 11 members of the ABC met on a balmy summer day at **McCormick Farm** to conduct a field study of resident and migrating birds. Altogether, 38 species were recorded. Some birds of interest included an immature Double-crested Cormorant, Green Herons, a Great Blue Heron, and one adult male American Redstart. I would like to acknowledge that at the conclusion of the walk in the parking lot, an immature and an adult Bald Eagle, 2 Ravens, and a Chipping Sparrow were happily observed.

Many thanks to all my fellow birders. Always a delight to spend time with you in this worthy pursuit

—Jo King

Fall Field Trips

Don't look now, but fall migration is upon us! Grab your binoculars and get ready to enjoy some great fall birding with our dedicated trip leaders. **For all field trips, dress appropriately for the weather, wear comfortable walking shoes, and bring your water bottle and a snack.**



Springdale Water Gardens—Fall Series

Friday, September 11

Meeting Time & Place: 8:00 am, main parking lot, Springdale Water Gardens, 340 Old Quarry Rd, Greenville, VA 24440. Beginning birders are encouraged to join us! For more information, email me!

Leader: Tish Folsom (tishspringdale@gmail.com)

The fall warbler migration is a great time to explore here! The early morning can find the River Birch and Willow trees hosting several species of warblers! We'll start in the parking lot and bird the gravel path to the creek bottom and then wander around the nursery and driveway. Should last about 2 hours, or you may leave as needed. Total walking of less than 1/2 mile most likely.

Blue Ridge Parkway & SR-610

Saturday, September 12

Meeting Time & Place: 8:00 am, the lower parking lot at the old Howard Johnson's building (orange roof), next to the the Kettle Corn stand

Leader: Allen Larner (larnersky@mindspring.com)

Join Allen Larner on a quest to find migrating warblers, vireos, tanagers, flycatchers, and sparrows in this half-day trip on the Blue Ridge Parkway and SR-610. After the Parkway, all are welcome to stop by the Hawkwatch to see what is coming through.

Bells Lane

Tuesday, September 15 (rain cancels)

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

Leader: Penny Warren (onthewingnow17@gmail.com)

Join Penny on an early fall bird walk on Bells. With permission, we will go to the private pond, then venture back to the lane and continue from there and check the various habitats ... catching some fall migration and seeing what resident birds might still be hanging around.

McCormick Farm Series—Fall Series

Wednesday, September 16 (rain date September 23)

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 is ready for fall migration and invites everyone to join her at McCormick Farm for her popular fall bird walks! This is a great site to spot a variety of birds, and with fall migration in full swing, you can expect to see several songbirds, such as warblers, vireos, as well as some late swallows. The fields may host hunting raptors, while the two ponds always turn up a few surprises, such as waterfowl and possibly a few waders.

(Cont'd on page 7)

Fall Field Trips (Cont'd from page 6)

Springdale Water Gardens—Fall Series

Friday, September 18

Meeting Time & Place: 8:00 am, main parking lot, Springdale Water Gardens, located at 340 Old Quarry Rd, Greenville, VA 24440. Beginning birders are encouraged to join us! For more information, email me!

Leader: Tish Folsom (tishspringdale@gmail.com)

We'll see if any of the warblers are still around and hunt for the arrival of winter species. Same easy walking and maybe a little longer as we explore more of the woodland road area for winter birds. Could even find a Barred Owl or a Great Horned Owl.

Springdale Water Gardens—Fall Series

Friday, October 9 (rain date October 16)

Meeting Time & Place: 8:00 am, main parking lot, Springdale Water Gardens, located at 340 Old Quarry Rd, Greenville, VA 24440. Beginning birders are encouraged to join us! For more information, email me!

Leader: Tish Folsom (tishspringdale@gmail.com)

Join us for the last walk of the season (we'll start again in the winter), as we search for migrants among the beautiful fall colors! There are always some great birds that show up in October! This is a great time of the year to get outdoors!

McCormick Farm Series—Fall Season

Wednesday, October 14 (rain date October 21)

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

The McCormick's Fall Birding Series continues, as we welcome the migrating birds and autumn colors of October to McCormick Farm! Join Jo as she searches high and low for these winged wonders.

McCormick Farm Series—Fall Season

Wednesday, November 11 (rain date November 18)

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

The McCormick's Fall Birding Series continues into November. Grab your binoculars and join us!

Membership

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



Theresa and Scott Masdon
Joseph Tuttle
Alyson Weege



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."



Opening Day
Crew-2026!



This year is the 50th anniversary of the Rockfish Gap Hawkwatch, one of the longest-running hawkwatches in North America! Although the old Inn is still deteriorating, we do plan to have another super season! I want to inform you about some important information about the hawkwatch for the upcoming fall season, which runs from August 15 through November 30.

PLEASE NOTE: Vehicle access to the parking lot at the Inn is now restricted by a locked gate on the road going up the hill from SR-250. However, we do expect to have a full season this year and to allow visitors. Although the gate will typically remain closed and locked 24 hours a day, during days when the hawkwatch is open this fall, the Counter for the day will open the gate in the morning to allow visitors access to the hawkwatch, while the hawkwatch is open.

Thus, before visiting, we recommend that visitors check our online calendar for the status of the hawkwatch on any particular day, which can be viewed at: <https://www.rockfishgaphawkwatch.org/schedule/>. 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. Be sure to bring some supplies for your visit, such as food, drink, a hat, sunscreen, a chair or blanket, and, of course, your binoculars. A spotting scope is also recommended for those distant raptors (and many of our raptors are distant).

SOCIAL
HOUR

September 14
6:00 pm-7:00pm

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.



Check us out on the web
www.augustabirdclub.org



The Meadowlark
Editor: Rich Wood



Next Birds & Brews

September 10 @ 5:30 pm

Ann Cline's Farm

2633 Barrenridge Rd

Staunton, VA



&



Annual Bird Seed & Feeder Sale



Pick-Up Date: Saturday, November 14

Augusta Expo, Fishersville (right off I-64)



Online ordering will begin in October.

Watch the website for more details!

PLEASE NOTE!

We need one or a few people to help Crista Cabe with this year's Seed Sale. Other than working on pickup day (Saturday, November 14), most of the work can be done from home on your own time. The need is urgent! Crista is scheduled for a medical procedure in early November and will not be able to see the Seed Sale through to the very end this year, so she needs a partner who can learn the basics and take over the final few tasks.

If you feel you can help Crista this fall, please drop her an email at : cristacabe@gmail.com, ASAP!

2026 Holiday Party & 3rd Annual Wildlife Center Donation Drive

Monday, December 14 @ 6:30 pm

Covenant Presbyterian Church

2001 North Coalter Street,

Staunton, VA



Invasive Species Focus: House Sparrow

reprinted from *The Wonderful World of the House Sparrow*, By Pam Carlton
Montana Natural History Center

In 1850, Nicholas Pike, Director of the Brooklyn Institute, purchased 8 pairs of House Sparrows from Liverpool, England. They were released in 1851, but none of them survived. Later that year, he purchased 25 more and overwintered them at the Institute. These birds were then released into the parks of New York City and began to thrive. But House Sparrows did not spread across the United States without help. More were released in various parts of the US over the next 25 years. Although their numbers did not explode immediately, they eventually came to inhabit every state in the Union.



House Sparrows - male (l), female (r)

House Sparrows have many of the key characteristics needed for a successful invasion. They can easily establish themselves in a variety of environments. They live in grasslands, forests, and urban areas. They also reproduce, and grow, rapidly. House Sparrows can raise up to 5 clutches of 2 to 7 chicks a season. Finally, they are aggressive competitors, nesting much earlier in the spring than many other birds do. House Sparrows mate for life, although they will show promiscuous behavior outside of the mate-bond. They live in colonies of up to 40 birds, and once they have been accepted by a colony and claim a nest site, which they return to each year, they are set for life. The sparrow will remain in that colony and will never be banished.

One of the more interesting facts about these little brown birds is that much of their success stems from the military precision with which they arrange their groups. Because House Sparrows are very social creatures, without some sort of structure they would spend their time fighting among themselves—thus not being nearly as successful as they are. Leaders of other groups that live in close social arrangements have some identifying feature that announces to the others that they are in charge, such as the silverback in mountain gorilla families, or the size of the antlers in elk and deer.

For the House Sparrow it is the size of the male's black breast patch. Males with the largest breast patch are highest in the pecking order. All of the sparrows know where they fall in this pecking order and the highest-ranking individual gets the safest feeding spots, has the largest breeding territory with more and better mates, and is first in line for food when food is scarce. Scientists are not sure what makes the breast patches bigger on some than on others, but they have found a positive correlation between the fighting ability of the male and the size of the patch.

Although they can take over your favorite bluebird house, these adaptable birds have evolved an intricate social structure that allows them to be so successful.

Fun Facts About Fall Migration

- At least 4,000 species of bird are regular migrants, which is about 40% of the total number of birds in the world.
- The Arctic Tern has the longest migration of any bird in the world. Each fall the North American subspecies migrate from their breeding grounds in the Arctic to their wintering grounds in Antarctica, a distance of about 13,000 miles, a round trip of over 25,000 miles.
- Speaking of long distances, the Northern Wheatear travels up to 9,000 miles each way between the Arctic and Africa, giving it one of the largest ranges of any songbird. What makes this an amazing feat is that the tiny bird weighs less than an ounce, on average.
- Bar-headed Geese are the highest-flying migratory birds, regularly reaching altitudes of over 29,000 feet (5½ miles) above sea level while flying over the Himalayas in India.

Fall Bird ID Quiz: The Raptors

Look to the skies! It's time for the fall raptor migration! These may be a little tougher, and you might have to enlarge them a bit on your computer screen. Good Luck! Answers in the winter issue.

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



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3



4



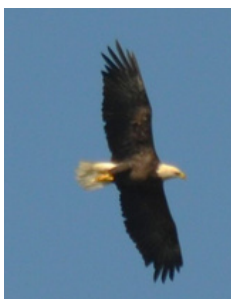
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10



11



12



13



14



15

Answers to Sparrow ID Quiz from the Summer Issue

1. American Tree Sparrow
2. Vesper Sparrow
3. Field Sparrow
4. White-throated Sparrow
5. Song Sparrow
6. White-crowned Sparrow

7. Lincoln's Sparrow
8. Savannah Sparrow
9. Chipping Sparrow
10. Grasshopper Sparrow
11. Fox Sparrow
12. Swamp Sparrow

Do You Know a Student Who May Be Interested?

2027 Nature Camp (Vesuvius, Virginia)

Full & Partial Scholarships Available

Sleepaway camp | two-week sessions

Rising grades 6 to 12 | Boys & Girls

www.NatureCamp.net



Scholarship recipients must be Staunton, Waynesboro, or Augusta County residents



Great opportunity for students who like to be outside and are interested in the environment & conservation.

Applications for Summer 2027 will be available after September 30, 2026 on the ABC website.

Deadline for submission is December 15, 2026.

For more information:

Contact Sarah Foster (email: FosterCabin@hotmail.com), or visit <https://augustabirdclub.org/nature-camp/>