

Vol. 61 No. 2 - Winter 2026-2027

The Meadowlark

The quarterly newsletter of the Augusta Bird Club

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photo by Rich Wood

The Snowbird

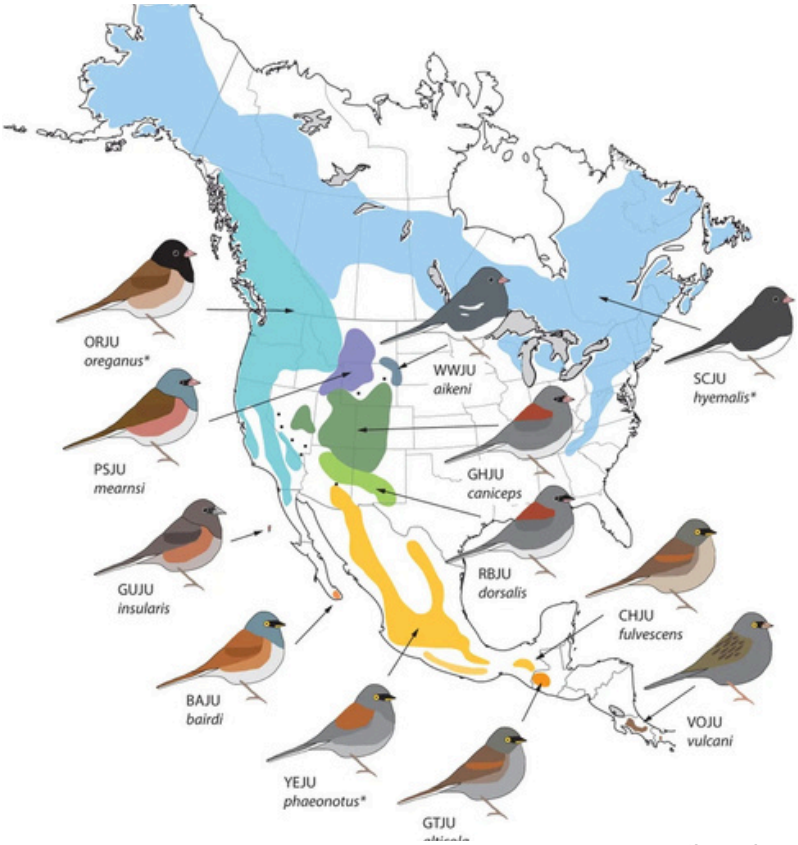
by Rich Wood

Information provided by National Audubon Society, Cornell Lab and Bird Forum

Since I was 8 years old, I always looked forward to the arrival of "The Snowbirds," as my dad taught me, and the name he knew them as growing up on a small dairy farm in NE Pennsylvania. He used to tell me, "Grey skies above, and snow below." This was his description of the Dark-eyed Juncos.

As a kid I knew them as Slate-colored Juncos, before they changed their name. Over fifty years later, my anticipation of the arrival of these small, ground-feeding songbirds to our backyard still runs high.

Almost anywhere you go in the U.S., Canada or Mexico, there is a species of junco there. Until the 1970's, several of the Dark-eyed species were considered separate species, but they aren't separate species-at least not yet. The regional varieties of juncos will still mate and interbreed randomly wherever their ranges meet, which means many of them are all the same species. There are as many as 15 separate subspecies, some easy to tell apart and others showing only subtle differences. One of the most interesting aspects of Dark-eyed Juncos is their diverse appearance. These juncos show color variations depending on where they live. This "splitting" of species is referred to as speciation. The different regional junco groups don't really behave differently (though their songs differ some). They all nest on the ground, eat seeds and bugs, and hop along the ground. In other words, their feather colors have changed-but that's about it. Out west in winter, you can even spot multiple junco flavors in the same flock.



Breeding Range of Juncos of North America

- SCJU (Slate-colored Junco-DE)
- WWJU (White-winged Junco-DE)
- GHJU (Grey-headed Junco-DE)
- RBJU (Red-backed Junco-DE)
- ORJU (Oregon Junco-DE)
- PSJU (Pink-sided Junco-DE)
- GUJU (Guadalupe Junco-DE)
- YEJU (Yellow-eyed Junco-YE)
- CHJU (Chiapas Junco-YE)
- VOJU (Volcano Junco)
- BAJU (Baird's Junco)
- GEJU (Guatemalan Junco)

DE = Dark-eyed, YE = Yellow-eyed

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The Snowbird

continued from page 1

The birds' evolutionary story goes back some 10,000 to 13,000 years, to the retreat of North America's glaciers, according to recent DNA evidence. Before then, the northern half of what is now the United States was smothered in ice. Then, the climate warmed and those glaciers receded, exposing largely unpopulated terrain ripe for colonization. Ancestral juncos (likely Yellow-eyed Juncos or relatives) migrated north and spread across the continent. Since then, some groups became isolated enough to evolve new color variations in what scientists now believe is "one of the fastest cases of speciation known in vertebrates."

The Dark-eyed (Slate-colored form) that visits our backyard each winter is your classic snowbird here in VA, which breeds in forests from Alaska to Newfoundland, north through the boreal forest and south through the Appalachian Mountains to Georgia. Here in Augusta County, you can find breeding birds at high elevations, such as the Blue Ridge Mountains up in Shenandoah National Park, or the Alleghenies in the western part of the County. A couple years ago, Vic Laubach and I found a nest while hiking up the backside of Elliott Knob. We were delighted to see an adult carrying food into a small, hidden rock crevice, covered by a fallen log and moss, right along the trail. We've also watched adults carrying food up on Reddish Knob. According to the Second Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas, Dark-eyed Juncos also have the honor of being one of the best-studied species in Virginia, with generations of researchers studying their breeding, migration, and physiology at Mountain Lake Biological Station in Giles County.

The male Dark-eyed Juncos (Slate-colored form) we see here in the valley have a gray head (sometimes closer to black, sometimes tinged brown), chest, back and wings, and a bright white belly, with white, outer tail feathers; a female is similar with a paler wash. Juncos are sometimes referred to as "ground dwellers" because they spend so much of their time there. They can often be found searching for seeds and insects on the forest floor. One study from New Hampshire found that juncos spent 65% of their time on the ground, 20% in shrubs, and 16% in low trees. While on the ground they prefer to hop around rather than walk. If you watch them long enough you will probably see them do the "junco shuffle", where they quickly hop forwards then backwards, scratching the ground. This helps them pick through leaf litter, seed shells and whatever else is on the ground to uncover hidden insects or seeds.

During the winter, juncos often gather in flocks consisting of 15 to 25 birds, and can often be found with larger flocks of other sparrows. In areas where the ranges of several subspecies overlap, they may group together. While things are friendly in the flock, a "pecking order" is still established, with those that joined the group last at the bottom.
Many bird enthusiasts are delighted to find Dark-eyed Juncos visiting their backyard feeders, especially during the winter. They will eat from almost any type of seed feeder including tube feeders, mesh feeders, hoppers and platform feeders. But you'll probably see them most often on the ground underneath your feeders scratching around for spilt seeds. Millet is a junco favorite, but they will also eat cracked corn, milo, sunflower, safflower and peanut pieces.



photo by Rich Wood

Every year, beginning in late October/early November, we enjoy watching these "Snowbirds" hopping and scratching in our backyard, signaling the beginning of the winter season! Good birding!



- Ian Sicking
- Luke Gartzke
- Keith Thomas
- Karen Wilson
- Tracey Hopper
- George Sproul
- Sarah Miller
- Daniel Purdom, Jr.
- Carroll Robertson



Upcoming Monthly Programs



December 14, <u>Starting at 6:30 pm</u>

Holiday Party and 3rd Annual Wildlife Center Donation Drive

Join us as we celebrate the holidays with our Augusta Bird Club friends with a potluck meal. Please bring a side dish, salad, bread, or dessert to share with the group. The club will provide meat and beverages.

In addition, we will once again be collecting donated items for the Wildlife Center of Virginia at our holiday party. The Wildlife Center (in Waynesboro) treats thousands of animals every year including birds. In 2025 the Wildlife Center treated 76 Bald Eagles, 56 Barred Owls, 29 Cooper's Hawks, 60 Screech Owls, 90 Red-tailed Hawks, 35 Great Horned Owls, 56 Bluebirds and 66 Cardinals among many other species. **SEE PAGE 4 FOR A LIST OF NEEDED DONATED ITEMS**.

January 11, 2027, 7:00 pm

American Kestrel Project and the Plight of Virginia's Grassland Birds

Dan Bieker



Dan is a wildlife biologist and a long-time natural sciences instructor (now retired) at Piedmont VA Community College where he taught Field Ornithology and Appalachian Ecology. He's a past president of the VSO (Virginia Society of Ornithology) and has worked with the VA Cooperative Extension's 4H Junior Naturalist program for many years. He now works closely with the VA Grassland Bird Initiative. Loss of grasslands along with increased use of pesticides and the sharp decline of insects are just some of the factors driving diminishing bird population trends. The VA Grassland Bird Initiative, a project of the Piedmont Environmental Council, is working throughout the Piedmont and Shenandoah Valley to promote grassland species. In addition to speaking on the American Kestrel Project, Dan's program will highlight various aspects of these projects, along with efforts to encourage landowners to employ conservation practices for the benefit of grassland birds and other wildlife.

February 8, 2027, 7:00 pm

The Claudius Project – Poisonous Mushrooms in Virginia

Kevin Howe



Kevin is a Virginia Master Naturalist (VMN) in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula Chapters and teaches for a number of VMN Chapters. He is a longtime birder and retired aquatic ecologist having done research and teaching at various universities and agencies, and he has been active in a number of Audubon Chapters in the US. In 2025, Kevin was part of a team of VMNs, in collaboration with the Blue Ridge Poison Center at UVA Health and the UVA School of Medicine's Division of Medical Toxicology, wrote and published "The Claudius Project – Poisonous Mushrooms in Virginia". His program will introduce us to poisonous mushrooms and the publication. Because Kevin teaches Mycology (the study fungi) for VMN, his talk will also include a brief biology lesson about mushrooms/fungi.



Christmas Bird Count Dates



- **AUGUSTA COUNTY CBC - Sunday, December 20** - Coordinator Allen Larner (larnersky@mindspring.com)
- **WAYNESBORO CBC - Sunday, January 3, 2027** - Coordinator Crista Cabe (cristacabe@gmail.com)

To particpate in this fun, citizen science project, please contact Allen or Crista directly. All levels of birders are welcome and encouraged to help us out!



Wildlife Center Donation List

CLEANING SUPPLIES

- Antibacterial liquid soap
- Paper towels
- Tissues (no lotion)
- Toilet paper
- Bleach (jugs and spray bottles)
- Brass high-pressure hose nozzles
- Dawn dishwashing liquid (blue)
- Kitchen-size or larger trash bags
- Scrub brushes
- Scrub Daddy Sponges
- Contractor bags
- Gift certificates to the following locations: *Amazon, Chewy, Kroger*

FOOD SUPPLIES

- Eggs
- Baby rice cereal
- Baby food (fruit and meat)
- Canned dog food
- Dry cat food (high-quality)
- Dry dog food (high-quality, high-protein)
- Bird Seed

Fall Sightings

Enjoy some of the excellent photos our club members captured during the fall migration.



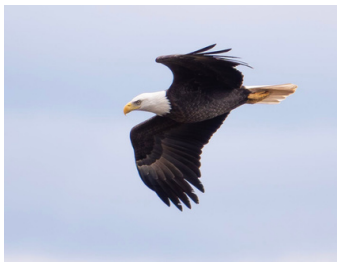
L to R-Cape May Warbler-David Chernoff, Orange Crowned Warbler & Connecticut Warbler-Vic Laubach, Bay-breasted Warbler Tom Roberts



L to R-Northern Harrier-Joel Stauffer



Barred Owl-Andrew Clem



Bald Eagle-Vic Laubach



Osprey-Antonio Martinez



Lincoln's Sparrow
Vic Laubach



Northern Saw-whet Owl
Saw-whet Owl Banding Station-Rockingham Co
Robyn Puffenbarger



White Pelican - Lake Shenandoah
Rockingham Co
Scott Priebe



Calliope Hummingbird
Linda Matkin's Home

Researching the Rainbow Bird

Painted Bunting Banding in NC

by Linda Matkins

While at the beach this summer working with the Caswell Beach Turtle Watch, another turtle volunteer and I drove about an hour away to attend a Painted Bunting bird banding at Carolina State Park, conducted by the Cape Fear Bird Observatory (CFBO). While we were there, we were able to observe the capture of 60 Painted Buntings. Most of the birds captured that day were females and juveniles but there were a few beautifully colored males. There are permanent feeders in the park by the Cape Fear River, a regular hangout for Painted Buntings.

THE PROCESS

During the banding process, they replace the regular feeders with feeders with cages-where the bird goes in but can't get out (or at least not easily). They remove the birds from the feeding cages, put them in cloth sacks and hang them from a small clothesline under the table, waiting in line to be banded. The bander removes the individual bird and then prepares the appropriate band for each bird. Different colors are used on the bands to make it easier to identify the birds from a distance by sight, without having to recapture them. After attaching the band, the bander examines the bird to determine the bird's overall health. The bander documents the approximate age, sex and reproductive status of adult birds by looking for a cloacal protuberance for a male and a brood patch for female. The bird is placed in a cup upside down on a scale to determine the weight. They document the feather condition and fat reserves needed for migration by gently blowing on the belly and the breast to temporarily part the bird's feathers so they can examine the translucent skin underneath. Finally, the wing length and bill length are measured. All the data is submitted to the US Geological Survey's Bird Banding Laboratory.

As a fundraiser for the bird conservancy, they offer "adoption" of a captured bird for a fee which goes to support wild bird research and banding conservation work. The group will then alert you if your bird is captured at any banding site in the future and give you a status update. My turtle volunteer friend and I adopted a juvenile female. The CFBO, in partnership with the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences and other collaborators, study bird populations, nesting ecology, and overwintering behavior of Painted Buntings in coastal North Carolina.













All photos by Linda Matkins

Fall Field Trip Reports



10 Birders gathered on a cloudy, humid morning on **September 11**, to explore the grounds of **Springdale Water Gardens.** We totaled 31 species during the walk. The stars of the day were the Hummingbirds and the mimickers. They were literally everywhere. It was a slow day for warblers with only Common Yellowthroat, Magnolia and Chestnut-sided seen briefly, making ID difficult. Lots of great conversation and plant photo ops too. We even tasted the seeds of the Touch-me-Nots and the Lotus pods along the way.

When most folks had departed, and I had ended the Ebird checklist for the walk, the raptors and vultures must have decided it was time to lift off. We tallied two more species and five more raptors during the 30-minute post-walk chit chat. All raptors were high and headed south. Thanks to everyone that came out to share eyes and ears.

Tish Folsom



It was a glorious morning on **September 15**, to be on **Bells Lane**, with thirteen club members … beautiful weather, temps, great group of birders, etc.

Although most of us would say it was a quiet morning on Bells and we only had two warblers, we ended up tallying 45 species. Starting at the private pond, among other sightings, we had four Wood Duck, Chimney Swifts, Pied-billed Grebe, Great Blue Heron, Belted Kingfisher, N Rough-winged (25), Barn (3) and Cliff (1) Swallows, one Palm Warbler, and one Brown Thrasher. We headed back to the lane and continued to add to the medley of usual suspects … Mourning Doves, Red-bellied, Downy, Hairy and Pileated Woodpeckers, Northern Flicker, American Kestrel, Eastern Wood Pewee, Eastern Phoebe, Ble Jays, American and Fish Crows, and one Indigo Bunting…. Mark and Allen also found a Magnolia Warbler.

On our return, we started to see kettles of vultures, two Bald Eagles, two Red-shouldered Hawks and a group of 25 Broad-winged Hawks joined in the group. It was a great ending to a marvelous morning! Complete list of birds can be found on eBird. As always, I thank all of those who came out for the morning. With so many great birders, it always adds more enjoyment to the walk!

Penny Warren



Twelve members of the Augusta Bird Club conducted a bird walk at **McCormick Farm on September 16**-a balmy morning with clear blue skies. We were greeted by a flying Great Blue Heron and many hatch year Bluebirds flitting from trees to fences to power lines. A Scarlet Tanager, Palm Warbler, Wood Duck, Solitary Sandpiper, Bald Eagle, and an awe inspiring male Northern Harrier delighted our presence. Thirty-four species were recorded.

My thanks to everyone who contributed to this wonderful pursuit of birding. What great camaraderie we share. See you in October. Happy trails to you.

Jo King

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.”

Field Trip Reports continued on page 7

Fall Field Trip Reports

continued from page 6



Nine birders came to **Springdale Water Gardens on October 9th**, on a gorgeous fall morning, including two people from the Headwaters Chapter of Virginia Master Naturalists. We enjoyed four hours of exploring the grounds and road, and totaled 54 species during the walk! We were still standing in the parking lot, when a Yellow-breasted Chat popped up on the bramble hill in front of us. It continued to showing, off and on, but no photos were to be had. We continued on our way and tallied more birds.

Then, as we passed the parking lot again, a Peregrine Falcon appeared over the fields! We ended the day with 10 warbler species and lots of the other usual suspects. Lots of great conversations with both old and new birders, and the eyes and ears of all the participants made for a great tally of species and a fun outing. Our next official walk will be in March of next spring but anyone is welcome to come out any day. Bird photos thanks to David Chernoff.

Tish Folsom



It was a beautiful morning on **October 14**, as fourteen avid birders of the Augusta Bird Club conducted a field trip to **McCormick Farm**, where we tallied 41 species. Of special interest was a Great Blue Heron perched on a pole welcoming us to his domain. Good numbers of Eastern Bluebirds, American Goldfinches and Yellow-rump Warblers were scattered throughout the area. Wonderful views of an adult Bald Eagle, Common Raven, Peregrine Falcon, two Wild Turkeys, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo, along with Bay-breasted and Cape May Warblers, were so appreciated. Many thanks to all the participants. It is so satisfying to enjoy the pursuit of seeing birds in the wild with friends of the same interest.

We were back at it for our last walk of the year at **McCormick Farm on November 11.** Once again, fourteen members of the ABC attended, where 43 species were tallied. The outstanding find was of a lone Rusty Blackbird keeping company with a Brown-headed Cowbird and a Common Grackle in a tree top. Also, we were happy to report a good showing of sparrows, especially White-throated, Field, Song, Savannah and a Swamp. Woodpeckers, Bluebirds and Finches made a good showing, that contributed to the ambience of the area.

Thank you to all my fellow birders for attending all our 2026 walks! It is always such a pleasure to spend a morning walk with you, pursuing our love of nature. Happy Holidays and see you in 2027. *Happy Birding, Jo King*



Nine members of the Augusta Bird Club came out for the bird walk at **Bells Lane** on a chilly, but sunny day, on Monday, **November 16**. Although it was pretty quiet, we managed to pick up 35 species. The private pond gave us Canada Geese, Gadwall, American Wigeon, Mallard, Black Duck, Ring-necked Duck and one lonely Hooded Merganser. Going up to the farm at the top of the hill, we were treated to a Bald Eagle perched on the top of a snag.

We had both Red-shouldered and Red-tailed Hawks, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Red-bellied Woodpecker and a Northern Flicker, along with a good group of White-throated Sparrows, but no White-crowned Sparrows were seen. An assortment of other birds were observed with our last bird of the day being a single Song Sparrow. A full list is on eBird.

I thank all who attended, adding to a delightful day of fall birding and friendship!

Happy Birding, Penny Warren

Winter Field Trips

Don't put those binoculars just yet! Bundle up and join Jo King for a couple winter walks at McCormick Farm!

McCormick Farm-Winter Series
Wednesday, January 13 (bad weather date January 20)
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

Dress warm and join Jo to explore the fields, forests, and ponds of McCormick Farm, and discover the birds that make the farm their winter home. We'll search for sparrows, finches, woodpeckers, winter raptors and hopefully some waterfowl on the ponds.

McCormick Farm-Winter Series
Wednesday, February 10 (bad weather date February 17)
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 walks continue, "down on the farm!" Let's discover some cold-weather specialities.



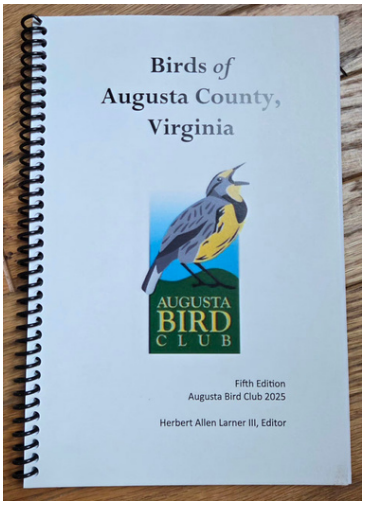


We now have Augusta Bird Club t-shirts and hats for sale! Limited colors and sizes available. Everything is $20. For more information, please drop Ann Cline an email (*anncline1443@yahoo.com*)



Copies of *Birds of Augusta County*, Virginia (fifth edition) still availble 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, we will have them for sale starting at the January, 2027 monthly meeting.





How Do Birds Stay Warm in Winter? 7 Survival Tricks

Information provided by BirdBuddy

1. **Their feathers work like a down jacket**

When a bird fluffs up, it lifts it's feathers and traps a layer of still air against its body. That air warms up and stays put, the same way the filling in you winter coat works. A fluffed up bird can look twice its usual size.

2. **They tuck themselves in**

A resting bird turns its head and pushes its bill into its feathers on its back, so it breathes air already warmed by its own body. It crouches low so its belly feathers cover its legs, or stands on one leg and pulls the other up out of the cold. Less bare skin means less heat loss.

3. **Their feet are supposed to be cold**

Birds really do get cold feet, and it's on purpose. Their legs have a built-in heat exchanger: warm blood heading down to the feet runs right alongside cold blood coming back up, so the heat passes across before it reaches the toes. The *Cornell Labratory of Ornithology* calls it a countercurrent heat exchange system.

4. **They shiver all night**

Shivering is the main way small birds make heat. Birds tense their big flight muscles in tiny, fast contractions that don't move their wings but do make heat. Small birds like chickadees can shiver through the whole night to hold a daytime body temperature of about 108°F, roughly ten degrees warmer than yours.

5. **They eat all day for one night**

All that shivering burns fuel, so they spend most of the daylight eating. Research on chickadees by the *National Wildlife Federation* found birds with almost no body fat at dawn "bulging with fat" by the afternoon, gaining 10% or more of their body weight each day. By morning, nearly all of it is gone.

6. **Some lower their body temperature at night**

On the coldest nights, chickadees let their body temperature drop by about 12°-15°F, a state called regulated hypothermia.This can save them as much as 25% of their hourly energy use, so their fat lasts until dawn.

7. **They roost in sheltered spots, sometimes together**

Small birds spend winter nights out of the wind, tucked into tree cavities, dense evergreens and thick shrubs. Some share space: Eastern Bluebirds, House Wrens and even Black-capped Chickadees will crowd into one tight spot to pool their body heat. Ruffed Grouse will even dive into deep snow, where the snow shields them from cold winds.

Answers to Raptor ID Quiz from the Fall Issue

1. **Golden Eagle**
2. **Broad-winged Hawk**
3. **Northern Harrier**
4. **Peregrine Falcon**
5. **Red-tailed Hawk**
6. **Cooper's Hawk**
7. **Black Vulture**
8. **Bald Eagle**
9. **Mississippi Kite**
10. **Rough-legged Hawk**
11. **Osprey**
12. **American Kestrel**
13. **Sharp-shinned Hawk**
14. **Merlin**
15. **Turkey Vulture**

Do You Know a Student Who May Be Interested?
There's Still Time To Apply-Deadline December 15!

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 Augusta Bird Club 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/

Check us out on the web
www.augustabirdclub.org

Find us on Facebook

The Meadowlark
Editor: Rich Wood