

VSO Annual Meeting Field Trips

All trips start at the Sheraton parking lot

Friday – field trips depart from hotel between 1 and 2 pm; preregistration required; contact Linda Cory at lcory50@juno.com or 540-580-5214

Saturday and Sunday – depart between 7 and 8 am

Field trips will generally conclude between 12 and 1pm.

The field trips cover a variety of habitat from Arcadia to the STP. Target birds include cerulean and a myriad of other warblers, blue grosbeak, bald eagle, osprey, brown-headed nuthatch, red-headed woodpecker and ruffed grouse.

Field trip leaders will have water and snacks, first aid kits and other necessities on hand. Most leaders will have recommendations of restaurants local to the field trip site for lunch after the walks. Lunch will also be available back at the hotel restaurant as well as boxed lunches being available by pre-order. Field trips will each have a maximum number of participants and are on a first come, first served basis. Pre-registration is required for the Friday trips (see above); sign-up for the Saturday and Sunday trips will be available at the registration table Friday and Saturday. Although not likely, some of the field trips may change due to availability of the trip sites or other field conditions. Carpooling is recommended for all field trips. Sturdy/water-proof shoes are recommended for most of the field trips.

Friday Afternoon (preregistration required):

Greenfield Birds and Butterflies –

Greenfield is a popular place to bird due to a diverse habitat and convenient location. It is on Route 220 in Botetourt County near I-81 and the Appalachian Trail. Greenfield consists of 110 acres and includes flat graveled pathways around Greenfield Lake, good shore waterfowl, grassy fields where a variety of hawks hunt and a marshy area below the dam. While looking for interesting birds, this walk will also concentrate on spotting butterflies in the warm (hopefully) afternoon sun. Walking will be mostly flat, but will also include a gradual uphill walk for those that wish to continue up to the grassy field above the lake. Benches are located on the flat path.

Harvey's Knob Hawk Watch –

Harvey's Knob has been the primary hawk watching post for the Roanoke Valley and the Lynchburg Bird Clubs since 1977 when it was established by VSO lifetime member, Miriam Moore. Located at mile marker 95.6 on the Blue Ridge Parkway near the Peaks of Otter Lodge, the hawk watching post is ideally located along a ridge at 2,600 feet in elevation, overlooking spectacular valleys. Hawk watchers spend over 500 man hours each season from early September to mid-November to view and record over 10,000 migrant raptors. To see data, visit <https://sites.google.com/site/bijame/>. Although this will not be the peak season, you will most likely see some movement of the return migration. It is also a chance to see where this important hawk counting is done.

Mill Mountain and Smith Park –

Mill Mountain is where Roanoke's famous star can be found, giving Roanoke the name of Star City of the South. At 1,750 feet, it catches plentiful migrating warblers such as the yellow, palm, pine, black-throated green, northern parula and worm-eating. We will also expect various vireos and thrushes, yellow-billed cuckoo, rose-breasted grosbeak and scarlet tanager. The mile long hike is around the top of the mountain through a wooded area and the Mill Mountain Wildflower garden. We will also take time to view the Roanoke Valley from the star platform. From there we will visit Smith Park, located at the base of Mill Mountain and part of the Roanoke River Greenway. Walking is level, but partly through grasses that may be wet. Our target bird will be the yellow-crowned night-heron that nests in the sycamore branches low over the Roanoke River. Because this species is seldom found outside the coastal plain but is found in several locations throughout the valley, the Roanoke Valley Bird Club recently adopted the yellow-crowned night-heron for our new logo.

Radford Arsenal –

Designated as an Important Bird Area, this 2,700 acre property on the New River is managed by the Radford Army Ammunition Plant. Visitation is by permit only. The trip will consist of a riding tour with stops at various points of interest with opportunities for participants to take short walks. Due to security and safety concerns participants will be required to stay within sight of the installation's escort. Participants will be required to show identification prior to gaining access to the installation. Binoculars, spotting scopes and cameras are allowed, but cameras will need to be preregistered. Total number of participants is limited and all participants must be US citizens. Because of the installation's grassland habitat and management practices, it is home to several unique species including brown-headed nuthatch, prairie warbler, and grasshopper and Henslow's sparrows.

Saturday Morning:

Arcadia and Solitude –

This all-time favorite birding spot sweeps along the James River to the James River Bridge overlook and the grassy fields below. Orchard and Baltimore orioles are frequently seen, along with various vireos, sparrows and northern rough-winged swallows. River birds can vary, and hawks, including an occasional osprey or bald eagle, have been recorded here. We will also be on the lookout for warblers, including the prairie warbler. Be very careful crossing from one side of the bridge to the other due to erratic traffic. We will look for yellow-throated vireos on the way to Solitude swamp, then continue on to look for warblers, vireos, brown thrashers and blue grosbeaks. The swamp can produce a variety of ducks and sometimes prothonotary warblers.

Bent Mountain and Poor Mountain –

As part of Roanoke County, Bent Mountain is a hamlet just south of Roanoke City with great habitat for a variety of birds such as the bobolinks found in 2015. Because the community is 2,000 feet higher in elevation than Roanoke, it is said that there is Roanoke weather and then there is Bent Mountain weather. The property behind Bent Mountain Community Center is a high elevation bog with a unique habitat for willow and sometimes alder flycatchers, red-winged blackbird, orchard and Baltimore orioles, Louisiana waterthrush and more. Although level walking, wear water-proof shoes. We will then caravan up Poor Mountain to 2,700 feet elevation to look for nesting songbirds, including a variety of warblers such as Kentucky, chestnut-sided, redstart, black-throated green and possibly blackburnian. Ruffed grouse and turkey are also present as well as scarlet tanager, wood thrush and ovenbird. The group has the option of having lunch at the Bent Mountain Bistro.

Booker T. Washington National Monument and Smith Mountain Lake Community Park –

In 1956, Booker T. Washington Park was designated a national monument on the 100th birthday of Booker T. Washington as his birthplace. This 207-acre property has not only historical significance but is endowed with hardwood forests, a large variety of birds, wildflowers and butterflies. Park personnel will take us on a one-mile, mostly flat walk in search of woodland birds including brown-headed nuthatch, blue grosbeak, Acadian flycatcher, grasshopper sparrow, Louisiana waterthrush, a variety of woodpeckers and turkey. We will then carpool to Smith Mountain Lake Community Park to walk the mile and a half loop trail on the wooded peninsula that stretches out into the lake. The trail will take us through pine stands that gradually change to a hardwood forest. In 2015 we enjoyed a pair of nesting red-headed woodpeckers at the park, and brown-headed nuthatches are year-round residents. Shorebirds and waterfowl should also be seen, with the possibility of double-crested cormorant, common loon and horned grebe. We may also see osprey at the Smith Mountain Lake State Park osprey platform across the lake.

Claytor Nature Study Center –

Located at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Claytor Nature Study Center encompasses freshwater streams, woodlands, wetlands, grasslands, rare plants, wildlife and a portion of the Big Otter River. This is a great place to see a variety of spring migrants. We'll try for purple martin and other swallows, blue-gray gnatcatcher, wood thrush, gray catbird, early warblers (Louisiana waterthrush, black-and-white, common yellowthroat, American redstart, northern parula, palm, yellow-rumped and prairie),

indigo bunting, orchard oriole, and hopefully a raptor or two. We'll walk about two miles of trails, and if there has been recent rain in the area, the trails may be muddy so wear hiking boots.

Explore Park –

Operated by Roanoke County Parks and Recreation, Explore Park has long been a popular hiking and birding spot. Just off the Blue Ridge Parkway at mile marker 115, the 1,100 acre property is situated along the Roanoke River Gorge. Hiking trails are moderately level as you descend to the Roanoke River and then back up to the Taubman Visitor Center. Habitat includes forest, river, wetlands and open meadows. We should expect to see turkey, woodpeckers, herons, belted kingfisher, wood duck and possibly bald eagle. Many songbirds nest here, such as eastern wood-pewee, great-crested flycatcher, scarlet tanager and Louisiana waterthrush. We will spend a little time in the visitor center to learn about the history of the park, including native American lore and a settlement that once existed on the site.

Falls Ridge Preserve –

This unspoiled area is owned and maintained by The Nature Conservancy. It has hiking trails, a waterfall, rare plants and interesting geologic features such as a fault line, sink hole and cave. Research shows that this area was settled by and was an important spot for Native Americans. Walking is easy to moderate and hiking boots are recommended. Birding can vary at this beautiful spot, with hawks, raven, indigo bunting, chestnut-sided warbler, redstart and eastern wood-pewee. After the walk, the group may decide to stop for lunch at the Mountain View Italian Kitchen where several hummingbird feeders line the windows.

Fenwick Mines and Craig Creek –

A favorite of the Roanoke Valley Bird Club, this trip covers a wide range of habitats in a relatively small area. These include open fields, a small pond, wetlands, a mountain stream and mixed pine-hardwood forests. The Fenwick Nature Trail is one mile of easy walking. Expect to see and hear a variety of warblers and other woodland birds. Wild turkey and ruffed grouse are often found in the area. Red crossbill, woodcock and olive-sided flycatcher have been seen here. Other features include a wide variety of wildflowers, interesting butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. We will also hear spring peepers and other chorusing amphibians. Lunch will be available at the Pine Top Restaurant in New Castle.

Greenfield Recreational Area – see Friday

Johnson Farm and Peaks of Otter area –

We will carpool about 50 minutes to the Peaks of Otter Visitor Center (not the Lodge), then hike the Johnson Farm Loop trail for two to three hours. The trail is a two-mile loop starting from the Peaks of Otter Visitor Center parking lot. It is a hilly trail, but we will be setting a slow pace. Good walking shoes will be needed and part of the trail is through a grassy field, so your feet may get wet. A variety of migrants and other woodland species are possible on the trip, but target birds include cerulean, black-throated blue and Blackburnian warblers, scarlet tanager, Acadian flycatcher and rose-breasted grosbeak. Participants may then want to have lunch at the Peaks of Otter restaurant.

Lick Run Greenway –

Roanoke is proud of its ever growing Greenway trail system used for bicycling and walking. Lick Run Greenway is located centrally in town with open areas, woods and wetlands near the Roanoke River. The four-mile round trip hike is mostly flat with one hill and should take about three hours. This walk should produce a good cross section of birds found in the lower elevations of the valley, such as herons, hawks, yellow-billed cuckoo, vireos and a variety of warblers.

Ponds of Botetourt County

“Have scope, will travel” is the motto of this walk. Carvins Cove is a reserve protected by the largest conservation easement in Virginia history with over 60 miles of trails and 12,700 acres. The woods produce warblers such as pine and prairie warbler, as well as several species of woodpeckers. The cove is a reliable spot for waterfowl, usually in the colder months, but springtime as well. Bald eagle and

osprey occasion the cove. After visiting “the cove”, we will proceed on to three or four much smaller but reliable ponds in search of ducks and shorebirds.

Smith Mt Lake State Park (SMLSP) Boat Trip –

This walk is sponsored by park staff and the “Friends of SMLSP” who maintain a roosting spot for osprey. Osprey are known to mate for life and park staff have confirmed that the same pair have returned more than once. Nestlings should be visible at the time of our visit and a free short pontoon boat trip is offered to view the nest from the water. You can also view the nest via their webcam available online or live in the visitor center. The pontoon boat can carry 12 people, so two trips will take place. Half the group can bird the wooded and grassy trails of the park while the other half takes the boat ride. Information about the nest will be available closer to annual meeting time.

Warbler Road -

Aptly named, Warbler Road is part of the Virginia Birding and Wildlife Trail. The 13-mile gravel road goes from the James River up 2,700 feet in elevation to the Blue Ridge Parkway. Terrain covered is old-growth hardwood forests, hemlock-lined trout streams, open meadows, clearings and pine stands. Our target bird is the cerulean warbler. Many other sought-after warblers are present as well as a plethora of migrating songbirds. Walking is minimal and carpooling will be required due to limited pull-off space.

Sunday Morning:

Arcadia and Solitude – See Saturday

Falls Ridge Preserve – See Saturday

Finca Aloha -

This is a walking trip around Tim and Alyce Quinn’s property and the surrounding woods and gravel roads. With a wide variety of habitats surrounding their property, including woodlands, a pond, a creek, scrub and open fields, a typical spring day can yield more than 50 species. A few of the birds we will likely encounter include red-shouldered hawk, great crested flycatcher, white-eyed and yellow-throated vireos, blue-grey gnatcatcher, wood thrush, field and grasshopper sparrows, scarlet tanager, blue grosbeak, orchard and Baltimore orioles and a variety of warblers such as ovenbird, Louisiana waterthrush, black-and-white, common yellowthroat, hooded, American redstart, pine, prairie, black-throated green, and yellow-breasted chat. The terrain varies from level to hilly but is not strenuous. However, the ground is uneven, so wear sturdy shoes. If you don't want to hike, there's a big deck and lots of chairs where you can relax and do some stationary birding while watching the antics of the Quinns' llamas, chickens and guinea fowl. The drive from the hotel to Finca Aloha will take about 35 minutes. Keep an eye out for Eurasian collared doves as you pass the Burnt Chimney Elementary School a few miles from their house. After a morning of birding we can eat our box lunches on the deck, or there are a few good restaurants within a 15-minute drive.

Greenfield Recreational Area – See Friday

Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) and Roanoke River Trail -

As with most cities, the STP is one of the best places to bird. Entrance to the STP, or the Roanoke Water Pollution Control Plant, is only by special permit and only on Sundays, due to heavy equipment used the rest of the week. The trip is limited to the number of participants, and we all must enter at the same time and stay together as a group. This site is one of the best spots for viewing shorebirds in the Roanoke Valley. Impoundments, sludge ponds, and mudflats provide ideal habitat for many migratory species, as do the riparian woodlands and riverine edges. In spring we can expect to find migrant shorebirds such as least, semi-palmated, spotted, solitary and pectoral sandpipers, Wilson’s snipe and both yellowlegs. Songbirds may also be abundant during spring migration, such as white-eyed vireo, bank, tree, northern rough-winged, and cliff swallows, and blue grosbeak. Kestrel and red-tailed hawk can be seen along with occasional fish crow and raven. The walking is mostly flat with moderate elevation change. Study waterproof boots are recommended as it could be a little muddy.

Warbler Road – See Saturday