



# April 2009 Newsletter

*Celebrating 52 Years  
of Birding! 1957-2009*

## INSIDE:

RVBC Annual Picnic.....	2
Big Spring Day, May 9...2	
Raptor Count	
Correction.....	2
Field Trips.....	2
Field Notes.....	2
Sightings.....	2
VSO Annual Meeting, May 1-3, Fredericksburg, VA.....	3
VSO Piney Grove Field Trip, June 6.....	3
Dr. Rupert Cutler Appointed to Roanoke City Council.....	3
Plover Volunteers Needed in Michigan's Upper Penninsula.....	3
The Culpeper Basin IBA and Conserving Private Lands.....	3
For Quail and Other Birds. A Little Habitat Goes a Long Way.....	4
Return a Baby Bird to Its Nest.....	4

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## MARCH MEETING

Scott Shirley from the Western Virginia Water Authority spoke on birding at the Roanoke Sewage Treatment Plant. The site is open for birding access M-F from 7:30-5 p.m. (To visit on the weekend you must call ahead to make arrangements). Visitors must complete a temporary permit and receive a brief orientation in how to safely bird the site (permanent permits are also available). The plant attracts a broad variety of water and woodland birds.

Bill Grant presented a program on the ten North American birds in greatest decline since 1967 as listed on National Audubon's Common Birds in Decline report. The birds are:

- 1) Northern Bobwhite—82% decline (*but there is some good news: see article on page 4*)
- 2) Evening Grosbeak—78% decline
- 3) Northern Pintail—77% decline
- 4) Greater Scaup—75% decline
- 5) Boreal Chickadee—73% decline
- 6) Eastern Meadowlark—72% decline
- 7) Common Tern—71% decline
- 8) Loggerhead Shrike—71% decline
- 9) Field Sparrow—68% decline
- 10) Grasshopper Sparrow—65% decline

## Mountain Lake Migratory Bird Festival May 29-31

The Fifth Annual festival will take place at the Mountain Lake Hotel in Giles County. There are many excellent field trips to choose from over the three days. Julie Zickefoose, writer, artist, and naturalist will be the keynote speaker on Friday night. The hotel is providing special rates on all accommodations and meals are included for hotel guests. There are also motels available in the surrounding area. All field trips will leave from the hotel and buses will be provided for many of the trips.

**Advance registration is necessary for the field trips.** Registration can be done online: [www.mountainlakebirding.com](http://www.mountainlakebirding.com). For more information concerning registration contact: Jenny Clay: Phone: 1.540.921.2525 / Email: [jclay@gilescounty.org](mailto:jclay@gilescounty.org)

## NEXT MEETING:

**April 13, 7:00 p.m.**

**Grandin Court Baptist Church**

Gwenn Johnston, a wildlife rehabilitator and President of Wildlife Care Alliance (WCA) will give a presentation on wildlife rehabilitation-- what it is, why we do it, and how the public can help. WCA helps at least 1,500 wild animals each year. At least half of them are birds. Learn what to do when you find a baby bird, a sick or injured bird; and how to safely capture and transport injured wild birds and mammals to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

Wildlife Care Alliance is a non-profit group of licensed wildlife rehabilitators and concerned citizens working to benefit native Virginia wildlife. WCA serves an area encompassing Roanoke, Bedford, Lynchburg, Blacksburg, and adjacent counties. Our goal is to release healthy, viable animals into appropriate habitat and to help the public understand the value of wildlife.

*Please join us for dinner before the meeting at 5:30 p.m. at the Brambleton Deli at 3655 Brambleton Road.*



## ***RVBC Annual Picnic, August 16***

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Mark your calendars now for our Club picnic. Our annual club picnic gathering will be at Walrond Park, 6824 Walrond Drive off of Plantation Road at 4 P.M.

## ***Big Spring Day – May 9, 2009***

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The short spell of warm weather in early March reminded us that spring migration is not too far away. Late April through mid-May is the best time to see migrants in our area. It's also the time to see the birds that spend the entire year here. They are all showing off their bright summer plumages, setting up territories and pairing up to breed. All of this makes them more active, vocal and more easily observed.

Every spring at the height of the migration, our club teams with the Lynchburg Bird Club to do a census of birds in our area—Big Spring Day. The count (done rain or shine) is centered around the Peaks of Otter, and specific territories within a 7 ½ mile radius of the Peaks are covered every year. Historical records can then be used to determine trends in bird populations over the years.

Most territories can be covered from your car and include very little or no walking, but there are a couple of territories that require hiking for several hours. Most groups start out between 7 and 8:00 in the morning. You don't have to be an expert to participate. We try to include at least one experienced birder on every territory, but beginners can help pick up birds even if they can't identify all the species they are seeing. The more eyes and ears we have out there, the more birds we will find.

At noon, all participants gather at the Peaks of Otter Picnic Grounds for lunch and a tally of what was seen. Everyone brings their own food and drink, and we get to catch up with people we haven't seen since the last Big Spring Day. After lunch, groups that didn't have enough time to finish up their territories head back out for a while. Others might choose to go in search of a specific rarity reported by another participant. The rest of us just call it a day and head home.

If you would like to join us for this year's Big Spring Day on May 9, please contact Eunice Hudgins at 389-4056 or [uvvau@aol.com](mailto:uvvau@aol.com) or Pam Wefel at 977-0636 or [pewefel@aol.com](mailto:pewefel@aol.com) to sign up. Let us know if you prefer to drive or hike, and whether you feel comfortable identifying species yourself or just want to tag along with others more experienced than yourself.

Join us for a fun day. You'll meet new birders, discover new territories and may see a bird you have never seen before.

## ***Raptor Count Correction***

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The Raptor Count Results posted in the March newsletter were incorrect. A team was accidentally omitted. Joyce Holt, Liz Williams and Linda Barker journeyed around Roanoke County and found 61 raptors of 7 species for a point total of 251, including 10 bonus points for the most Screech Owls (1). I apologize to the ladies for the omission.

*Anne Tucker*

## ***FIELD TRIPS***

**CHAIRMAN**

**BETH GRIFFIN 265-4853**

**REMEMBER TO SHARE THE COST OF GAS WHEN YOU CAR-POOL**

### ***Botetourt County, April 11, 8:00 AM***

Meet leader Bill Hunley (774-2397) near the Bojangles at Botetourt Commons. Bill will lead us to various birding hot spots in the area. Expect a small amount of walking.

### ***Poor Mtn. and Bent Mtn. Field Trip & Pot Luck, April 18, 8:30 AM***

Robin and Allen Austin (929-9071) invite all birders to meet them at their home on Bottom Creek Rd., Bent Mtn., to assemble for a birding trip up Poor Mtn. Little walking will be involved. Afterwards, we will gather at the Austin's for a pot luck. They will provide drinks and a meat entree; everyone else should bring a dish to share. After the potluck, those who want to can go on a bird walk on Bottom Creek Rd. This will involve easy walking but a greater distance than the morning trip. Don't miss this event! A good time is always had by all.

### ***Warbler Road, April 25, 7 AM***

Alyce and Tim Quinn (719-0109) will lead us up Warbler Rd. in search of, you guessed it—warblers (and other migrants.) Meet near the Bojangles at Botetourt Commons at 7 AM. This is often a long trip so bring snacks, water and lunch. Also there are altitude change so it is best to dress in layers. This is usually a GREAT trip, even if you do end up with warbler neck. Little walking involved.

### ***Mill Mountain Park, May 3rd, 7:30 AM***

Bill Hunley (774-2397) will lead us on an exploration of this excellent habitat. We usually see warblers and other migrants, plus wildflowers. Meet Bill in front of the Discovery Center in the Park. NOTE: this is SUNDAY hike. There will be about 1 mile of easy walking, with slightly more taxing walking if you want to venture up to the star.

## ***FIELD NOTES***

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### ***Green Hill Park Salem, Feb. 28***

Birders joined leader Bill Hunley on a walk along the Roanoke River in Green Hill Park. Highlights included: Red-bellied Woodpeckers exhibiting territorial behavior; Wood Ducks- early spring arrivals; lots of Yellow-rumped Warblers: good views of Great Blue Herons; and a real treat: a Mink hunting along the river.

### ***Fenwick Mines, March 21***

25 participants, led by Liz Williams and Joyce Holt, saw a variety of species, highlights included: Brown Creeper, Blue-headed Vireo, Wild Turkey, Hairy Woodpecker,

Purple Finch, Red-shouldered Hawk, American Kestrel, Field Sparrow, Common Raven, Eastern Phoebe, Pine Warbler, Golden-crowned Kinglet, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker.

## **Sightings**

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Pam Wefel reported over 100 Pine Siskins at her back yard feeders in Blue Ridge.

Carol Siler saw Pine Warblers at Carvins Cove near the boat ramp/picnic area in the pines on March 7.

On March 8 Kent Davis spotted several Pine Warblers and Eastern Phoebes on the Roanoke River above Smith Park.

Zach Thompson saw 3 Blue-Winged Teal at a private pond on Stevens Road on March 9.

On March 13 Kent Davis visited the Roanoke Sewage Treatment Plant and saw 75 Tree Swallows, 1 Rough-winged Swallow, 3 Killdeer, 4 Great Blue Herons and 5 Red-winged Blackbirds.

Carol Siler went hiking in Dupont National Forest south of Asheville, NC on March 22, and saw Blue-headed Vireo, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Yellow Warbler.s

Kent Davis saw an Osprey flying near his home on March 23.

Zach Thompson sighted two Rough-winged Swallows at Murray's Pond on March 25.

Also on March 25, Mike Purdy saw a Red-necked Grebe on Carvins Cove.

## **VSO Annual Meeting May 1-3, Fredericksburg, VA**

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Hosted jointly by the Fredericksburg Birding Club and the University of Mary Washington, the annual meeting will be held May 1-3 in Fredericksburg. All meeting activities will be at Gari Melchers Home and Studio, which is on the VDGIF Birding Trail. The official meeting hotel will be the Comfort Suites located at the intersection of I-95 and U.S. Route 17, a 5 minute drive from meeting headquarters. The hotel will offer rooms at a 15% discounted rate for meeting attendees, \$88.00 plus tax per night for one or two people, \$10 for each additional person. Reservations must be made by phone (540 322-4700) to receive the discounted rate. For more info go to: <http://virginiabirdsnet.umwblogs.org/>

## **VSO Piney Grove Field Trip, June 6, 2009**

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Again this summer the VSO and CCB (Center for Conservation Biology) will join together for a field trip to Piney Grove, site of nesting Red-cockaded Woodpeckers. Mike Wilson from the CCB will be our leader and educator. We are given access to this protected site through Mike's support and the cooperation of The Nature Conservancy. The past two years have produced both a look at Red-cockaded Woodpecker nest sites and good views of adult birds.

We will assemble at 5:20 A.M. in the morning on June 6 at the Virginia Diner in Wakefield and carpool to Piney Grove as a group. Because of the sensitive nature of this area, we are limited to the number of participants that can go in at one time so you must pre-register. If you are interested in this trip, please contact Peggy Opengari at 540-921-4340 or [gramby@pemtel.net](mailto:gramby@pemtel.net).

## **Dr. Rupert Cutler Appointed to Roanoke City Council**

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On March 2, RVBC club member Dr. Rupert Cutler was appointed to Roanoke City Council, a position he left in 2006. The Council appointed Rupert to fill the vacancy left after the resignation of Alvin Nash. The club warmly congratulates Rupert for his appointment.

Rupert is a native of Detroit, Michigan. His master's and doctor of philosophy degrees are from the Department of Resource Development of Michigan State University. His doctoral research was a study of environmental litigation. Rupert has worked in journalism, environmental policy and natural resources public administration. President Jimmy Carter appointed him assistant secretary of agriculture for conservation, research, and education.

Since January of 1991, Rupert has lived in Roanoke and from 1991-1997 was the executive director of Virginia's Explore Park.

In March of 1997, he became the founding executive director of the Western Virginia Land Trust, a private, nonprofit association created to help preserve the natural, scenic, and cultural heritage of western Virginia on private land, using conservation easements.

## **Plover Volunteers Needed in Michigan's Upper Peninsula**

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The Nature Conservancy is looking for volunteers to help monitor Piping Plover nests and chicks in locations across Michigan's Upper Peninsula: Grand Marais and Vermilion on Lake Superior, Gulliver, Escanaba, Indian Point, and Pte. Aux Chenes/Brevort on Lake Michigan.

Biologists are hired at each site, but cannot cover the beach every minute of every day. In addition to surveying the beaches and monitoring located nests, volunteers may also provide public outreach support and watch for predators such as gulls and raptors. We need help during June and July, and housing may be provided at some sites.

Also, we will be hosting volunteer workdays to improve habitat by controlling invasive plant species. Sit on the beach, observe many shorebirds and other species or roll up your sleeves and help pull weeds to assist in the Piping Plover recovery efforts.

## ***For Quail and Other Birds, A Little Habitat Goes A Long Way***

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The once-ubiquitous Northern Bobwhite is in deep trouble. Quail counts have been in free fall since the annual Breeding Bird Survey was launched in 1966, plunging 82%.

Bobwhites are an indicator species, a sign of ecological vigor. When quail disappear, so do other species that depend on grasslands and shrubby habitat. The list of songbirds that share quail territory includes the Orchard Oriole, Painted Bunting, Dickcissel, Leconte's Sparrow, Grasshopper Sparrow, Sedge Wren, and Loggerhead Shrike.

**But there is some good news:** High-quality Bobwhite cover can be produced in three to five years, and there's a new federal program dubbed "Bobwhite Buffers" designed to restore 250,000 acres of habitat in 35 states. Meanwhile, quail devotees from across the Southeast have an ambitious plan, the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative (NBCI), to return covey counts to 1980 levels. That goal may seem quixotic, given all the quail country that has disappeared over the past 40 years and the limited resources of state wildlife agencies. Still, the scheme has enthusiastic participants, including Audubon Texas, which added a full-time quail biologist to its staff and has taken the lead role in restoring the Lone Star State's Bobwhite populations.

The root of the Bobwhite's plight is no mystery: wide-scale land-use changes. Suburban sprawl and shopping malls have gobbled up quail habitat.

In the meantime, many landowners have turned to intensive agricultural practices. Farmers tear out hedgerows to create huge fields and use herbicides to control weeds that would provide quail food. Others have switched from traditional crops to grass pastures, hay fields, or pine plantations, equally poor Bobwhite habitat. In addition, the practice of burning farmland to control unwanted vegetation, which generates new Bobwhite cover, has been largely abandoned.

Quail require a mix of native grasses and woody thickets. Creating good quail habitat, however, entails continuous effort in the form of prescribed fire, winter disking, planting, and control of invasive exotics. It can be more difficult than

managing a wetland or mature forest.

The Bobwhite has a short lifespan. Of every 100 Bobwhites alive in the fall, at the end of a long breeding season, 75 to 80 will perish over the next 12 months. The species, however, compensates with robust reproductive capacity. Blessed with good habitat and weather, an adult pair might produce two or more broods totaling 25 offspring.

In spring and summer, Bobwhites feast on protein-rich insects, eating as many as 168 grasshoppers in a single feeding. Seeds of native forbs and weeds provide 90 percent of the birds' food during fall and winter, when quail move into woodlands or dense brush to escape harsh weather.

**It's important to note that** there has been little change in the Bobwhite's overall range since Colonial times, though some populations of the birds have been extirpated. The issue is the number of breeding birds, which has spiraled down from an estimated 31 million in 1966 to 5.5 million today. Without a valiant effort to reverse that trend, experts say, we'll be left with a breeding population of only 3.1 million Bobwhites by 2020 and the species will have disappeared from much of its historic territory. Thus programs like the Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative may be the best hope for the future filled with quail and other struggling grassland and brushland songbirds.

The NBCI is a coalition of biologists and land managers from state and federal resource agencies, the academic community, and private organizations. Its authors predict that an additional 65 million acres of rural America will be converted to urban use by 2020 because of population growth. However, they believe Bobwhite populations can still be restored to 1980 abundance—19.6 million breeding birds—by quail-friendly management on about six percent of the Southeast region's 81 million acres of farm, forest, and rangeland.

Wildlife Management Institute's Don McKenzie, national coordinator of the NBCI, says, "Our philosophy is to put Bobwhites back in the working landscape, not to create refuges," he said. "We know how to manage all of those landscapes to the benefit of quail. The challenge is figuring out a way to apply the technology to millions of acres instead of five or ten acres at a time like we're doing now."

Audubon Texas is doing just that. **For the present, the best news about quail is the Bobwhite Buffers program**, which was introduced four years ago by the USDA's Farm Service Agency. (The official title is Habitat Buffers for Upland Birds.) Part of the ongoing program provides incentive payments to farmers who sign 10-year contracts to plant and maintain buffers of native grasses, legumes, wildflowers, shrubs and trees along field edges. As of last October, 199,832 acres had been enrolled.

Quail managers are euphoric about the program. A relatively small change in land use can produce a significant increase

in numbers of quail and grassland birds. Researchers documented a 44 percent jump in Bobwhite numbers in the first year along with greater numbers of Dickcissels, Field Sparrows, and Indigo and Painted Buntings. The biggest response has come from wintering sparrows, whose numbers jumped 10- to 20-fold on the new habitat.

*Summarized from Audubon Magazine: "Bad News, Good News"  
by Les Line*

## **The Culpeper Basin IBA and Conserving Private Lands**

*Important Bird Areas, or IBAs, are sites that provide essential habitat for one or more species of birds. IBAs may be a few acres or thousands of acres, but they are usually discrete sites that stand out from the surrounding landscape. IBAs may include public or private lands, or both, and they may be protected or unprotected.*



The Virginia Important Bird Areas (IBA) program exists to identify and protect the places in Virginia that are critical to bird survival in the Commonwealth. The program focuses on identifying and conserving a network of sites across Virginia that are essential for sustaining birds and other wildlife. With nineteen sites identified that represent over 2 million acres of habitat, the IBA program is moving into the next stage of building a community engaged in conservation.

The Culpeper Basin IBA in the northern Piedmont of Virginia once supported an abundance of grassland bird species such as Bobwhite Quail and Loggerhead Shrike. It has been transformed into a mosaic of farms, fields, and scattered secondary woodlots of oaks, hickories, and Virginia pine. Many of the grassland species for which the Piedmont is noted are recognized by Audubon as Common Birds in Decline.

Despite its tremendous value to Virginia's birds, only 3% of the Culpeper Basin IBA is formally protected, the least of any IBA. Due to its close proximity to the rapidly suburbanizing areas along the I-95 and I-66 corridors, the greatest threat to the IBA is urban expansion. Such development is placing enormous pressure on rural farmland, changing the landscape for birds. Additionally, changes in farming practices that lead to frequent mowing, larger fields without hedgerows, the loss of large fallow fields and greater use of pesticides are all threats to birds. Ensuring the future of these vulnerable species will depend on the involvement of local communities, farmers, landowners, and local decision makers.

With these ideas in mind, the Virginia IBA program, in partnership with the Piedmont Environmental Council, the Natural Resource Conservation Service, and the Farm Service Agency, is currently helping to implement a Farm Bill Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) called SAFE – State Acres of Wildlife Enhancement. This Culpeper Basin SAFE project will use native trees, shrubs, and warm season grasses to restore bird habitats along the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers, as well as upland habitat next to their tributaries; thus, creating wildlife corridors of diverse habitats. To realize our goal of restoring grassland species habitat in the Culpeper Basin IBA, we must first find private landowners willing to enroll in the CRP program. If you would like to learn more about this SAFE program or if know of landowners in Fauquier, Culpeper or Orange counties that may be interested in signing up, please contact Mary Elfner, Virginia IBA Coordinator at [melfner@audubon.org](mailto:melfner@audubon.org), (804) 788-7660. You can also visit the Piedmont Environmental Council website at [http://www.pecva.org/anx/ass/library/120/faq\\_basic.pdf](http://www.pecva.org/anx/ass/library/120/faq_basic.pdf).

*Mary Elfner, VA IBA Coordinator, February 2009*

## **Return a Baby Bird to Its Nest**

What should you do if you find a baby bird out of its nest? If the fledgling is hopping around on the ground in a safe area, leave it alone. Usually its parents are nearby, keeping an eye on it, and still feeding it, but if you think the bird would be safer off the ground, place it back in its nest. If that isn't possible, then put it on a tree branch or in a shrub, close enough for the parents to find it. Parents will *not* abandon a baby bird if it is handled, as birds do not have a keen sense of smell.

If you cannot return the fledgling to its nest or near its parents, then get it to a wildlife rehabilitator as quickly as possible. Caring for a baby bird is a 24-hour task that can last for weeks. Let a professional handle it. **In our area, contact The Wildlife Care Alliance at 540-507-4007. <http://www.wildlifecarealliance.org/>**

Wildlife rehabilitators don't charge for services so donations are greatly appreciated. In the meantime, keep the fledgling warm as it cannot yet regulate its own body temperature. One way to do this is to make a soft nest of tissues inside a small cardboard box, placed on a heating pad set at its lowest temperature setting. A moist sponge placed in the box will add some humidity and help keep the bird warm. No matter what anyone tells you, do not try to feed milk, insects, worms, etc. to the baby bird.

*Summarized from Baby Bird Q-and-A, BirdWire, Feb. 20, 2009,  
e-newsletter of Bird Watcher's Digest*

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