

VSO Annual Meeting 2016 Field Trips

Field trip leaders will have water and snacks, first aid kits and other necessities on hand. Field trips will each have a maximum number of participants and are on a first-come, first-served basis. 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, and sturdy/waterproof shoes are recommended for most. Below are descriptions of all the trips, along with travel time and distance to each site.

Friday Afternoon:

Greenfield Birds and Butterflies – (25 minutes/15 miles)

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, grassy fields where a variety of hawks hunt and a marshy area below the dam. We will likely encounter wood duck, American coot, willow flycatcher, eastern kingbird, eastern wood-peewee, warbling vireo, red-winged blackbird and orchard and Baltimore orioles, to name a few. 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 who wish to continue up to the grassy field above the lake. Benches are located on the flat path.

Harvey's Knob Hawk Watch – (45 minutes/40 miles)

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. Very little walking is expected, and you can bring a folding chair to stay a while.

Mill Mountain and Smith Park – (20 minutes/9 miles)

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 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 it for our logo.

Radford Arsenal – (50 minutes/40 miles)

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. 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. 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. Total number of participants is limited and all participants must be U.S. citizens.

Saturday Morning:

Arcadia and Solitude Swamp – (55 minutes/40 miles)

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 swallow. 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. We will look for yellow-throated vireo on the way to Solitude swamp, then continue on to look for warblers, vireos, brown thrasher and blue grosbeak. The swamp

can produce a variety of ducks and sometimes prothonotary warbler. Walking will be around 1 mile and mostly level on gravel, but possibly wet.

Bent Mountain and Poor Mountain – (30 minutes/22 miles)

Bent Mountain is a hamlet just south of Roanoke with great habitat for a variety of birds such as bobolink, found in 2015. 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. Expect 1-2 miles of level walking, and wear waterproof shoes. We will then caravan up Poor Mountain to 3,850 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.

Booker T. Washington National Monument and Smith Mountain Lake Community Park – (40 minutes/25 miles)

Designated as a national monument, Booker T. Washington Park is located at his birthplace. This historical 207 acre property is endowed with hardwood forests, grassy fields and 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 1 ½-mile 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, horned grebe and osprey.

Claytor Nature Study Center – (55 minutes/35 miles)

Located at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Claytor Nature Study Center encompasses freshwater streams, woodlands, wetlands, grasslands, rare plants and wildlife. 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 – (25 minutes/10 miles)

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 hilly 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 – (40 minutes/26 miles)

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. This location is also a favorite for the local Blue Ridge Wildflower Society.

Fenwick Mines and Craig Creek – (40 minutes/32 miles)

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. Also featured are a wide variety of wildflowers, interesting butterflies, dragonflies and damselflies. Spring peepers are abundant as well as other chorusing amphibians.

Greenfield Recreational Area – see Friday

Johnson Farm and Peaks of Otter area – (45 minutes/40 miles)

We will carpool to the Peaks of Otter Visitor Center (not the Lodge), then hike the two-mile Johnson Farm Loop trail. It is hilly, but we will set a slow pace. Good walking shoes will be needed, and part of the trail is through a grassy field

which can be wet. A variety of migrants and other woodland species are possible on the trip. Target birds include cerulean, black-throated blue and Blackburnian warblers, scarlet tanager, Acadian flycatcher and rose-breasted grosbeak. Participants may then want to visit the Peaks of Otter Lodge.

Lick Run Greenway – (15 minutes/8 miles)

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 which we will take at a leisurely pace. This walk should produce a good cross section of birds found in the lower elevations of the valley, such as yellow-crowned night-heron, great crested flycatcher, yellow-billed cuckoo, warbling and white-eyed vireos, a variety of warblers, scarlet tanager and possible orioles.

Ponds of Botetourt County – (45 minutes/30 miles)

“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, 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. We will then proceed to three or four much smaller but reliable ponds in search of ducks and shorebirds.

Smith Mt Lake State Park (SMLSP) Boat Trip – (45 minutes/30 miles) - \$5 entrance fee per person collected at the park site

This field trip 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 may be visible at the time of our visit and a pontoon boat trip is offered to view the nest from the water. You can also view the nest via their webcam available in the visitor center. The boat ride is limited to 20 people, and the ride should last about an hour or maybe longer, depending on what we see. We will then do some mostly flat walking through wooded and grassy trails of the park. Besides osprey and waterfowl, other target birds include brown-headed nuthatch and pine warbler.

Warbler Road – (55 minutes/40 miles)

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

Ferrum Birding – (55 minutes/39 miles)

The Ferrum College campus has over 400 acres of forestland with hiking trails, fields and two ponds. One to two miles of hiking is mostly easy with a couple of short hills, and includes a forested trail, open field and then a walk around the pond on the main campus. Species to be seen in the forested area are Acadian flycatcher, ovenbird, eastern woodpecker and other woodland birds. Also seen on the Ferrum campus are orchard and Baltimore orioles, brown thrasher, eastern phoebe, eastern bluebird and northern rough-winged swallow. For those interested, on the way back to Roanoke we can do some more birding along a steeper trail at the Grassy Hill Nature Preserve.

Finca Aloha – (35 minutes/22 miles)

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, orchard and Baltimore orioles and a variety of warblers such as ovenbird, Louisiana waterthrush, common yellowthroat, hooded, pine, prairie, black-throated green, and yellow-breasted chat. Walking is level to hilly; sturdy shoes and long pants are recommended. If you prefer, you can do some stationary birding on the deck. Keep an eye out for Eurasian collared doves as you pass the Burnt Chimney Elementary School a few miles from their house.

Greenfield Recreational Area – See Friday

Sewage Treatment Plant (STP) and Roanoke River Trail – (20 minutes/10 miles)

As with most cities, the STP is one of the best places to bird. Entrance is by special permit and only on Sundays, due to heavy equipment used the rest of the week. Trip participants must all 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. The property includes impoundments, sludge ponds, mudflats, riparian habitat and woodlands. 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, a variety of 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 muddy.

Warbler Road – See Saturday