



VSO Newsletter

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Grasshopper Sparrow. Photo by Dave Boltz

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Change of Address (USPS or email)

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Send submissions by email. Attach MS Word document or plain text, with high resolution photos. Submissions may be edited for style and/or length.

Contact VSO President Bill Williams at:
info@virginiabirds.org

Bringing Back Virginia's Grassland Birds

*October Greenfield, The Piedmont Environmental Council
Justin Proctor, Smithsonian's Virginia Working Landscapes*

Virginia's scenic countryside, a place of mountain forests, headwater streams, and rolling farmscapes, is inarguably beautiful and captivating. But what makes it truly memorable and unique are the sights and sounds of so many charismatic birds moving across its diverse landscapes. Passersby are enriched by a vibrant chorus of birdsong, transported back in time by the song of the iconic Eastern Meadowlark as it resonates through hayfields and across pastures. Other grassland birds flutter around energetically, like the sharply-dressed Bobolink, affectionately referred to as the "R2D2 bird" for its bubbly and robotic-sounding song. Meanwhile, the cryptic Grasshopper Sparrow often goes unnoticed, with its insect-like buzz and camouflaged plumage, while the Red-winged Blackbird belts out the songs of spring from any high perch they can find, showing off their new plumage adorned with bright red shoulder patches. In the spring, the symphony of these birds is accompanied by a frenzy of courtship and nest-building activity amidst the growing grasses of meadows and fields.

Sadly, many of our grassland birds, along with their beauty and songs, have been in sharp population decline over the last century as native grasslands in Virginia and throughout the United States are steadily converted to agricultural lands. In fact, modern agricultural machinery, widespread use of biocides, and increased consumer demands have inflicted more intense human impacts on grasslands than on any other North American terrestrial ecosystem. To make that tangible, Eastern Meadowlarks have now lost more than 75 percent of their population in the U.S. since the 1970s, and those that remain rely almost entirely upon private working lands for habitat.

With the majority of remaining grasslands in Virginia currently held in private hands and under agricultural use, the onus for grassland bird conservation has fallen largely on landowners and agricultural producers. Recognizing that balancing the needs of conservation as well as the demands of working agricultural lands can be a complex conservation challenge, the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative (VGBI) was created to build partnerships, strategies, and outreach that can help stem the decline of grassland birds while restoring ecosystem functionality to working lands and protecting farmer livelihoods.

A partnership of Smithsonian’s Virginia Working Landscapes, The Piedmont Environmental Council, American Farmland Trust, and Quail Forever, VGBI draws on locally-derived science, partner expertise, and a growing network of collaborating farmers to identify a specific suite of best management practices (BMPs) that allow agricultural lands to work in favor, rather than against, grassland birds. With bird diversity and abundance invariably interwoven into the greater ecology of these farmscapes, BMPs that benefit birds are those that build back productive habitats, landscape resiliency, and ecosystem services. Therefore, practices that target improvements to soil and water quality have a positive, ecosystem-scale impact on birds as well.

The combined capacity and expertise of these organizations allows the initiative to offer landowners and producers a start-to-finish pathway for implementing a suite of win-win conservation practices tailored to their working landscapes. “We are able to bridge what’s referred to as the research-implementation gap, which means that we can take new information we learn through our research and directly apply it to conservation action on farms,” explains VGBI Coordinator Justin Proctor.

In 2022, VGBI launched an incentives program aimed at helping farmers transition to grassland-bird friendly practices. With support from grant funding, the program is able to pay farmers to adopt BMPs—specifically, delayed spring haying and summer pasture stockpiling—that protect grassland birds during their vulnerable nesting season.

The two simple strategies are not only beneficial for grassland birds, but for farmers as well. VGBI’s Co-



VGBI Conservation Conversation at Heaven's Hollow Farm, Madison County. Photo by Hugh Kenny

ordinator, October Greenfield, oversees the incentives. “Delaying the first hay cutting in the spring until at least early July is a game-changer for allowing the bulk of our grassland birds to fledge at least one successful clutch of young,” explains October. “And while a delayed cut may not work for every farmer, it can work for many of them, especially in cases where producers aren’t targeting high protein hay.” Meanwhile, summer pasture stockpiling involves rotating cattle off of select pastures in the early spring to allow a stockpile of grass to grow and be available for grazing in the summer, when hot temperatures normally reduce available forage. This practice works very well for grassland birds, as VGBI works with farmers to select stockpile fields that are conducive for their needs and also where nesting activity is most dense.

In its first year, VGBI ran a pilot for this incentives program, which enrolled 500 acres over ten property owners, and also included an additional 1,300 acres with no incentives, totaling 1,800 acres protected for breeding grassland birds. Now in its second year, with a more robust framework in place, and a larger pot of incentives money available, VGBI has advertised the incentives program openly across its 16-county region in the Blue Ridge, Shenandoah Valley, and northern Piedmont. Upon closing the application period in mid-November, the program received 41 applications totaling over 2,600 acres—plus several inquiries from landowners and producers wishing to participate without receiving financial support!

In addition to its incentive program, The VGBI also offers exciting volunteer opportunities. Each year, Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL) recruits citizen science volunteers to conduct biodiversity surveys across the northern Piedmont and



Eastern Meadowlark. Photo by October Greenfield

Shenandoah Valley. These surveys are part of an ongoing study to collect data that over time could elucidate the impact of different land management practices on native biodiversity, including pollinators, plants, and birds. VWL provides training and oversight of more than 50 citizen science volunteers who are invaluable for collecting data that helps VGBI refine its management recommendations to best match the needs of birds and working landscapes.

As the seasons transition into winter, some of our grassland bird species have made spectacular migrations and have arrived on their wintering

grounds farther south. As these species depart, others arrive from farther north, marking the return of Virginia's overwintering grassland bird species. As you drive past local farmlands in the winter months, keep your eyes peeled for life amongst the grasslands, including the moth-like flight of short-eared owls, the distinctive white rump patch of northern harriers gliding low over fields, and songbirds like horned larks foraging on the bare ground beneath the standing vegetation.

For more information about the VGBI, our nest box program, volunteer opportunities, or other ways to help grassland birds, visit vagrasslandbirds.org

President's Message

Bill Williams, VSO President

Educational Outreach

It was my privilege to represent the VSO with the workshop presentation "Using Bird Data to Meet Living Systems and Life Processes Standards" at the Virginia Association of Science Teachers Professional Development Institute in Williamsburg November 11. The discussion focused on free, easy-to-access data sources such as Hawkcount, eBird, Motus Wildlife Tracking System, Monarch Watch (which also tracks hummingbird migration), the student project resources offered by the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, plus a glimpse of forthcoming 2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas information.

The main emphasis throughout the talk was modeling open-ended questioning, an essential inquiry skill for prompting students to "investigate and understand" the natural world. Consider the following questions for example: What is a

nanotag? How do we prove a Bar-tailed Godwit flew 8,425 miles non-stop from Alaska to Tasmania in 11 days? How do you quantify the economic value of Clark's Nutcracker? How long and how high does a Black Swift fly and why? To find nesting Black-throated Blue Warblers in Virginia, where and which habitats would you explore? As students begin to peel away substantive layers associated with such queries, the potential for student-owned critical thinking is strengthened.

Archiving the VSO Newsletter

All published volumes of *The Raven* (1930-2022) and *Virginia Birds* (2004-2020), two of the VSO's three publications, are accessible through our website. However, only a trace (Spring 2018 through Summer 2022) of the organization's *Newsletter* has been archived for public access. Membership Secretary Shirley Devan has taken on the daunting task of correcting that. See the box.

VSO Newsletters and Blasts from the Past

Shirley Devan, VSO Membership Secretary

Here's a quick quiz: What year was the first VSO Newsletter? (Hint: The VSO's birthdate is 1929.) Answer on page 5.

This is an appeal for **ANY VSO newsletters** you may have tucked away on a shelf or in a box at the back of the closet. Now you know what to do with them! We have large gaps from 1967 to 1974 and 1982 to 1997. Plus, we're missing some odd ones after 2000. Our inventory of newsletters is fairly complete after 2008.

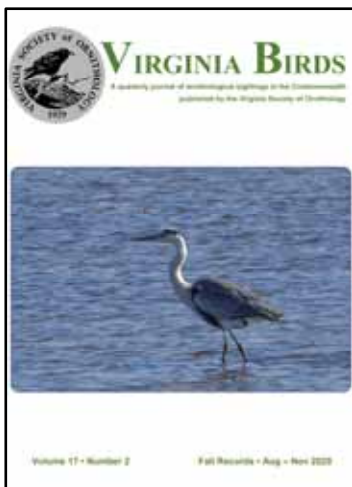
Please contact me at vsomembership@cox.net or call 757-813-1322 and leave a message. I'll call you back promptly. We'll work out a way for you to get them to me without much hardship on your part. Many thanks!

President's report, continued...

below to learn how you can help VSO fill in the gaps for this valuable component of the VSO's historical record.

Catching up *Virginia Birds*

Matt Anthony and his team of Regional Editors have made significant progress in bringing our



Virginia Birds journal up to date. The path for making the journal current meant assembling seven volumes from Fall 2020 through Summer 2022, each of which had to be assembled, edited and formatted for publication. The Fall 2020 edition was mailed to members

and posted online early last fall. Members will soon receive two more volumes as a double issue, Winter 2020 and Spring 2021.

When those arrive, the immediate attraction will be the volume's remarkable photos. More important, however, is the context for the photos. Set aside some time to digest Matt's "Editor's Corner" that links the extraordinary Fall 2020 species-rich record with an equally impressive Winter 2020-2021 record. Then delve into his insightful editorial: "The 2021-2020 Boreal Finch Irruption in Virginia." Not only are each essays immensely engaging field trips down memory lane, but substantive learning experiences all around.

International Conservation Involvement

The VSO has a recent history of international ornithological collaborations, including working with Community Cloud Forest Conservation in Guatemala's education program for young females and with Earth Sanga to complete bird monitoring surveys for its Tree Bank program in Los Cerezos, Dominican Republic. During the VSO Board's 2023 budget setting meeting in November, funds were added to our Conservation budget to potentially support those and other international outreach endeavors. The goal is to enable our organization to become directly involved with

initiatives that are educationally valuable, especially for aspiring young naturalists and to benefit bird populations that may have ties to Virginia.

Newly-elected Board of Directors Member

Recognizing that only two of the three Class of 2025 Board positions had been filled during the spring 2022 election, the Board elected Todd Day to fill the vacancy. Todd's standing within the birding community has few peers. His statewide oversight of eBird, his work with the international bird tour company, Field Guides, and his background of writing for the *North American Birds* journal are but a few of the many experiences he brings to the Board. Todd has a particular interest in enhancing our organization's presence and opportunities among the youth in the birding community.

Spring 2023 Annual Meeting

To meet our legal obligations as a corporation, the VSO must follow election of officers directives found in our Articles of Incorporation—"Officers shall be elected at the annual meeting of the members by the affirmative vote of a majority of the members voting." and in the VSO By-Laws—"Annual meetings of the corporation shall be held in the spring of every calendar year in a manner prescribed by the Board and fully noticed to the membership." We will, for a second consecutive year, conduct the annual meeting virtually. We have tentatively secured a speaker whose presentation will be of significant importance to Virginia ornithology. We will also conduct a brief business meeting to elect officers and announce award and scholarship recipients. The date, time and virtual linkage for the meeting will be detailed in the next *Newsletter*.

Birders "Know" This, But Here's the Proof

VSO Board of Directors member, Faye Copper, recently forwarded an article from the journal **Ecological Economics** which empirically demonstrated "bird species richness is positively related to life-satisfaction across Europe, with a comparable effect to income." The study argued that management actions for the protection of birds and the landscapes that support them would benefit humans, and that political and societal decision-making should consider the critical role of species diversity for human well-being. Such information may be crucial for evidence-based policy decisions

President's report, continued...

regarding environmental management and nature-based solutions to improve human health and well-being. Reference: Methorst, Joel et al. 2021. "The importance of species diversity for human well-being in Europe. 2021," *Ecological Economics* Vol.181: 106917.

What's Your Favorite Bird?

If your favorite bird nests in Virginia, you can sponsor it in the 2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas! But you need to act now! By mid-December, 69 of the 195 species were already sponsored!

Sponsorship donations will support the creation of the "species account" for each of Virginia's breeding species -- an interpretive narrative illustrated with photographs, maps, tables, and charts. These donations will also support creation of the website and writing and publication of overall results, and background and interpretive sections. Want to know more? [Check here!](#)

How does Sponsor a Species work? Sponsor your favorite species by making a pledge and donating the sponsorship amount by the end of 2025. Once you have pledged, your species will not be available for others to sponsor. Only you will be shown as the sponsor! And you can dedicate your sponsorship in memory or in honor of someone.

The Atlas species account will show that you sponsored the species and show the dedication you may have requested. You also will be included in the list of Atlas donors on the VSO and Atlas websites (unless you choose not to be listed).

What are the sponsorship levels? Virginia's breeding species are grouped into five sponsorship levels, ranging from \$200 per year (\$600 total donation over three years) to \$1,000 per year (\$3,000 total donation over three years).

VABBA2 Sponsor-a-Species

Have you sponsored a VABBA2 species yet? If not, consider doing so as a stocking stuffer or as a New Year's resolution that will have an extraordinary lasting benefit.



Golden-winged Warbler, sponsored in the Atlas by the VSO in memory of Margaret and Wayne O'Bryan. Photo by Kevin Shank, Nature Friend Magazine.

Why is the VSO doing the Sponsor a Species campaign?

What birds breed in Virginia? Where do they nest and raise their young? Are they increasing in number, decreasing, or changing their distribution? The 2nd Atlas will show how the state of breeding birds in Virginia has changed since the 1st Atlas was completed in 1989.

The VSO must raise \$274,000 to support publish the Atlas. With the help of VSO members, friends and bird clubs, we were 41 percent toward our goal by mid-December. Your sponsorship will help get us to 100 percent!

Answer to the quiz question on p. 3: The first VSO newsletter was a page and a half, dated November 1, 1955. The lead article features details about the upcoming field trip: "This year there will be only one Back Bay trip – December 10, 1955. Assemble at Sandbridge at 7 am. Hot luck will be served as in the past at approximately \$1.50 per plate. It is imperative that reservations be made for this trip, and the usual \$1.00 reservation fee will be required." Another headline featured Christmas Bird Counts and "count rules." Reports were to be submitted to Audubon Field Notes using "the form supplied by them" to be requested from the Audubon office in New York City. The entry fee was 50 cents for each observer in each count.

VSO Chincoteague Field Trip Report

September 9-11, 2022

Meredith Bell, VSO Field Trips Co-chair

Close to 100 enthusiastic participants attended the VSO annual Chincoteague weekend field trip on September 9-11, and we tallied 128 species. The weather was beautiful, and a great time was had by all. Many have already marked their calendar for next year's trip, September 8-10, 2023!

Our two new traditions were a big hit again:

1. *Zoom call the Tuesday evening* before the weekend, where Meredith Bell previewed the field trip locations, and Jerry Via gave an excellent presentation on shorebird, wading bird and tern identification.
2. *Meet-and-Greet Happy Hour*, held late Friday afternoon on the back lawn of the Refuge Inn. Most participants were able to attend, with new friendships formed and old ones renewed.

The two boat trips continue to be very popular, with about 50 people on each trip. Several people signed up for both trips because they enjoy the experience so much. The boat captain does a great



Brown-headed Nuthatch. Photo by Seth Honig

job giving passengers up-close views of a variety of shorebirds, wading birds, and raptors.

With the impoundments on the Wildlife Loop dry this year, we had very few ducks. The highlight for waterfowl was a Black Scoter on a boat trip.

We did get 10 species of warblers, most of them seen on the Island Nature Trail and Woodland Trail. A new offering this year was starting the Woodland Trail trip at 7:00 a.m. for early birders and we plan to have that option again next year.

We appreciate so much the dedication of all the field trip leaders—Jerry Via, Bill Akers, Lee Adams, Andrew Rapp, and Meredith and Lee Bell—who worked hard to ensure everyone had a great experience.

Complete list of species for the weekend is on the [VSO website](#).



Birding the Woodland Trail, both sides! Photo by Meredith Bell.

VSO Gloucester County Field Trip!

Save the Date for the VSO Summer Field Trip: June 2-4, 2023

For the first time, VSO will be holding the summer field trip in Gloucester County, just across the York River from Yorktown. Mark your calendar now for June 2-4, 2023, and join us to explore the fabulous new Machicomoco State Park, as well as local Beaverdam Park and Woodville Park.

You can book your reservation now at the Holiday Inn Express Gloucester at 804-695-1900. Mention Virginia Society of Ornithology to get the special rates: \$114/night (King) or \$119/night (2 Queens). There are a few other hotels/motels in the county and lots of other lodging options in nearby Williamsburg or Newport News.

Watch for details in the spring newsletter and on the VSO website. Questions before then? Contact Meredith Bell, VSO Field Trips Co-chair: merandlee@gmail.com or (804) 824-4958.

VSO Seeks Award Nominations and Grant and Scholarship Applications

Part of the VSO's mission is *to encourage the systematic study of birds in Virginia*. Two important ways we carry out this mission are to recognize scientific achievements through awards and to support the development of young scientists through grants and scholarships. The VSO is currently seeking nominations and applications for the following awards, grants and scholarships.

Mitchell A. Byrd Award

This award was established in 2011 to recognize outstanding scientific achievement in the field of ornithology. The award is named for Dr. Mitchell A. Byrd, retired College of William and Mary Professor of Biology, whose research career was key to the restoration of the eastern United States' Bald Eagle and Peregrine Falcon populations.

Recipients shall demonstrate an exceptional record of contribution to the scientific knowledge of Virginia's birds through evidence including, but not limited to, publications such as papers in peer-reviewed scientific journals and books or book chapters derived from the candidates' original scientific research, conference presentations, recommendation letters from scientific peers, and other forms of peer recognition (e.g., an award from a national scholarly society).

Any member of the VSO may nominate a candidate for the Byrd Award. The Byrd Award Committee selects a recipient for the award from among the candidates, and the award is presented at the annual meeting.

Please contact Patti Reum at pareum@gmail.com to submit the name of your nominee. Deadline is **February 20, 2023**. The award will be presented at our next annual meeting.

Jackson M. Abbott Conservation Award

In 1973 the VSO established a conservation award to be given to an individual or an organization that has demonstrated outstanding conservation work in the state of Virginia. The award, a framed certificate acknowledging the accomplishments of the recipient, is presented at the annual meeting. In 1989, the award was renamed in honor of Jackson M. Abbott for his lifelong devotion to conservation and his effective work on its behalf.

The VSO is seeking nominations for the Jackson M. Abbott Conservation Award, given for outstanding work in conserving Virginia's birds and/or the state's natural areas. Nominations, including at least three letters of recommendation and a list of the nominee's accomplishments, should be submitted to VSO's Conservation Committee chair: Patti Reum pareum@gmail.com no later than **February 20, 2023**. The award will be presented at the next annual meeting.

James Eike Service Award

In 1983, the VSO Board approved the James Eike Service Award, named in honor James Eike, a member of the VSO from 1933 until his death in 1983. His long and faithful service, his dedication, and his enthusiasm in promoting the work of the VSO gave him a unique status in the organization. The recipient is recognized by the presentation of a silver Raven pin. The first pin was given to Claire Eike, in honor of her late husband.

The James Eike Service Award recognizes a VSO member for outstanding service to the VSO. Eligibility for consideration would include service as an officer, board member, foray director, field trip leader, or other contributions to the Society.

The Eike Service Award Committee is soliciting nominations for the award. Nominators should send a letter of nomination giving the rationale behind the nomination. In addition, two letters of support are required. These materials should be sent to **Patti Reum** at pareum@gmail.com by **February 15, 2023**. The committee will review all nomination packets and make its recommendation to the VSO Board in the spring with the award itself being presented at our next annual meeting.

Myriam P. Moore Award

This is the VSO's highest service award, instituted in 1983. It recognizes a very high level of achievement in service areas and long continuous service and a demonstrated devotion to the principles and objectives of the VSO.

Please send your nomination and 3 letters of support to: pareum@gmail.com Deadline is **February 20, 2023**.

VSO Conservation Grant, \$500-\$1000

The VSO Board established the Conservation Fund in March 2007, managed by the VSO Conservation Committee. Each year, the VSO awards conservation grants to worthy candidates conducting research in the field of bird conservation with potential benefits to Virginia species and habitats. The VSO has budgeted \$2,500 annually. Awards are usually \$500, \$1,000 or occasionally more, with the amount determined by the Conservation Committee.

Applicants are encouraged to submit a request in writing to the Conservation Committee Chair. Each application should include:

1. A 1-2 page research proposal describing how the proposed work will lead to improved conservation of Virginia's avifauna and/or its habitat
2. Requested funding level
3. Detailed budget for requested funding

The Conservation Committee will consider each application and confer with the entire VSO Board. Recipients are asked to report their findings to the VSO Board and members at the completion of their project, preferably at a VSO annual meeting.

DEADLINE for application: **January 31**. The committee will notify the applicant(s) around Feb. 15. Please submit your application to Patti Reum (Conservation Chair) at pareum@gmail.com

VSO Murray Award, \$1000

The Murray Award was established in 1980 to honor the Rev. J. J. Murray, Sr., a charter member of the VSO and editor of its journal, *The Raven*, from its inception until 1969. The award is designed to promote graduate and undergraduate research consisting of current or projected field studies on Virginia birds. The VSO Board of Directors has budgeted \$2,000 annually to support two proposals. Proposals will be judged for their scientific merit and the likelihood that the work will make a meaningful contribution to our understanding of Virginia avifauna.

Upon completion of the research, the recipient will be asked to present the results at the next VSO annual meeting and are encouraged to publish the results in an appropriate journal. The recipient will also be awarded a one-year VSO membership.

Applicants must submit the following materials by **January 31, 2023**, as a PDF file:

1. Proposal of ≤ 5 pages including background, objectives/hypotheses, methods, expected results, and benefits to VA birds. Citations should be included in the 5 pages.
2. Budget describing how the VSO funds will be used along with any other funding already acquired to carry out the project.
3. Name of the institution and department they are enrolled in, the degree they are working towards, and the name of their research advisor.

Applicants should also have their advisor send a letter of recommendation separately that, at a minimum, verifies the applicant is a student in good standing and is receiving the advisor's support for the proposed project. Inclusion of additional information about the applicant is also helpful and will be considered by the reviewers.

Applicants will be notified of the results by mid-March 2023. Please send proposals or requests for information to: Lesley Bulluck, Center for Environmental Studies, VCU, lpbulluck@vcu.edu

NOTE: We ask that you not apply for both the Conservation Grant AND Murray Awards.

VSO Field Ornithology Scholarship, \$500

The VSO would like to annually support one student/recent graduate to participate in a formal training/workshop to gain field ornithology skills (i.e., mist-netting, banding, etc.). Applicants need to submit the following materials (a) description of the workshop they hope to attend, including a web link to the opportunity if one exists), (b) description of why the student needs to gain these skills, and (c) a brief budget of expected expenses. Students

working with a faculty member to carry out a specific project to benefit Virginia birds will be given priority. Applicants will be notified of the results by early March. Please send proposals or requests for information by **January 31** to: Lesley Bulluck, Center for Environmental Studies, VCU, lpbulluck@vcu.edu

VSO Youth Scholarship, \$500

The VSO would like to annually support one early-stage student (high school or undergraduate) to participate in their first avian research experience. The hope is that the funds will enable a student with interests in avian research to spend a portion of their summer participating in research with a mentor. Such opportunities can provide much needed and

sometimes difficult to acquire experience that propels them to future opportunities. This can be especially true for under-represented minority students. Applications can come from directly from early-stage students with an agreed upon mentor OR from a graduate student/faculty interested in mentoring a student (that may not yet be identified).

Applicants should submit a brief description of the research to be conducted, including the role that the student will have, and the length of the mentoring experience. Applications should be <=2 pages. Please send proposals or requests for information by **January 31** to: Lesley Bulluck, Center for Environmental Studies, VCU, lpbulluck@vcu.edu

Have an Interesting Bird Story to Tell? We Need You!

The VSO publishes a Speakers Directory to help VSO-affiliated bird clubs and other Virginia nature organizations get great speakers for their meetings, virtual and in-person. To see the previous 2020 – 2021 directory, visit the VSO's Web site at <https://www.virginiabirds.org/s/VSO-Speakers-Directory-2020-2021.pdf>.

It's time to create the 2023 edition! We're always looking for new speakers to include in the directory. Please consider telling your birding story! To list program(s) you are willing to present, please provide the title(s) and your contact

information to me at gnatcatcher@gmail.com **NO LATER THAN JANUARY 31**. Have a look at the current directory to get an idea of the kind of write-up I'll need and contact me if you have any questions. The Speaker's Directory is distributed statewide, so you should be willing to travel but can specify limits in your speaker's profile.

The updated VSO Speakers Directory will be available on our Web site in early 2023. We'd love to include your program!

Russell Taylor, Speakers Directory Editor

NEW VSO MEMBERS – AUGUST 1 – DECEMBER 9, 2022		
Maria Altonen, North Chesterfield, VA	Kristin Fuoco, Staunton, VA	William Kurtz, Charlottesville, VA
John Altonen, Williamsburg, VA	Xavier Gitre, Blacksburg, VA	Caelen McCormick, Yorktown, VA
Lauren Atlas, Kensington, MD	Max Goldman, Ruther Glen, VA	Eaden McCormick, Yorktown, VA
Kathy Carpenter, Richmond, VA	John Gress, Charlottesville, VA	Winnie Otey, Chesterfield, VA
Susan and Tom Crockett, Gloucester, VA	Kimberly Griffin, Suffolk, VA	Kathryn Pongonis, Falls Church, VA
Eileen Darland, Chesapeake, VA	Thomas Haycraft, Bumpass, VA	Ann Pontius, Staunton, VA
Mike Donaldson, Harrisonburg, VA	Melissa Hilbish, Baltimore, MD	Brian Rademacher, Springfield, VA
Kristin Duty, Lynchburg, VA	Monica Hoel, Emory, VA	Kathy Richardson, Glen Allen, VA
Abram Egger, Alexandria, VA	Bart Huxtable, Staunton, VA	Alfred Strong, Midlothian, VA
Cynthia Faux, Blacksburg, VA	Catherine Johnson, Virginia Beach, VA	Lisa Waldrop, New Church, VA
Carolyn Ford, Staunton, VA	Donna Kerpelman, Keswick, VA	Janet Wheelock, Eastville, VA
	Eleanor Knowlson, South Boston, VA	

Virginia's Two Song Sparrows

Jonathan Clark, Ph.D. Student in Earth & Environmental Sciences, jonathan.clark@unh.edu
 Department of Natural Resources & the Environment, University of New Hampshire

The Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*) is a species familiar to most American birders, as it can be found breeding across much of North America and is commonly associated with human-altered landscapes. Possibly as a consequence of its widespread range, the Song Sparrow has at least 25 distinct subspecies, each exhibiting adaptations to their local environment.

In Virginia, there are two subspecies of Song Sparrow: the familiar Eastern Song Sparrow (*M. m. melodia*), found breeding throughout most of the Commonwealth and a common backyard visitor, and the Atlantic Song Sparrow (*M. m. atlantica*), a coastal specialist found in saltmarsh edges and sand dunes along Virginia's coast and in marshes up the Chesapeake Bay. In fact, the Atlantic song sparrow was first described from specimens collected on the barrier islands off the coast of Virginia (now owned by the Nature Conservancy) less than 100 years ago. The Atlantic Song Sparrow subspecies can also be found out of the Commonwealth, breeding in coastal habitats from the Outer Banks of North Carolina north to the southern coast of Long Island, New York.

The main features that differentiate the Atlantic Song Sparrow from the typical Eastern Song Sparrow are a longer and thicker bill, darker and heavier streaking, and generally grayer plumage — contrasting with the smaller bill and rusty plumage of the Eastern Song Sparrow. These traits are typical of songbirds adapted to saltmarsh habitats and sometimes referred to by evolutionary biologists as the "saltmarsh syndrome." Researchers believe that coastally adapted songbirds tend to have larger bills in part to help



Atlantic Song Sparrow at Hog Island, Virginia. Photo by Jonathan Clark

radiate heat more efficiently in hot coastal habitats, thereby reducing heat stress.

In a study funded by VSO and recently published in *Evolution*, colleagues and I examined the genetic differences between the Atlantic and Eastern Song Sparrows. We found that, while genetic differences between these subspecies were weak overall, these subspecies do constitute two distinct gene pools. We also found that the bill size of the Atlantic Song Sparrow remains larger despite interbreeding with the Eastern Song Sparrow at sites near the coast, likely due to selection for a larger bill in coastal habitats. Now that we know the patterns of genetic differentiation between these two subspecies, we are using whole-genome sequencing to identify the specific genes that are highly differentiated between them and associate these genes with each of the coastal adaptations of the Atlantic Song Sparrow. Our study can be read here: <https://doi.org/10.1111/evo.14538>

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Make sure your VSO membership is current for 2023!

With a current membership, you can continue to participate in VSO field trips – like the OBX trip in early February 2023 – and continue to receive VSO publications and announcements of special events, updates on the funding and progress of the final Breeding Bird Atlas publication, Bramble Hill, and the 2023 Annual Meeting. The VSO has lots going on and many commitments in the coming years. So we need your continued support for 2023.

You can renew using the form on the back of this newsletter – clip it out and mail it with your check

to the address on the form. Even easier, you can renew quickly and easily on the [VSO web site](#).

If you are able to make a year-end donation (tax deductible) to one of the VSO's special funds, you can do so on the paper form or on the web site. Membership dues alone do not allow the VSO to accomplish all we need to do for our scholarship recipients, Bramble Hill, the 2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas, and the Conservation Fund to support our ongoing American Kestrel research. *Thank you!*

Book Review

Wings Across the Border: An American's Travels to See Mexico's Birds by Stauffer Miller, 2022

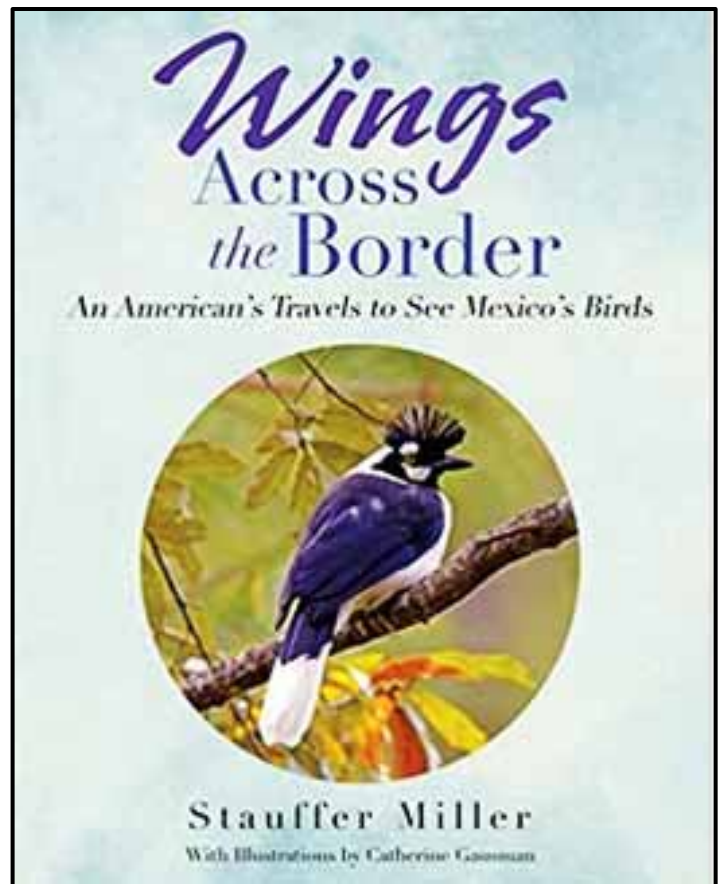
Review by Phillip Kenny

As a huge admirer of Mexico's culture and avifauna I immediately jumped at the opportunity to review VSO member Stauffer Miller's new book about his life and travels to Mexico. I was not disappointed by his realistic portrayal of the joys and agonies of international birding.

Stauffer, along with his wife, Ellie, took their first trip to Mexico in 1986, and over the next 27 years he managed to see 889 species of birds. According to eBird, this would put Stauffer in the top 16 birders of all time for Mexico! He has birded from Chiapas in the south to Monterey in the north, and from Baja California in the west to Cozumel in the east. The book portrays Stauffer's evolution from a casual birder locating new species on his own to a serious lister hiring guides to help with hard-to-find endemics.

The warmth and generosity of the people shines through the narrative, along with the beauty of the diverse country and its delicious cuisine. But Stauffer doesn't shy away from the challenges of birding in another country, such as when his car was broken into or when a guide stiffed him. Small setbacks never deterred him from reaching the next milestone.

In *Wings Across the Border*, Stauffer aptly summarizes his lifetime of travel to Mexico to see the birds and enjoy the culture. I would highly



recommend this book to anyone thinking about birding in Mexico. I know it whetted my appetite for my next trip south of the border!



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_____ Contributing Membership \$75 _____ Active Membership \$20
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I would like to make a donation to:

\$ _____ 2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas Fund \$ _____ VSO Conservation Fund
\$ _____ Bramble Hill Conservation Fund \$ _____ VSO Endowment Fund
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VSO Merchandise

Virginia's Birdlife "Gold Book" (Rottenborn, Brinkley 2007) \$25.00
VSO Arm Patch \$4.00 VSO Cloisonné Pin \$5.00
VSO Field Checklist FREE! Download the latest 2020 list at:
<https://www.virginiabirds.org/resources-education>

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If you have questions about your membership, contact Membership Secretary Shirley
Devan at: vsomembership@cox.net

Your support means so much to the success of the VSO. Thank you!

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