



# VSO Newsletter

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FALL 2022



*Guy Babineau with Royal Tern chick at Ft. Wool. Photo by Meagan Thomas, DWR.*

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**Editor:** Dixie Sommers

### 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](mailto:info@virginiabirds.org)

## Royal Raffle Reaps Rewards for its Lucky Winner and the Atlas

*By Jessica Ruthenberg*

The Royal Raffle proved to be a successful fundraiser for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas (VABBA2). And it provided a memorable day for the lucky winner Guy Babineau and his guest - his wife and best birding buddy, Susan Babineau!

Guy won the opportunity to visit Virginia's largest seabird breeding colony at Fort Wool in Hampton (a site not open to the public) and to participate in the banding of the colony's Royal and Sandwich Tern chicks. Fort Wool was transformed in 2020 into a temporary nesting site for breeding seabirds as part of a [ground-breaking conservation success story](#) by the Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) and Virginia Department of Transportation.

Needless to say, Guy and Susan were very glad to learn of their win. Guy shared that, "Our principal interest in supporting the raffle was because we are supporters of the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas. Susan and I spent many hours in the field and so we are 'invested' in the project. The field work was useful, but the work happening now to analyze and share the data is critical so that we can be better informed."

"Rewarding, memorable, and satisfying" is how Guy described his and Susan's visit to Fort Wool on the morning of Saturday, July 3, as seen in his comments below.

**What was your first impression upon seeing the seabird colony at Fort Wool?** "It was a multisensory experience! Because it was dark, before we could see the colony we could hear and smell it before seeing it! The sound was cacophonous and the smell was strong, but not revolting. As the boat approached Fort Wool, the terns and gulls could be seen wheeling in the air and as the sun rose, we could see the huge number of chicks on the island."

**What was your favorite part about your tern banding experience?** "Getting to see and even hold the young terns was memorable."

**What was challenging about it?** "We were moving very quickly, so as to complete the banding before it was too hot for the birds. So



*Guy and Susan arrive at Ft. Wool very early in the morning of July 3. Photo by Meagan Thomas, DWR*

every action was performed efficiently and there were not any real "rest" periods for anyone on the team. We were tired at the end. We started out meeting the boat at 5:00 a.m. and were back at the dock around 1:00 p.m., after which a nap seemed prudent!"

**What surprised you that day?** "Though we had heard of the [colony's] numbers, seeing thousands of recently hatched chicks moving together was impressive."

**What did you learn about Royal Terns from the experience?** "We became very adept at sorting Sandwich from Royal Tern chicks, as they required different bands. I don't think that will be an ID challenge for us ever again."

**What will you always remember about your experience?** "The volume of tern chicks milling in the corral as they were getting ready to be banded along with the sound that they made."

**Anything else that you would like to share?** "The DWR crew that we joined was very welcoming, even though we were new to banding and the procedure. We were assigned jobs and by the end of the day, had performed all of the roles involved--recording data, picking up more chicks from the corral, banding, handing chicks to banders."

"I most liked picking up more chicks from the corral. Some thought this was the least desirable job. I liked it because I felt that I was well suited for

that job and the way I could help the team most. I wanted to help the team band as many terns as we could in the shortest time possible. Minimizing the time to band the birds reduced the time the birds were under stress. I also enjoyed the challenge of reaching into the milling masses of Royal Terns to pull out the smaller Sandwich Tern chicks."

After the banding was completed, we had a chance to look around the area and see all the breeding activity in the area. And there were terns and gulls breeding on the barges as well. This tiny spot of habitat is clearly critical for the birds and it is also clear that it is not enough. Figuring out ways how we can create larger spaces for breeding terns, gulls and others is an important objective for Virginia and the surrounding area."

*The VSO thanks all who purchased Royal Raffle tickets and thereby contributed to the Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas. We also thank DWR for their part in making this happen.*

The Raffle, held by the VSO and made possible by DWR, raised over \$7,670 to support publication of the VABBA2. The raffle was held May 14 – June 3 with the drawing conducted by Virginia Tech.



*Susan Babineau with a Sandwich Tern chick that she banded. Photo by Meagan Thomas, DWR*

# President's Message

*Bill Williams, VSO President*

We extend our sincere thanks and appreciation to Terri Cuthriell, who served the VSO the previous eight years, seven years as Treasurer and most recently as President. Terri's will continue her passion for the conservation of Virginia's birdlife as a member of our Conservation Committee.

Three-quarters of the way through its 93<sup>rd</sup> year, our organization finds itself fiscally sound, programmatically vibrant, and brimming with successes. A common theme from everyone who discusses VSO programs is their enthusiasm for field trips. Without question the birds that are or may be encountered at the diverse venues we visit are central to those conversations. However, what becomes readily apparent is how socially valuable bringing our birding community together is for participants. Field trip registrations exceeded 100 participants throughout the pandemic. With such standard favorites as Virginia Beach and the Outer Banks already in the offing, that volume seems likely to continue. We can only imagine how many folks are going to jump at the chance to be a part of VSO's early June 2023 gathering at Machicomoco State Park in Gloucester County!

The significant progress made by our Bramble Hill Committee to meet the multifaceted challenges of the property's ownership, stewardship and maintenance was recently acknowledged by a pledge from the Rimora Foundation of \$100,000 over 5 years to be "applied to projects approved by the Committee with oversight by the VSO board." The scope and depth of this committee's efforts have been extraordinary.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas Fund Raising Committee garnered public exposure and proceeds by successfully partnering with the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources for the "Royal Raffle" then with the Audubon Society of Northern Virginia to host the June 28 Scott Weidensaul's "A World on the Wing" lecture. The committee also had a productive launch of its sponsor-a-species among our VSO bird clubs. Its plans to give individuals an opportunity to sponsor a species are forthcoming.

Methodical, incremental progress has been made to update *Virginia's Birdlife: An Annotated Checklist* fondly know as the "Gold Book." The editors have been meticulously seeking out and through the extensive amount of data from multiple resources that has become available since the last edition was published in 2007. Synthesizing that information for the next annotated checklist edition is aimed to make the document as current as possible and serve as a "living" platform for ongoing checklist revisions.

Equally promising for the organization's ornithological record, the *Virginia Birds* journal is being brought up to date after a two-year hiatus. We anticipate publication of the back issues in the near term.

The diligent work of our Engagement Committee will be evident with the set of Goals and Objectives and a Statement of Inclusion and list of resources to be posted soon to the VSO home page.

**Want to help?** *The VSO needs more hands to make everything happen! We currently need volunteers with interest and skills in finance and social media. Let us know by email to [billwilliams154@gmail.com](mailto:billwilliams154@gmail.com).*

| VSO OFFICERS  |   | VSO Editors   |
|---|---|---|
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# Signs of Change...

## What the VABBA2 can tell us about shifting phenologies of Virginia's Breeding Birds

By Dr. Ashley Peele, VA Tech

In Fall 2020, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas completed its fifth and final season of data collection. Those five years of hard work by hundreds of volunteer birders, wildlife biologists, students, and technicians resulted in a massive dataset (1.5+ million records). The next step involved reviewing and cleaning up the database, incorporating surveys from partner organizations (e.g., U.S. Forest Service).

This work is all with the goal of analyzing the data to assess occupancy, change in occupancy, and abundance of breeding bird populations. *In other words, where are the birds now, how has that changed, and how many of them are still on the landscape?*

Along the way, I became interested in what we could learn about the breeding timelines (phenologies) of Virginia's birds and how they have changed since the first Virginia atlas (BBA1), covering 1984-1989. While our use of the eBird system to collect data dramatically increased the volume of data reported, our methods were largely the same for the 1st and 2<sup>nd</sup> Atlases, especially the survey areas (atlas blocks) and methods for recording behavioral observations.

So I decided to ask two key questions...

1. Can we use BBA datasets to detect changes in breeding phenology across a diverse range of species?
2. Can specific behavioral observations allow us to detect variation in the directionality of shifting breeding periods?

To address these questions, I focused only on the strongest indicators of active breeding attempts, the 'breeding confirmations' in atlas parlance. This preliminary analysis specifically targeted nesting behaviors (occupied nests, nest-building, etc.) and post-hatching behaviors (nests with young, fledged young, feeding young, etc.).

We calculated the median date of each behavior for each species with sufficient sample sizes, and ultimately used a data sub-setting analysis to



Occupied Nest! Acadian Flycatcher nestlings.  
Photo by Dixie Sommers

reconcile small sizes from the BBA1 dataset. Ultimately, I was able to assess the magnitude and direction of change between BBA1 and BBA2 for 97 species, allowing comparison among three major life-history strategies: long-distance migrants (LDM), short-distance migrants (SDM), and resident species (RS).

So, what did we learn? It may surprise few to learn that a lot has changed since the 1980s, but the pattern and scope of change is quite fascinating to dig into. First, let us focus on the direction of change. Across all the breeding behaviors and species considered, 60% of SDMs, 33% LDMs, and 54% of RSs shifted toward an earlier onset of breeding activities. The mean change for each of these groups was 20, 28, and 17 days respectively. But that is not all! Some 40% of LDMs, 50% SDMs, and 20% of RSs shifted toward a later median date for a different subset of their breeding behaviors, suggesting an overall lengthening of the breeding season.

Still more intriguing, the direction of these changes vary by behavioral type. (Figure 1) Reports of nesting behaviors were much earlier in BBA2 across all three life-history groupings, while observations of nests with young and fledglings were later for many migratory species (Figure 2).

Ultimately, we observed three patterns of change: the breeding season has advanced for some species, grown longer for others, and for a smaller subset of species, the only change we detected is a shift toward later fledgling dates.

It is important to note that analyses for many species were limited by sample size constraints and we were only able to look at either nesting or post-hatching behaviors. Additionally, there may be sources of bias stemming from the older datasets, which we have not yet been able to detect. However, the strength of these patterns across a diverse range of species, as well as similar patterns of change in other recent studies of breeding birds in the eastern US, suggest that further investigation is merited.

As is often the case, this research has led to more questions than answers. For example, if birds are arriving earlier and initiating nesting behaviors immediately, why are we seeing a shift toward later hatching and fledgling dates? One theory is that unstable weather conditions or unpredictable food resources in spring/early summer are leading to early nest failures. Alternately, it is possible that birds are increasing the overall number of clutches annually, leading to a shift toward later fledgling dates. Either scenario is possible, underscoring the

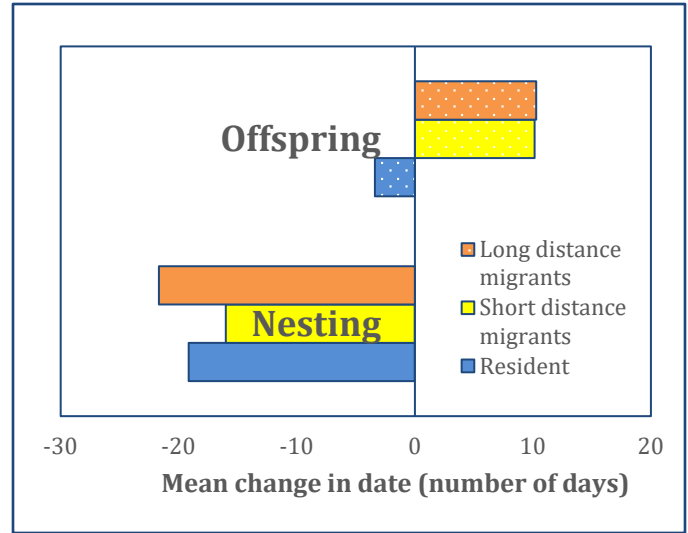


Figure 1. Mean change in date from BBA1 to BBA2 for nesting and post-hatching (or offspring) behaviors for each life history grouping. Change calculated as numerical difference in date. Note: negative numbers illustrate a shift toward earlier dates and positive indicate later dates.

need to better track the timing and fecundity of a diverse range of species.

Ultimately, the current take-aways are that the breeding season appears to be extending both earlier and later, particularly for migratory species. While some migratory species have shifted dramatically, the magnitude of change is greatest for resident species, who are more able to respond



Figure 2. Examples of varying phenological shifts across a range of species (clockwise from top right: Northern Mockingbird, Scarlet Tanager, Red-winged Blackbird, Baltimore Oriole, and Red-bellied Woodpecker). Photos by Bob Schamerhorn.

to changing conditions both early and late in the breeding season. Lastly, while these analyses are limited by historic sample sizes, behavioral observations collected by volunteers are raising important questions about how birds are responding to changing conditions in their breeding habitats.

# Sponsor Your Favorite Bird in the Atlas

What's your favorite bird?

If it nests in Virginia, you can sponsor it in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas! The VSO will open the Atlas Sponsor a Species campaign in October, making sponsorships available to you and other supporters of Virginia's birds.

Sponsorship donations will support the creation of a "species account" for each of Virginia's 200 or so 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 as well as 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 published 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?** The VSO has grouped Virginia's breeding species into five sponsorship levels, ranging from \$200 per year (\$600 total donation over three years) to \$1,000 per year (\$3,000 total donation).

| Atlas Sponsor a Species Sponsorship levels |                                 |                   |
|--|---------------------------------|-------------------|
| Sponsorship annual level                   | Total donation over three years | Number of species |
| \$1,000                                    | \$3,000                         | 8                 |
| \$750                                      | \$2,250                         | 14                |
| \$500                                      | \$1,500                         | 33                |
| \$300                                      | \$900                           | 54                |
| \$200                                      | \$600                           | 93                |

## Why is the VSO doing the Sponsor a Species campaign?

What is the state of Virginia's breeding birds? What birds breed here? Where do they nest and raise their young? Are they increasing in number, decreasing, or changing their distribution?

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Atlas will show how the state of breeding birds in Virginia has changed since the 1<sup>st</sup> Atlas was completed in 1989. The preceding article by Ashley Peele is an example of what the Atlas can tell us

The VSO has responsibility for the cost writing and publishing the Atlas. We must raise \$274,000 during 2022-2025 to support developing the website and preparing the analytical results for presentation. With the help of VSO members, friends and bird clubs, by mid-August we were 21 percent toward our goal. But there is a way to go!

Watch for the announcement of the Sponsor a Species campaign in October and make pledge to sponsor your favorite bird!

## Bird Clubs Are Sponsoring Their Mascot Species!

The VSO gave our member bird clubs the opportunity to sponsor their mascot species before opening the Sponsor a Species campaign to all comers. As of mid-August, nine clubs and the VSO have pledged, providing a total of \$23,000 to support the Atlas!

If your club is not listed, please encourage the club leadership to consider making a pledge!

### Bird Clubs Sponsoring Species - So Far!

Augusta Bird Club – Eastern Meadowlark  
 Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory – American Kestrel  
 Highlands Bird Club – Rose-breasted Grosbeak  
 Northern Virginia Bird Club – Pine Siskin  
 Piedmont Virginia Bird Club – Northern Mockingbird  
 Richmond Audubon Society – Brown Thrasher  
 Rockbridge Bird Club – Black-and-white Warbler  
 Rockingham Bird Club – American Goldfinch  
 Williamsburg Bird Club – Red-headed Woodpecker  
 Virginia Society of Ornithology – Common Raven

# Years of Habitat Work at Highland WMA Pays Off in Gold

By Sergio Harding and Jessica Ruthenberg  
Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources

The Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) is excited to share that following multiple years of habitat management for [Golden-winged Warbler](#) on the [Highland Wildlife Management Area](#) (WMA), the species was at long last confirmed on the property! This was an important discovery because this imperiled bird has experienced steep population declines in the Appalachian region and is classified as a Tier 1 Species of Greatest Conservation Need in [Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan](#). In Virginia, Golden-winged Warbler is only found west of the Blue Ridge Mountains and given that the majority of its population occurs on private lands, attracting the species to this WMA, located in Highland County, is a small yet significant step toward improving its conservation status in Virginia.



*Habitat patch occupied by Golden-winged Warbler on Highland WMA.  
Photo by Lesley Bulluck, VCU*

DWR staff first observed the warbler in a high-elevation wildlife opening on the ridgeline of the WMA's Jack Mountain tract. They confirmed a singing male on May 23 and again on June 1. On June 12, Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) conducted a systematic survey of suitable habitat on Jack Mountain and confirmed a breeding pair of Golden-winged Warbler.

The DWR's habitat management planning at Highland WMA first began in late 2016 in consultation with VCU, one of the agency's primary partners in Golden-winged Warbler conservation in the Commonwealth. Golden-winged warblers thrive in open, shrubby habitats at elevations of over 2,000 ft., so Highland WMA was strategically selected as a site for a Golden-winged Warbler habitat restoration project because it already provided the high elevation (the Jack Mountain ridgeline reaches elevations up to 4000 ft.) and four large forest openings, but what it lacked was shrubs. Therefore, a key part of the management plan was stimulating the growth of shrubs, specifically those in the *Rubus* genus

(blackberries), at the base of which the bird is fond of building its nest. Management actions included conducting prescribed burns, the creation of brush piles, herbicide treatments to reduce non-native grasses, tree thinning to create an open overstory, and expansion of one of the existing forest openings.

On the heels of this golden discovery, plans are already underway to create even more space for the warbler by connecting each of the openings into one very large block of habitat. All of this habitat work was done and will continue to be done in conjunction with management practices to also help the Federally Endangered [Rusty Patched Bumble Bee](#) population on the WMA.

To access Highland WMA (or any other DWR WMA or lake), visitors must hold either a [Restore the Wild Membership](#), access permit, a Virginia hunting/fishing license, or Virginia boat registration. Visit the [Virginia Bird and Wildlife Trail](#) for detailed information about birding at Highland WMA.

# VCU Students Visit and Band Birds at Bramble Hill

Text and photos by  
Lesley Bulluck, Virginia Commonwealth University

In July, Lesley Bulluck brought four student avian interns up to Bramble Hill. The students have been helping with the long term Prothonotary Warbler project and banding at a MAPS station at the VCU Rice Rivers Center this summer. They appreciated the new species and cooler temperatures in Highland County. They learned so much and some even got a fleeting glimpse of a male Golden-winged Warbler which is not easy to see this time of year.

They arrived at Bramble Hill midday on a hotter-than-normal Wednesday afternoon and set up five 12-meter mist nets within a short walk of the house. They opened the nets at sunrise Thursday and Friday mornings for about 5 hours each day and caught the following birds:

- 2 Song Sparrow (1 adult, 1 juvenile)
- 1 Cedar Waxwing (who regurgitated honeysuckle berries in the net)
- 1 Eastern Towhee (adult male)
- 4 Chestnut-sided Warblers (2 females, 1 male, 1 juvenile)
- 3 American Goldfinch (2 males and 1 female)
- 1 Ovenbird (female)
- 1 Field Sparrow (female)
- 3 Indigo Bunting (male, female & fledgling all in same net)
- 1 Red-eyed Vireo (female)
- 1 Northern Flicker (male)

Sam Fishman and Emma Bruno, field technicians working with Dr. Bulluck, studied Golden-winged Warblers in Highland County (including at Bramble Hill) since late April. Samantha joined the VCU

interns in July and showed them how to track birds using telemetry equipment.

To understand and hopefully reverse population declines in Golden-winged Warblers, Dr. Bulluck and her field technicians are collaborating in a range-wide effort to estimate adult survival in GWWAs. To do this, they deployed 14



Female Golden-winged Warbler



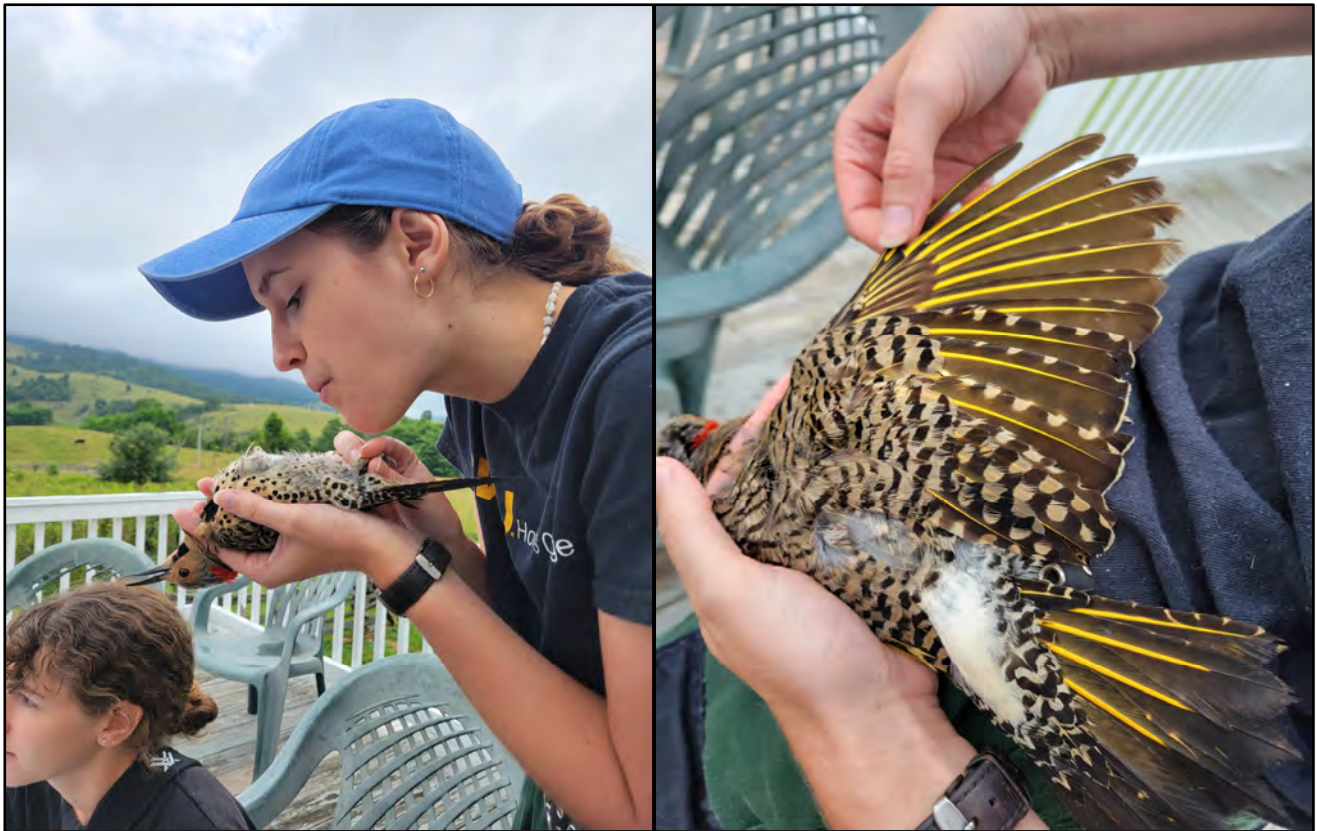
From left: Lesley Bulluck, Emma Cummings, Dylan Curtis, Samantha Fishman, Dylan Slusarz, and Nikki Novak.



Sam Fishman with her radio telemetry equipment.

nanotags on GWWAs (5 males and 9 females) and color banded an additional 27 males, 1 female, and 4 fledglings in Highland County this summer. One of those tagged males was at Bramble Hill as well as 1





*Left: Nikki Novak blows on the Northern Flicker to assess whether it is molting and how much fat it has stored.  
Right: Opened wing and back of the Northern Flicker.*

color banded male and 1 color banded female (pictured on previous page).

Nanotags allow us to track the birds using an antenna and receiver, both this season and next spring when they hopefully return from South America. Tagged birds can also be picked up by a network of Motus towers (<https://motus.org>) located throughout their migratory route. We can

also assess survival with color bands but have to locate and resight the birds, which can be challenging, especially if they disperse to another site to breed next year. Through the efforts of their collaborators across nine states from North Carolina and Tennessee to Wisconsin and Minnesota, a total of 74 females and 106 males were tagged and another 114 males and 12 females were color banded.

### **Bramble Hill Available for VSO Members**

The Bramble Hill Committee has been working diligently to establish guidelines and plans for the management and use of this unique Highland County property. Wayne O'Bryan generously donated Bramble Hill to VSO in 2021 with an agreement that it would be carefully managed to protect and enhance breeding habitat for the golden-winged warbler, a migratory songbird species that is on a steep decline because of habitat loss (see above article). The O'Bryan family also made clear that they wished for the property to continue to be used for the enjoyment of birders and naturalists.



The property has a nicely restored farmhouse which is now available to VSO members on a limited basis for overnight stays. We ask that all overnight visitors be a VSO member. There is a small per night fee to assist with maintenance expenses. To learn more about overnight accommodations or to make a reservation, please email or call Faye Cooper, [fcooper2@verizon.net](mailto:fcooper2@verizon.net), 540.294.1665.

# VSO Winter Field Trip – North Carolina Outer Banks February 3-5, 2023

Make plans to join us for the VSO's Winter field trip at the Outer Banks of North Carolina February 3-5! The weekend's leaders include Bill Akers and Jerry Via, as well as VSO field trip co-chairs Lee Adams and Meredith Bell. We always have a great variety of birds—and often a few surprise species, too—no matter what the weather.

**VERY Important!** All VSO field trips are open to members at no charge. If you have not renewed your dues for 2023 or have not joined yet, you can [RENEW or JOIN here](#).

## TRIP REGISTRATION

Please register online [HERE](#). On the form, you'll indicate your preference for the Friday trips (see options below).

## HEADQUARTERS

The Comfort Inn South Oceanfront in Nags Head is again the trip headquarters. There's a huge deck off the second floor, which offers great beach-viewing opportunities. The special VSO room rate is \$79 for oceanfront and \$64 for bay-view (plus tax). Ocean



*Snow Geese. Photo by Linda Millington*

front rooms are available on a first come, first served basis. Contact information for the hotel is: 8031 Old Oregon Inlet Road, Nags Head, NC 27959; Phone: 252-441-6315. Reservations must be made by **January 2, 2023**, to get the special VSO rate.

## MEALS

A complimentary breakfast buffet breakfast is included with your stay, beginning each morning at 6:00 AM. Lunch and dinner are on your own.

## MONDAY, JAN 30

We'll hold a Zoom video call to overview the weekend and have a presentation by Jerry Via. We'll record the call and send a link for the recording to all registrants afterwards.

## FRIDAY, FEB 4

You have two options for Friday. Please indicate your preference when completing the registration form.

**Option 1** - Lee Adams will lead the all-day trip to Lake Mattamuskeet (90-minute drive). Meet at the Visitor's Center at 9:00 AM. Bring snacks, beverage, and lunch. Those interested will stop at Alligator River on the return trip to listen and watch for Short-eared Owls at dusk.

**Option 2** - For those who prefer less driving, Meredith, Bill and Jerry will cover areas closer to the hotel in the morning. Lunch is on your own. In the afternoon, we'll meet at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and explore areas that won't be covered on Sunday's AM trip. Those



*VSO Birders at the Outer Banks. Photo by Madelyn Chappell*

interested can stay until dusk with Lee Adams' groups to listen for Short-eared Owls.

## SATURDAY

**AM:** Visit the impoundments of Pea Island NWR and surrounding areas. We'll divide into smaller groups, and every group will visit all areas. Lunch is on your own.

**PM:** Visit Jennette's Pier, the beach, and other nearby areas. In the past, species of note at the pier included Dovekie, Razorbill, Red-breasted Merganser, Horned Grebe, and Northern Gannet. At 3:00 PM we'll gather at Bodie Lighthouse to view waterfowl from the platform.

**6:00 PM:** A tally of the weekend's species in the Neptune Room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. (tentative, depending on Covid)

## SUNDAY

**AM:** Explore Alligator River NWR. Drive on your own and meet at 8:30am at the main entrance on Milltail Road. Come prepared for variable weather, lots of birds and a great time! If you have any questions, contact field trip coordinator Meredith Bell at 804-824-4958 or [merandlee@gmail.com](mailto:merandlee@gmail.com).

Come prepared for variable weather, lots of birds and a great time!

### SAVE THE DATE!

**Virginia Beach and Eastern Shore field trip. December 2-4, 2022.  
Watch for VSO email for details!**

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## VSO New River Valley Field Trip Report

*Meredith Bell, VSO Field Trip Co-Chair.*

We had an unforgettable weekend in the New River Valley for the VSO summer field trip June 17-19 — for several reasons. There was a severe thunderstorm Friday afternoon in the middle of our trip to the Mountain Lake Biological Station, which resulted in a treacherous descent on Rt. 700, with fallen trees and limbs on the road. Everyone returned safely to the hotel, and we had gorgeous weather the rest of the weekend with lots of birds and special friendships formed or renewed.

Many thanks to Bill Akers and Jerry Via, who led the trips and put in many hours in advance checking out the field trip areas to make sure the birds would make an appearance when we arrived. And appear they did, with 103 species (including 17 warbler species) tallied over the 3 days.

We appreciated the water and other extras they provided for us on Saturday, as well as the assistance in leading walks from several members of the New River Valley Bird Club: Anna Altizer, Debby Applequist, Kristi DeCourcy, Phil Lehman, Sally & Doug Pfeiffer, Mike Schultz, Brent and

Laura Slaughter, Chris Sokol, and Doug Weidemann.

On Saturday we visited Glen Alton and Kelly Flats in Giles County. We divided into four groups and then came back together in the parking lot for lunch. A Chestnut-sided Warbler greeted us in the parking lot with vigorous singing that continued throughout the morning. Among the highlights: Blackburnian Warbler, Black-throated Blue Warbler, Brown Creeper, Scarlet Tanager, Cedar Waxwing, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, and Louisiana Waterthrush. At Kelly Flats we found Veery, Hermit Thrush, and Wood Thrush. On Sunday, one group visited Deerfield Trail just a few miles away and got Orchard Oriole, Baltimore Oriole, Warbling Vireo,



*At Glen Alton. Photo by Carol Mullen*

Yellow-breasted Chat, and Eastern Kingbird. The other group went to Caldwell Fields and found Prairie Warbler, Worm-eating Warbler, Hooded Warbler, and Red-headed Woodpecker.

Thanks to all who attended and enjoyed this special weekend. The complete list of species seen or heard is available [here](#).



Right: Blue-headed Vireo.  
Photo by Pam Scrima

| NEW VSO MEMBERS –MAY 2022-AUGUST 2022 |  |                                 |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Ani Allard, Earlysville, VA           | James Dunson, Blacksburg, VA             | Linda McConnell, Aldie, VA      |
| Jill Barker, Arlington, VA            | Shannon Durham, Roanoke, VA              | Alan Mitchnick, Herndon, VA     |
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## HIGHLAND COUNTY AMERICAN KESTREL PROJECT

### Update on the 2022 Season

*By Patti Reum*

Every breeding season brings new information and sometimes surprises! This project started in 2014 with initial box installation, and more boxes have been installed and moved since that year.

Monitoring of boxes started in 2015 and has intensified ever since. This year, John Spahr and I started monitoring on April 2 and continued until mid-July to check on any late nesting attempts.

We monitored 71 boxes this year, six of which were installed as Eastern Screech-Owl boxes on trees and were inhabited by kestrels this year. We typically place kestrel boxes in open grazed agricultural fields, not at the periphery of forested edges. Kestrels use natural nesting cavities in trees if no boxes are present. Perhaps other boxes in the area were already taken so any overflow pairs sought nearby boxes placed for the owls!

Out of 71 boxes, 59 were occupied by kestrels, an 83 percent occupancy. A nesting box is classified as occupied if a brooding female sits and often doesn't



Banded Kestrel chick. Photo by Patti Reum

flush when the peeper camera is inserted in the box hole. Occasionally, early in the brooding period, a male will be sitting on eggs. Sometimes one egg or more will be visible on the edge of the brooding bird.

Of the 59 occupied boxes, 48 were successful, meaning nestlings survived until 21 days old. This is an 81 percent success rate. Two boxes were uncertain.

Two boxes were occupied by both kestrels and European starling and both nesting attempts failed. European Starlings occupied 6 boxes exclusively. In some cases, starlings were expelled from the box in hopes that an emptied box will be used by a kestrel.

An Eastern Screech Owl pair occupied a tree kestrel box for the first time. This box had been used exclusively by starlings for 7 years prior. John banded the adult female owl and her 4 nestlings.

Fox squirrels occupied 2 boxes, both placed in trees without predator guards. Thirteen boxes were placed in trees, and 7 of these that were monitored were originally placed for screech owls as part of John's project. One box put up exclusively for screech owls was occupied by kestrels. This box was depredated, with an adult kestrel found dead near the box. It seems that kestrels will use boxes in trees, but only in one tree box were we able to band chicks. These boxes were placed too high in the tree and were difficult and unsafe to reach for banding. We may place the box lower when we do box relocation in late Fall.

Only 2 boxes were placed on sheds without predator guards. Both were successful and we banded chicks out of one. We hope to lower these boxes before 2023.

John is licensed to band kestrels and screech owls under the permit of Dr. Jill Morrow. We banded 163 kestrels in 2022, with all bands placed on the right leg. Eighteen were adults, 2 males and 16 females, and the rest nestlings. Of the adults, 4 were second year birds (SY) and the rest were older (AHY). The nestlings ranged from 10 to 21 days old, with most old enough to determine sex by plumage. All nestlings appeared well nourished.

During the 2021 and 2022 banding season a total of 6 captured birds had been banded before, all from our region and efforts. Two females returned to the same box as in prior year, three birds (2 F,

**SAVE *the* DATE**

**VIRGINIA BLUEBIRD SOCIETY'S BIENNIAL CONFERENCE**

Registration opens early September. Contact Valerie Kenyon Gaffney - with questions. [vbs@virginiabluebirds.org](mailto:vbs@virginiabluebirds.org)

Location: NVCC's Workforce Center Woodbridge, VA

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: JULIE ZICKEFOOSE

**TWENTY FIVE +1 CELEBRATING THE 25<sup>th</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF OUR FOUNDING**

**NOVEMBER 11 & 12**  
Friday Evening (6-8pm)  
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Bluebird photo by: Randy Streufert, 2014

1M) were in boxes less than 3 miles of their banding location, and one SY female traveled 8 miles from her natal box to nest in a new territory.

With our fourth year of banding, we have many more banded birds. As we collect more data, we ask more and more interesting questions about kestrels in Highland County. Are they migratory? Could we place more boxes and still get occupancy? Should we supersaturate the prime areas? It seems that land usage is key, as the highest concentration of successful nesting boxes is pastureland grazed by cattle and occasionally mown for hay.

Clutch Initiation Date (C.I.D.), the approximate date that the first egg is laid, is important for timing monitoring and banding efforts. Only 5 boxes were initiated in late March. Around April 1, three more boxes showed clutch initiation. One of these failed and a second attempt was made in June (not sure if same female) that also failed. Between April 5 to 14, fourteen more boxes had eggs laid. Another cluster of 17 boxes was laid around April 18-20. On April 28 there were 7 more somewhat late clutch initiations, all successful. On May 1 and May 8, 4 more boxes were started. Even as late as May 19, 2 boxes that were placed for Eastern Screech Owls were initiated! What does this mean?

This year we have so many questions to answer and will try to focus on the most important research topics. Lance and Jill Morrow will provide some guidance with this and help with setting up datasheets. I will be meeting with Joe Kolowsky at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute to

further explore how to display data and ask key research questions unique to this study area. I will receive help from Dr. Lesley Bullock and perhaps one of her students on statistics and data display.

One important new question is “what happens to this year’s fledglings in August and September, where are they hunting, etc.?” I am planning where I will survey for birds, most likely near areas with high densities of successful nest boxes. This winter I also will use the camera to see if kestrels are

using boxes for roosting or caching prey.

Another interesting question is whether there is any migration between the Highland County banded birds and the ones banded by the Morrows in the Shenandoah Valley. To find out, we would position some boxes in open areas to our northeast and to the southeast of the Shenandoah Valley Project. If kestrels occupy these boxes, we could see if any birds are exchanged between the two study areas.

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## **Birding in South Africa Supports the Atlas**

*By Robyn Puffenbarger, Bridgewater College*

After three trips to South Africa with Bridgewater College students and seeing the wonderful VSO trip reports from Guatemala, I wondered about a VSO African birding adventure. After a chat with the VSO Board, I found Birding Africa and made plans for a May 2020 trip. Some of the proceeds from the trip participants would go to support the 2<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas

Of course, the global pandemic put a two-year hold on travel. We were excited to make the trip in May 2022 and to donate \$1,000 for the Atlas! It was an amazing birding experience! My own list was over 340 species, with ten species of cisticolas on this trip, the epitome of the “LBJ” bird that requires extensive knowledge of ecosystem and sounds to properly identify. We also encountered many reptiles and mammals, including leopard, elephants, impala, hippos, lions, giraffe, eland, kudu, and two zebra species.

The ten participants met in Cape Town. Our two main guides, Vince and Cameron, did an excellent job getting us on birds, finding food and breaks, and managing COVID-19 issues.

In metropolitan Cape Town, we started at Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens to learn about fynbos, the local and smallest floral kingdom in the world. We saw Swee Waxbill, Sombre Greenbull, Brimstone Canary, African Dusky Flycatcher, and Southern Double-collared Sunbird. The Cape Sugar Bird really showed off in the protea flowers. We had nine sunbird species, colorful birds with long beaks that fill the hummingbird niche in South Africa, pollinating many flower species.



*Bokmakierie, member of the Bushshrike family (Malaconotidae).*

At Cape Town’s waste management area we saw waterbirds, including Yellow-billed Duck, Cape Shoveler, Red-billed Duck, Cape Teal, Southern Pochard, Maccoa Duck, and Greater and Lesser Flamingos.

We were up early for an Atlantic Ocean pelagic trip like none other. The ride was very rough out past the African Penguins and Cape Cormorants. The pelagic birding provided great views of White-chinned Petrel, Cape Gannet, Brown Skua, Northern Giant Petrel, Cape Petrel and three albatross species: White-capped, Black-browed, and Yellow-nosed.

At Western Cape we found the Black Crake in a marsh and Black Bustard at the Seeburg Viewpoint. Heading out of Cape Town we found Cape Rockjumper and Ground Woodpecker, then passed Stoney Point’s African Penguin colony for the Agulus Plains and two nights at De Hoop Nature Reserve, where we had our only looks at the Knysna Woodpecker.

Our night walk at De Hoop included Fiery-necked Nightjar and Spotted Thick-knee. In this area we saw Agulus Long-billed Lark, Denham's Bustard, Blue Crane, Black Harrier, and Cape Griffon. At Cape Augulus, the southern-most point of Africa where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet, we had quite a photo opportunity and spotted a White-fronted Plover.

To access north-eastern South Africa, we flew to Johannesburg and then drove to Dullstroom. This area gave us Drakensberg Prinia, Gurney's Sugarbird, Buff-streaked Chat, and Mocking Cliff-Chat. Next day, a drive through the lost valley included Eastern Long-billed Lark, Orange-throated Longclaw, Bokmakierie, African Pied Starling, Sentinel Rock Thrush, Pied Kingfisher, and Rufus-throated Wryneck. This day was mostly a drive to Kruger, with sightings of Pied Crow, White-fronted Bee-eater, White-backed Vulture and Bateleur from the vans.

We entered Kruger National Park via the Paul Kruger gate and could hardly get into the park because of all the birds on the statues to the founders: Green Woodhoopoe, Black Collared Barbet, Brown-headed Parrot, Black-collared Barbet, plus Retz's and White Helmetshrike flocks. We stayed overnight at Skukuza and Satara camps in thatched huts.

At Kruger we helped our guide Cameron find one of his nemesis birds, the Shelley's Francolin, from our morning coffee break on a rock knob. We had several long days working the roads, water holes, and watching the ecosystem change with the topography and rainfall amounts. The raptors were numerous: Martial Eagle, Tawny Eagle, Brown Snake-Eagle, Gabar Goshawk, African Fish Eagle,

Pearl-spotted Owlet (by day and night!), African Scops-Owl, and Spotted Eagle Owl. The list goes on to include four hornbills, with looks at family groups of Southern Ground-hornbills, the thunderbirds of Kruger.

At our last stop, Mount Sheba, the elevation and distance from any city gave us dark sky views of the Milky Way with the 'coal sack' -- the starless black spot clearly visible along with the Southern Cross constellation. This was our spot for Knysna Turaco and we found two! We had great looks at the Chorister Robin-chat, Olive Woodpecker, Gray Cuckooshrike, and the green form of the Cape White-eye that will likely be its own species eventually.

It was a wonderful trip with ten Virginia birders and so many great memories of people, places, ecosystems, and the birds. And a great way to support the Atlas!

*Below: Ground-hornbill, the thunderbird of Kruger*



## **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 2<sup>nd</sup> Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas, and the Conservation Fund to support our ongoing American Kestrel research. *Thank you!*



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