



VSO Newsletter

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FALL 2020

VABBA2 Field Work Winds Down

By Dan Bieker, VSO President



This summer/fall marks the end of data collection for Virginia's Second Breeding Bird Atlas (VABBA2), a massive five-year project to update the breeding status and distribution of birds all across the state. Thousands of hours of field work by hundreds of enthusiastic volunteers are a strong testament to the dedication of Virginia's birders, especially to our most vulnerable species which stand to benefit most from the effort.

Those of us who were around for the first Atlas in the late 80's can't help but laugh at the one major difference this time - technology. No eBird back then, no smart phones, GPS, digital maps, etc. And no Siri when you got lost. Data collection was by paper, pencil, and hand-held quadrangle maps. Other than that, much has stayed the same - same chiggers, poison ivy, sunburn and briars. Same friendly "are you ok?" from passersby, to the not-so-friendly "what the #*%! are you doin' out here!" But above all, the same motivation - the adventure of getting out into the wilds to not only find birds, but to watch, listen and pay closer attention than ever to what they are actually doing.

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Change of Address (USPS or email)

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Send submissions by email. Attach text as a MS Word document or plain text. Submissions may be edited for style and/or length. Send the largest photo image files possible.

You can contact VSO President Dan Bieker at: danbieker@gmail.com

Virginia is blessed to have so many willing Atlas participants from all corners of the state - so a hearty THANK YOU to all who took part these past five years. Many individuals come to mind (especially those who went WAY out of the way to remote regions), but the biggest thanks go to our intrepid Atlas coordinator - Dr. Ashley Peele. Never without a smile and friendly word of encouragement, Ashley kept it all going with workshops, rallies, and all the behind the scene maneuvering of a magician. It wouldn't be the success it has been without her.

Along with our partners, the VA Dept. of Wildlife Resources and VA Tech, the next few years will involve extensive analysis and formatting of the data into publishable form. To that end the VSO has embarked on a fundraising campaign; see details further on in the newsletter. To all those who have donated so far, and to all of our Atlas volunteers, your commitment to the preservation of Virginia's diverse birdlife is much appreciated and an inspiration for all of us to keep up the good work.

WELCOME NEW VSO MEMBERS!

Joyce and Nat Ames, Arlington, VA Shelly Arthur, Manakin Sabot, VA Susan Blaha, Woodstock, MD Jeffrey Clark, Fairfax, VA Peggy and Mike Eubank, Kill Devil Hills, NC Sarah Foster, Staunton, VA	Amy Inman, Powhatan, VA Lincoln Kartchner, Vienna, VA Ellison Orcutt, Richmond, VA Lisa Perry, Broadway, VA Scott Priebe, Springfield, VA Veronica Ratliff, Oakwood, VA Geraldine Shannon, Arlington, VA
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VSO 2020 Award Winners

The VSO is pleased to announce the 2020 Award winners. Congratulations and thank you!

Jackson M. Abbott Conservation Award – The Coastal Virginia Wildlife Observatory (CVWO)

The Jackson M. Abbott Award recognizes individuals or organizations that have demonstrated outstanding conservation work in Virginia.

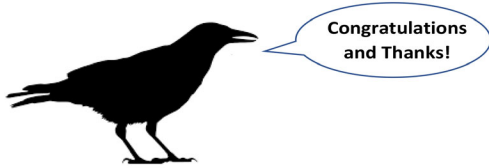
The CVWO was nominated by the Williamsburg Bird Club, with letters of support from Harry Armistead, the Department of Conservation and Recreation, and Cheryl Jacobson.

In its 25-plus years of service, the CVWO staff and volunteers, working in partnership with biologists, researchers, organizations and citizen scientists, have studied, protected and conserved birds and other wildlife on the Coastal Plain of Virginia. To mention a few, these projects include songbird research on the Eastern Shore, raptor research at the Hawk watch site, Prothonotary Warbler population studies, banding Saw-whet owls, and butterfly counts.

Mitchell A Byrd Award - Dr. Clair Mellinger

The Mitchell A. Byrd Award recognizes outstanding scientific achievement in the field of ornithology.

Dr. Mellinger was nominated by Dr. John Spahr, who noted his extensive teaching career at Eastern Mennonite University, involvement with the VSO for decades, membership with local Rockingham Bird Club, participation in Breeding Bird Surveys and efforts with the Northern Saw-Whet Owl banding project.



James Eike Service Awards – Shirley Devan and Dave Youker

The James Eike Service Award recognizes VSO members for outstanding service to the Society.

Shirley Devan was nominated by Patti Reum, with letters of support from Dan Bieker and Lenny Bankester. Shirley is heartily recognized for her long-term commitment to the VSO board, serving in the challenging role of Membership Chair. Her use of Constant Contact has vastly improved communications with our members. Shirley has attended many of the VSO field trips and organized a team for the annual Kiptopeke Challenge.

Dave Youker was nominated by Jane Frigo, with letters of support from Pete Peterman and Thomas Charlock.

Quoting Jane, “his contributions to the Virginia Society of Ornithology and other statewide projects to enhance, educate and preserve our avian populations span more than a decade. He does not seek out attention for his efforts but quietly continues to work toward providing a future for our avian populations and sharing that knowledge.”

Dave’s noteworthy accomplishments include, among many others, his service to VARCOM and the Hampton Roads Bird Club, his work at the Western Shore Marshes IBA, avian surveys at Craney Island, Grandview and Hampton Roads Bridge/Tunnel, managing the MOTUS operation at Craney Island and participating in a VSO sponsored avian population study in the Dominican Republic. Dave also serves as regional coordinator of the 2nd Breeding Bird Atlas.

Note: These awards were to be presented at the VSO Annual Meeting, which was canceled this spring because of the pandemic. Awardees will be recognized at the next publicly held event.

VSO OFFICERS	VSO BOARD OF DIRECTORS	
President: Dan Bieker Past President: Lenny Bankester Vice President: James Fox Secretary: Phil Kenny Treasurer: Terri Cuthriell Raven Editor: Mike Stinson Newsletter Editor: Dixie Sommers Membership Secretary: Shirley Devan	Terms Expire 2021 Cheryl Jacobson, Williamsburg Lisa Koerner Perry, Harrisonburg Patti Reum, Highland County Terms Expire 2022 Dianne Lepkowski, Harrisonburg Richard Rowe, Lexington Jessica Ruthenberg, Norfolk	Terms Expire 2023 Faye Cooper, Staunton Ellison Orcutt, Richmond Alan Williams, Luray

2020 Kestrel Box Monitoring in Highland County

By Patti Reum, Conservation Committee Chair

The 2020 monitoring project started on April 4. There were fewer helpers this year, due to the Covid-19 isolation issues. John Spahr helped by monitoring several boxes and Lisa Hamilton also helped me occasionally. The last monitoring date was June 15, a bit earlier than years past. A final monitoring was done on one box on August 17 because the landowner reported fledgling activity near the box.

Keith Carson provided weather data, both precipitation and temperature high/low for the months of April, May, June and July. I have found it very useful to have this information to determine potential causes of nest success and/or failure because heavy rains and low temperatures can cause chick death and low prey availability. About half of the days in April had night temperature below or hovering at freezing with heavy precipitation of rain or light snow. Daytime highs averaged low fifties. There were seven nights in May that experienced freezing temperatures. Early June temperature lows were in the forties with very heavy rain and flooding for the first few weeks. In July, temperatures were consistently in the eighties, which seemed rather warm for the mountains.

This year did prove to be another success story for kestrel breeding! Of the 78 boxes monitored, 54 were occupied by kestrels. Of that 54, 5 were occupied but then abandoned or taken over by starlings. Starlings grabbed 17 of the boxes, squirrels nested in 2 boxes placed in tree, and 5 boxes were not occupied. Sixty-eight boxes are placed on poles with predator guards; eight are mounted on trees and two are attached to sheds.

2020 Kestrel Box Occupancy		
Occupied by	Number of boxes	Occupancy Rate
Kestrels	54	69%
Starlings	17	22%
Squirrels	2	2%
Empty	5	6%

I estimate that there was a minimum of 194 chicks raised in boxes this season and that is on the conservative side.

Looking at Clutch Initiation Dates (CID), 37 boxes started incubating eggs in late March/early April. Fifteen boxes had Clutch Initiation Dates clustering in mid-April. There were two boxes in which the first



Kestrels just fledged on August 28 in Highland County. Photo by Keith Carson.

nesting attempt failed, then the same box was used again successfully. The CID for one of these boxes was early May, but in the second box, initiation started in mid-June and resulted in fledging date of around August 18th. I believe that this is the latest fledging date that I have observed in six seasons of monitoring.

Three boxes were not checked this year and removed from the project because permission to gain access to property and was not given for two, and one box was totally destroyed.

One of the most interesting occurrences in 2020 was that kestrels used boxes that were placed for Eastern Screech Owls and therefore in relatively wooded areas. It will be interesting to analyze where this occurred so we can look at just how close together boxes can be placed and be successful.

The most exciting aspect of 2020 season was that Charles Ziegenfus (Zig) came over on 2 Saturdays in May and June and banded kestrels in a total of 22 boxes. Bands were placed on 96 chicks and one adult female. Banding birds has been a goal of this project since I started monitoring so having Zig join the team is monumental. He plans to return to do some winter banding and resume banding in 2021. This will obviously give us much more information on where our birds are going. Are they migrating, are they returning to the same box or same area of the county,

Kestrel Nest Box Monitoring, continued

are they traveling over the mountains to nest in other boxes placed in the Shenandoah Valley or elsewhere? Banding is very valuable in the 21st century because “catch, release, catch again” can permit estimates of two key demographic parameters: survival and recruitment.

Another new development in the making is the cooperation and sharing of other key kestrel players in

VSO Members and Friends Support VABBA2

The 2nd Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas, VABBA2, is one of the largest citizen science projects in Virginia’s history. See VABBA2 Coordinator Ashely Peele’s article on page 6 of this issue to learn about the excellent accomplishment of the five-year field collection effort.

As the VABBA2 transitions to the next phase – data, review, analysis and publication – the VSO began a new effort to raise funds to support this work.

To date, 133 individuals and bird clubs have donated \$19,381 in response to our direct mail contact. Thank you to all who have donated!

And it is never too late! You can still give by going [online](#) or by sending a check to the VSO at P.O. Box 5994, Williamsburg, VA 23188.

The Virginia Academy of Science Invites You, Your Class, Your Family & Friends To Participate in the Virginia BioBlitz

A Virtual Event to Promote Exploration, Discovery,
Citizen Science, & Conservation.

Come join us to survey the biodiversity in every part of
the Commonwealth!

Join with us VIRTUALLY to discover, record and identify
species with iNaturalist.

When: Saturday, September 26, 2020, Virtual Kickoff
event at 9:00am

Where: Anywhere in Virginia

What: Use iNaturalist to find as many species as you
can for at least 30 min.

More Information and Registration:

<https://sites.google.com/view/virginiabioblitz/>

Virginia. One is Alan Williams who is a new VSO board member. Other participants will include Lance and Jill Morrow, Bert Harris from the Clifton Institute, Joe Kolowski of the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, and Bryan Watts from the Center for Conservation Biology, among others.

This has been a great season with great prospects for the years ahead for the Highland County American Kestrel Monitoring/Banding Project!

Renew your VSO membership for 2021!

What do your membership dues support? In addition to the costs of “keeping the organization running,” your dues support the VSO’s publications (printing and mailing plus cost of Constant Contact email subscription), Murray Scholarship Awards, conservation projects such as the Kestrel Nest Box Project across Virginia, the VABird listserve, and the Breeding Bird Atlas. Your dues and donations are so important to VSO’s ongoing conservation, research, and education efforts.

The VSO is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, so your 2021 membership dues and any donations are tax deductible in 2020 if paid in 2020. A financial statement is available upon written request from the Virginia Office of Charitable and Regulatory Programs.

Use the form on the back page of the newsletter or renew online (safely and easily with your debit, credit card, or PayPal account) at the VSO website: <https://www.virginiabirds.org/membership-and-donate>

Your VSO membership runs from January to December each calendar year.

We truly hope that VSO field trips can resume in 2021. When they do, remember that nonmembers have to pay a \$20 fee (individual) or \$25 fee (family of 2 or more) to participate in VSO field trips. Please make sure your membership is up to date to avoid the hassle of paying at the last minute.

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

NOMINATIONS AND APPLICATIONS FOR VSO AWARDS, GRANTS AND FIELD SCHOLARSHIP

VSO is soliciting nominations for the 2021 Murray Award and applications for the VSO Conservation Grant and the VSO Field Ornithology scholarship.

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 the editor of its journal, *The Raven*, from its inception until 1969. The aim of the award is 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 are 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 recipients will be asked to present the results at a VSO annual meeting held in May and are encouraged to publish the results in an appropriate journal. The recipients will also be awarded a one-year membership in the VSO.

Applicants must submit the following materials by **January 31, 2021** 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, 2021. Please send proposals or requests for information to: Lesley Bulluck, Center for Environmental Studies, VCU, lpbulluck@vcu.edu

VSO Conservation Grant, \$500-\$1000

The VSO Board established the Conservation Fund (originally named the Small Grants Conservation Fund) in March 2007. The VSO Conservation Committee manages the fund. Every year, the Virginia Society of Ornithology awards conservation grants to worthy candidates conducting research in the field of bird conservation with potential benefits to Virginia species and habitats. The VSO Board of Directors has budgeted \$2,500 annually. Awards are usually \$500, \$1,000 or occasionally more, and the Conservation Committee determines the amount.

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

1. A one- to two-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 Board of the VSO. We ask that recipients report their findings to the VSO board and members at the completion of their project, occasionally at the VSO Annual Meeting in May.

DEADLINE for 2021 application: **January 31, 2021**. The committee will notify the applicant(s) around February 15.

Please submit your application to Patti Reum (Conservation Chair) at pareum@gmail.com

VSO Field Ornithology Scholarship, \$500

The VSO would like to annually support one student 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 by January 31, 2021 (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 2021. Please send proposals or requests for information by **January 31, 2021** to: Lesley Bulluck, Center for Environmental Studies, VCU, lpbulluck@vcu.edu

The Wind-Down – VABBA2 Goals Met!

By Ashley Peele, PhD, VABBA2 Coordinator

Reflecting on the last five years brings a whirlwind of thoughts and images - everything from the first VABBA program I gave to the Cape Henry Audubon Society in February 2016 to the thousands of Virginia birders I have met since we launched the project in January 2016. The last five years have proven incredibly rewarding, as more and more members of the VA birding community stepped up to assist in our ambitious, often challenging, goal to document breeding birds throughout the Commonwealth. Despite the many challenges encountered, especially a global pandemic striking in our final year, the VABBA2 has broken many state records and blown away many expectations by the sheer magnitude of the database collected by our volunteers.

A brief reminder of where we began... at the end of our first breeding season in the Fall of 2016, the project had ~14,000 checklists submitted to the Atlas eBird portal, a few hundred volunteers, ~10,000 hours of birding effort, and a long way to go. Now, at the end of our final field season, preliminary estimates put our final numbers closer to 100,000+ checklists, 1400+ volunteers, and 70,000+ hours of birding effort.

At the start of this final year, the VABBA2 project had two key goals:

1) **Filling the Gaps** – We focused on geographic ‘holes’ in breeding bird survey effort. Heading into 2020, several large gaps remained in southwestern VA and in and around Pittsylvania and Alleghany counties. Closing these gaps was vital for improving the accuracy of our data on current species distributions.



Hairy Woodpecker, photo by Bob Schamerhorn

2) **Increasing Priority Block (PB) Coverage** – Nearly 40% of the VABBA2’s targeted priority blocks had less than 8 hours of effort at the start of 2020. Most of these ‘low-effort’ blocks were clustered in the southwestern

mountain-valley region and along the southern border. To better distribute our volunteers’ effort across Virginia’s ecoregions, we encouraged volunteers to target these low-effort areas with the goal of reducing the number of low-effort blocks to as close to zero as possible. We also encouraged volunteers to bring as many PBs up to full completion status (20+ hours effort, 60% probable/confirmed breeding status, nocturnal survey visits, etc.) as they were able.

Rapid Adaptation...

Prior to Spring of 2020, the VABBA2 project planned a series of events to launch our final field season and host data collection rallies. However, in March, the spread of Covid-19 rapidly changed both our day-to-day outlook and our strategy. As some citizen science projects across the country and world were rapidly shutdown, adaptation became vital. Despite the potentially bleak outlook, spending time outdoors was clearly becoming more vital than ever for maintaining our well-being. Birding presents a safe outlet in a world of necessary isolation and reduced mobility. So, with that in mind, we pursued a two-part strategy for ensuring that our final field season was still a success.

First, we continued to pursue the blockbusting strategy set in motion in 2019. Blockbusting targets local areas with high concentrations of low-effort blocks, whether for a weekend, week, or multiple visits. This is a tricky strategy when travel is so limited. The VABBA2 project turned to a die-hard set of volunteers who had the ability/means/gumption to travel to remote target areas. These volunteers adapted their own strategies to deal with the need for social distancing, many resorting to no-frills camping and even sleeping in their cars.

Additionally, thanks to the VSO’s financial contributions, we employed a team of full-time technicians to conduct additional blockbusting efforts in southwest and south-central regions from June-July. While their season was shortened by covid constraints, their efforts helped to fill many of the remaining gaps in data coverage.

Lastly, while we had to cancel many events, we were able to hold two ‘socially-distanced’ VABBA rallies in late June. Volunteers radiated out from

Occoneechee and Natural Tunnel State Parks to survey remaining low-effort blocks in these areas. Despite pandemic restrictions on the social elements of these events, volunteers brought great attitudes and a willingness to spend all day and even some nights collecting data.

So, how did we do?

Well, the detailed answer will have to wait until next year when the complete dataset has been received from Cornell, cleaned, and reviewed in depth. But a quick comparison of the Atlas Effort Map from 2019 (Figure 1a) to present (Figure 1b) readily reveals some key victories.

First, we filled the gaps! No significant holes remain in data coverage throughout the state. While some areas obviously received more data than others, our volunteers, blockbusters, and technicians did a tremendous job of adding vital data to all our 2020 target areas.

Second, our priority block coverage increased markedly, allowing the project to close out nearly as many priority blocks in 2020 as were fully completed from 2016-2019 (nearly 80%). Importantly, volunteers or technicians surveyed 99% of ALL priority blocks. The few remaining blocks with low-effort are largely limited to coastal

blocks with too little land to survey or border blocks that fall primarily outside VA state lines.

The VABBA2 project met its two goals for 2020 and ultimately, for the entire course of the project. Many members of Virginia’s birding community came together into the largest volunteer network for any single citizen science project within the Commonwealth to date AND helped to build the largest breeding bird database in Virginia’s history.

Now, we begin the next phase of the VABBA journey: collating, cleaning, and reviewing that massive database to prepare for data analysis. Data products may include species distribution and occupancy maps, current population abundance estimates, and with luck, changes in these population values over time. Data cleanup is currently projected to take at least one year, prior to moving into the analytical phase. We will do our best to keep volunteers apprised of progress. Keep a watch on the [VABBA2 website](#) and [eBird portal](#) for updates.

For now, we hope all who have contributed to this historic effort will take a moment to sit back, relax, and savor a job well done. To all our volunteers, both within and external to the VSO, we offer a profound thanks for your years of dedicated service to this vital conservation effort.

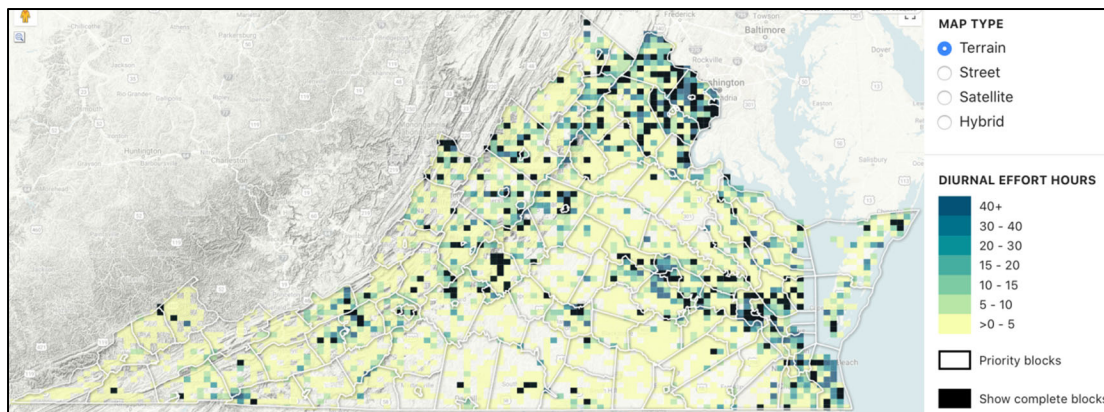


Figure 1a. VABBA2 eBird Effort Map, January 2019. This map illustrates the distribution of diurnal Atlas effort, as well as completed blocks at the start of 2019.

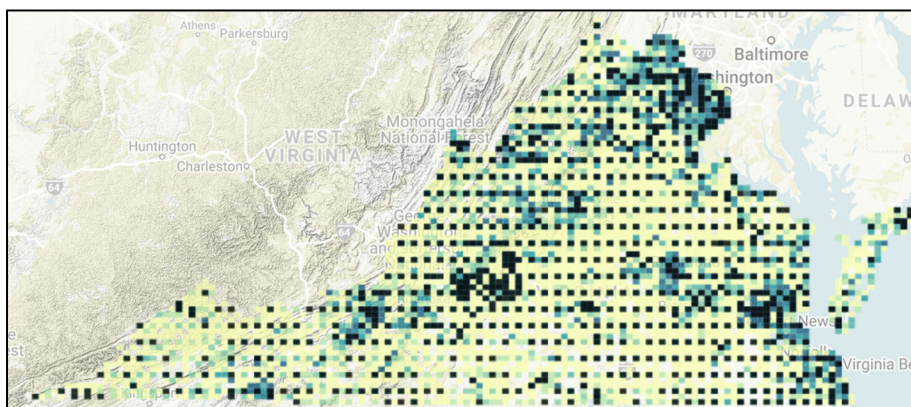


Figure 1b. VABBA2 eBird Effort Map, August 2020. This second map illustrates distribution of atlas effort, as well as block completion at the end of the final field season. Note: legend shown in Figure 1a applies to both maps.



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2021 VSO Membership Renewal

Name & Address: _____

Email address: _____

Check here if you wish to receive VSO publications electronically by email via Constant Contact. Please print your email address clearly. (Note that we do not share members' email addresses with any other organizations. The VSO may contact you by email to notify you of upcoming events, field trips, annual meetings, and organization news. You may opt out of these email notices at any time.)

New _____ Renewing _____ Gift _____

Contributing Membership \$60
Sustaining Membership \$35
Family Membership \$25
Active Membership \$20
Student Membership \$10
Life Membership (Individual) \$500

I would like to make a donation to:

\$ _____ Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas 2 Project
\$ _____ American Kestrel Nest Box Project
\$ _____ VSO Conservation Fund
\$ _____ VSO General Fund
\$ _____ VSO Endowment Fund

VSO Merchandise

Virginia's Birdlife "Gold Book" (Rottenborn, Brinkley 2007) \$20.00
VSO Arm Patch \$4.00
VSO Cloisonné Pin \$5.00
VSO Field Checklist FREE! Download the latest 2019 list at:
<http://www.virginiabirds.org/publications/field-checklist>

PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM WITH YOUR CHECK, PAYABLE TO THE VSO:

VSO, PO BOX 5994, WILLIAMSBURG, VA 23188-5216

You may also join, renew and purchase items online at:
www.virginiabirds.org/membership-and-donate

If you have questions about your membership, contact Membership Secretary Shitley Devan at: vsomembership@cox.net Your support means so much to the success of the VSO. Thank you!

The Virginia Society of Ornithology is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and all membership fees, donations, and contributions are tax deductible to the extent of the law. A financial statement is available upon written request from the Virginia Office of Charitable and Regulatory Programs.