



VSO Newsletter

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SUMMER 2020

Carrying On

By Dan Bieker, VSO President



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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

Cancellation of this year's VSO annual meeting in Williamsburg was unfortunate, to say the least. But no such misfortune was apparent in the world of birds, as a lush, early spring brought in many migrants, with early arrival records being shattered all across the state. While the health crisis has disrupted so many aspects of our lives, it's reassuring to welcome the blossoming of trees, wildflowers and birdsong all round us.

Like many, you might be especially appreciative of the natural world this season, as a respite from computer screens and the endless rehashing of news and politics. The happenings in nature are indeed something to be treasured. That's the main reason the VSO exists, not only to protect, but to celebrate birds and all they bring to our lives, and the lives of all creatures in nature's complex web. It's interesting to note that the VSO's formation was spawned by a desire to organize birding enthusiasts scattered throughout the state and to formalize documentation of the distribution, abundance, and breeding status of Virginia's birds. The VSO was born in December of 1929, with eighteen people in attendance at the first organizational meeting. Annual dues were set at \$1.50, and the first edition of the *Raven* was published in January of 1930. J.J. Murray, one of the founders, reported 300 Tree Sparrows near Lexington on that year's Christmas Count. These are just a few gleanings from the VSO's first year.

Fast forward 90 years and we're still at it. The technology of the times has certainly changed, but not the passion for our feathered friends or the dedication of talented volunteers. This summer we say goodbye from the board of directors to three of those volunteers: Rexanne Bruno, Ashley Peele and Len Smock. Their contributions have been immense, and though off the board they will continue to be active with many of the VSO's projects. At the same time, we welcome three new board members: Faye Cooper, Ellison Orcutt, and Alan Williams. The expertise they each bring will be valuable assets to our organization.

We encourage all to maintain strict safety measures, but as restrictions on public gatherings hopefully lift, we hope to gather for more fun VSO field trips in the months ahead. And please keep those Atlas reports coming in!

The Terns Are Back at Hampton Roads!

By Terri Cuthriell

The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) announced in mid-May that preparations for Rip Raps Island (Fort Wool) in Hampton Roads are complete and sand topped barges are being anchored nearby to provide additional nesting habitat for the seabird colony that was displaced by the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel Expansion Project. The fantastic news is that the birds are already inhabiting the island and forming the tightly spaced nesting groups characteristic of these species! The birds arrived right on the normal schedule late March, and many have been gathering over the island since their arrival. So, when the alternative habitat was completed, they were ready to begin nesting activities and got right to business!

Preparing the nesting area included removing predators and vegetation, installing erosion control devices and barriers to protect chicks, and spreading sand and gravel substrate in a large open area. Decoys and sound recordings were used for social attraction to encourage the birds to nest on the site. Virginia Tech scientists and DGIF will be monitoring the birds closely this summer to evaluate nesting success through the season.

We are extremely pleased by the progress made so far on Governor Northam's first steps to protect migratory birds. The next effort currently

underway is initiating legislation in Virginia to backstop the tragic federal rollback of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. The new state legislation focuses on protecting migratory birds from incidental take during construction projects.

VSO submitted comments in favor of the draft regulation as did our friends at many of your bird clubs, National Audubon Society, and the American Bird Conservancy. The comment period for the draft legislation closed on May 16, but there will be further opportunities to review and provide input on your opinions about the new legislation.

Governor Northam, Secretaries Matt Strickler and Shannon Valentine, and DGIF have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure that the seabird colony is protected, and they deserve many thanks and accolades from the birding community for their tremendous effort. See the [DGIF website](#) for more information.

And of course, we know that none of this could have happened without the input of so many of you who attended board meetings, wrote letters, and spoke up that the eviction of the largest seabird colony in the Mid-Atlantic was unacceptable. Activism is not always fun, but the success we have seen in Hampton Roads illustrates that when we all stand together great things can and do happen. As pressures on Virginia's birds continue to mount, we need to remain vigilant. I hope all VSO members will continue to be involved and speak out on the many environmental issues facing us today.

With my deepest gratitude!

Terri Cuthriell



Royal Terns nesting at Rip Raps Island, May 2020,
Photo by Meghan Marchetti, courtesy, VDGIF

2020 VSO Annual Meeting May 1-3, 2020, Williamsburg, VA

Under normal circumstances, I would be telling you about the VSO Annual Meeting that was to be held earlier this month in Williamsburg. But, as you probably know, that meeting was cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It's too bad we had to cancel as we had a terrific meeting planned. Bryan Watts from the Center for Conservation Biology at W&M/VCU was to be the keynote speaker. There were field trips to Piney Grove to see Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and the Dismal Swamp NWR to look for Swainson's Warblers and many others. We had even managed to set up a field trip to Craney Island on Friday.

Many people in the Williamsburg Bird Club contributed an enormous amount of time planning and arranging the field trips, cocktail hours, banquet, keynote speaker, exhibits, paper session, raffle drawings, registration forms and details, publicity, etc. I cannot begin to thank them enough for all of their efforts. But we did what was best for the safety of all and cancelled the meeting in late March. I hope you are all staying safe as we are here in Williamsburg.

Rexanne Bruno
VSO Annual Meeting Planning Committee Chair
Williamsburg Bird Club

New Speakers Directory Available

Looking for a great speaker for your bird club or nature organization meeting? VSO can help!

The 2020-21 edition of the [VSO Speakers Directory](#) is now available. You will find information on more than 30 speakers who can present on a range of topics, from bird behavior to raptor banding to conservation in Guatemala.

The web page also has information on "Virtual" Meetings in the Age of Coronavirus, about how to move your bird club meetings on-line. The directory denotes speakers who provide on-line presentations.

VSO thanks Russell Taylor, our Speakers Directory editor, and all the speakers who shared their information for the directory and will share their interesting stories with you.

Conservation Corner

Update on Highland County American Kestrel Nesting Box Monitoring Project

The 2020 project was initiated on April 1. I assigned several boxes to John Spahr to monitor, as we needed to maintain social distancing by using separate vehicles to monitor. Lisa Hamilton kindly offered to help too.

This was another spring with some weather extremes: occasional high seventies, then dipping to freezing temperatures, as well as almost daily rainy precipitation.

As of May 13, when we completed the second round of monitoring, we had checked all but 2 of the boxes in the county. Out of 68 nesting boxes, 49 had kestrel eggs or chicks by this date. Eight were occupied by starlings, 9 were empty, and 2 had squirrels (Gray and Fox). This gives us about 72 percent occupancy rate. Again, boxes installed for Eastern Screech Owls were used by kestrels, especially boxes placed on forest edges. Of the 4 boxes used by kestrels, one was predated.

We will move on to the 3d round of monitoring in late May. It will be very interesting to see if more boxes are occupied. Lance and Jill Morrow from the Shenandoah Valley may come check our boxes to see if any of their banded birds are moving westward to use our Highland boxes. So interesting and fascinating to watch as this story unfolds!

Patti Reum



American Kestrel chicks. Still from video by Patti Reum.

VABBA2's Final Summer in the Field

By Ashley Peele, VABBA2 Coordinator

As the heart of this summer's breeding season -June and July -- arrives, the final year of the VA Breeding Bird Atlas field work looks rather different to both project leaders and volunteers. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many aspects of both our daily lives and our plans for summer activities. Yet, while these constraints have changed and limited goals for the final data collection year of the historic Virginia breeding bird atlas project, our volunteer community has found ways to continue and, in many cases, increase their contributions.

In just the first few months of 2020, Atlas volunteers have submitted close to 25,000 Atlas eBird checklists, a marked increase to previous years' average of 18,000 checklists annually. Clearly, our volunteers are finding ways to safely get outdoors and collect observations on breeding birds, even if many are limited to their own backyards or neighborhoods.

Despite the need to cancel our first two Atlas rally events of the summer (Fairystone State Park and Breaks Interstate Park), the VABBA2 is moving ahead with a modified approach to the Atlas rallies scheduled for **Occoneechee State Park (June 19-21)** and **Natural Tunnel State Park (June 26-28)**.

Volunteers who are comfortable traveling by mid-June are invited to participate in these events. Our goal is to modify our approach to Atlas Summer Rally events to mitigate the need for volunteers to interact in groups, share housing, or otherwise violate social distancing practices. Naturally, this will require volunteers to find their own lodging, though we have suggestions on how/where to look for accommodations at each location. Similar to past years, rally participants will work in small groups of 2 to 3 people who will drive separate vehicles to field sites.

Additionally, we are working to devise a safe way to hold a 'socially distanced social' during our usual Saturday evening gatherings. We value these opportunities to visit and share with our fellow bird-nerds, as well as to collect critical data in some of our most under-birded regions of the state. However, we also strive to make these events as safe as possible for participants, a principle which guides all Atlas activities.



Logan Anderson and John Coe at the Natural Tunnel State Park Atlas Rally, 2019. Photo by Caroline Coe.

To this point, we encourage our volunteers to use their best judgement, informed by state and federal health guidance, to decide what/if any level of Atlas participation is appropriate for them in this final year in the field. We wish only the best for our dedicated community of volunteers and urge them to always prioritize their health and well-being, even if that means forgoing normal birding activities.

More details on Atlas Summer Rally events will be published on the VABBA2 website (vabba2.org) and eBird portal (ebird.org/atlasva). If you are interested in attending an Atlas Summer Rally event, please reach out to Ashley Peele, at ashpeele@vt.edu.

Early Atlas Volunteer Highlights of 2020

Compared to folks in well-birded urban areas, volunteers in the more rural regions began this field season with more local or close regional priority blocks targeted for completion. Many rural birders, like the members of the Lynchburg Bird Club, are working together to target and knock out dozens of priority blocks this year. Organized and coordinated by Bob Epperson and Donna Mateski de Sanchez, this central Virginia team has already KO-ed a number of priority blocks in under-surveyed areas and are ultimately looking to knock out a couple dozen new blocks by the

end of the summer. All the while they are observing best practices for keeping themselves and others safe during their time in the field.

In another rural region, Rockingham and Alleghany Counties, volunteers like Laura Neale and John Pancake are continuing their efforts to log breeding observations in remote priority blocks close to the West Virginia border. The rural nature of these areas helps to minimize contact with others and often leads to some exciting finds. John recently devoted time toward nocturnal survey hours in a number of remote blocks, adding new records of Great-horned, Barred, and Eastern Screech Owls to our database.

Laura shared a unique experience on a remote stretch of road in Alleghany County. Coming around a bend, she observed four thrushes walking around in the



Eastern Screech Owl. Photo by Dick Rowe

WELCOME NEW VSO MEMBERS!

- Timothy Chaney, Charlottesville, VA
- Faye Cooper, Staunton, VA
- Anna Dustin, Blacksburg, VA
- Randy Dye and Chris Kelley-Dye, Forest, VA
- Vicky Frye, Saltville, VA
- Lester Lawrence, Williamsburg, VA
- Joan Mashburn, Arlington, VA
- June McDaniels, Virginia Beach, VA
- Nancy-Elizabeth Nimmich, Charlottesville, VA
- Linda Pearson, Williamsburg, VA
- Ed Talbott, Grundy, VA
- Laura Thurman, Staunton, VA
- Margaret Wester, Boyce, VA
- Carol Whitt, Roanoke, VA
- Alan Williams, Luray, VA



Swainson's Thrush. Photo by Dick Rowe.

middle of the road. After spending some time observing these birds, she noted begging behavior by one of the thrushes, typically a sign of courtship behavior at this time of year. Laura suspected this was a group of Swainson's Thrush, but wisely recorded a snippet of their song. This recording allowed us to confirm that she was indeed correct, generating an interesting and rare breeding species record for the atlas.

While this sort of sighting was unusual and exciting for Swainson's Thrush in particular, such interesting experiences are a common occurrence for Atlas volunteers working in the rural regions targeted for the greatest Atlas effort this field season.

How You Can Help the Atlas to Completion

This is the last year of field work for the VABBA2. The project will soon move into its final phase: analyzing and publishing the results of the five years of field collection that have yielded millions of observations of breeding birds throughout Virginia!

To support the Atlas to its completion, the VSO has created the VABBA2 Fundraising Committee. We are looking for eager volunteers to help the committee with this vital effort and replace current members who are no longer available to serve.

If you have a passion for birds and the Atlas project, like to work with others on an important effort, and especially if you have any experience in raising funds, please let us know! Send your contact information to Len Smock at lsmock@vcu.edu.

And you can help by donating to the Atlas at www.virginiabirds.org Thank you!

VSO Fall Field Trip

Chincoteague, VA, September 18-20, 2020

We have made arrangements for the annual VSO trip to Chincoteague, and pandemic permitting, we will hold it September 18-20. We will monitor the situation and notify all registrants of any adjustments that might need to be made.

TRIP REGISTRATION. To help us plan for the weekend, please register in advance. Provide the names of participants in your party with your mobile number and email address so we can contact you if needed. Register with Meredith Bell, trip coordinator, at merandlee@gmail.com or 804-824-4958. If you're also registering for one of the bus trips to Wash Flats (see below), be sure to state your preferred day.

HEADQUARTERS. The Refuge Inn on Beach Road in Chincoteague will be the host hotel (800-544-8469 or 757-336-5511). Room rates for Friday and Saturday nights are \$114.75 (plus tax) per night for a single or a double room, minimum two-night stay. For those arriving a day early or staying an extra day, the rate for Thursday and Sunday nights will be \$102.00. The Refuge Inn is non-smoking, and no pets are allowed. To assure the VSO rate, **make reservations by August 18** and state you are with the VSO when you call. NOTE: There is a **one-week** cancellation notice if you decide to cancel your reservation.

MEALS. Meals are on your own. The Refuge Inn offers a complimentary continental breakfast and will open breakfast early for us at 7:00am. Many eating establishments in the town offer take-out or outdoor dining if restrictions on indoor dining are still in place.

CHECK-IN. Check-in time is 4:00pm. If you registered for one of the bus trips, you can make payment at the VSO headquarters, located in the Conference room at the far end of the Refuge Inn. The Conference room will be open Friday from 4:30-5:30pm.

FRIDAY EVENING. An evening orientation is tentatively scheduled to overview the weekend, based on social distancing restrictions. Details will be provided later.

SATURDAY FIELD TRIPS. Saturday morning trips include "Morning Warbler Walk" at the Island Nature Trail (on Chincoteague Island) to look for migrating songbirds, "Motorcade to Assateague Beach," with frequent stops to look at shorebirds, and possibly the Wash Flats bus trip.

WASH FLATS BUS TRIP – ADVANCE REGISTRATION REQUIRED. At this time, we are still determining whether the two bus trips to the Wash Flats will be offered, and if

so, what restrictions there may be on the number of passengers. If they are a "go," both will be at **8:30am** on **Saturday** and on **Sunday**. This is a restricted area in the refuge, entered only with special permission. The shorebirds and raptors are often abundant in this area. The cost per person is tentatively \$15 and may be increased if fewer than 25 passengers are allowed on each trip. If you want to go on this trip, you must make a reservation and specify your preferred day with Meredith Bell, at merandlee@gmail.com or 804-824-4958. Payment will be made at the registration area when you arrive on Friday (exact change is appreciated). If you are unable to attend after making your reservation, please contact Meredith so that she can open up your space for someone else. This is a popular trip and fills up quickly, so we recommend that you register early.

BOAT TRIP, SATURDAY, 19th – ADVANCE REGISTRATION REQUIRED. There will be a special birding by boat trip **Saturday at 2:00pm** (2 hours) with a local boat captain and his crew. You can check out the marshes and tidal flats up-close during the outgoing tide for interesting water birds and raptors. The fee per person is \$33. Details about how/where to pay will be provided later. Bring additional cash for tip (to crew) on the boat. Departure is from the Curtis Merritt Marina at the Sound end of Chincoteague Island, 2246 Curtis Merritt Lane. Be there 15 minutes before departure. The boat holds 100, but there may be limitations on seating. Contact Meredith Bell at merandlee@gmail.com or 804-824-4958 to register.

SATURDAY EVENING. We may have a tally of the day's species at 6:00pm, either in the Conference room or outdoors.

SUNDAY MORNING. We will repeat the field trips from Saturday. Check out time from most motels is 11:00AM.

OTHER AREA LODGING. If you are unable to get a room at the Refuge Inn, you may want to try these motels close by: Best Western (757-336-6557), Days Inn by Wyndham (757-336-1900) and Comfort Suites (757-336-3700).

For additional information about lodging, restaurant options and COVID-19 updates, check out the Chincoteague town website: www.chincoteaguechamber.com

NOW is the time to renew your VSO membership for 2020!

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](#).

Your VSO membership runs from January to December each calendar year. First notices of renewals were sent in November, and we are grateful for those who have renewed so far! THANK YOU! Your dues and donations are so important to VSO's ongoing conservation, research, and education efforts.

If you have delayed renewing, please do so soon to save wear and tear on your "volunteer" Membership Secretary.

The VSO is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization, so your 2020 membership dues and any donations to the Second Breeding Bird Atlas or the VSO Conservation Fund are tax deductible in 2020.

Keep in mind that non-members 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

VIRGINIA SOCIETY OF ORNITHOLOGY TREASURER'S REPORT CONDENSED 2019 END OF YEAR

BEGINNING BALANCES January 1, 2019

General Fund	\$59,768
Restricted Funds	\$126,212
Total	\$185,980

RECEIPTS

Dues	\$18,295
Other General Fund Receipts	\$2,581
Endowment Fund	\$1,281
Conservation Fund	\$2,285
Kestrel Fund	\$1,975
VABBA2 Fund	\$12,687
Total	\$39,104

DISBURSEMENTS

General Fund	\$15,668
Endowment Fund	\$250
Conservation fund	\$1,051
Kestrel Fund	\$1,534
VABBA2 Fund	\$33,520
Total	\$52,023

ENDING BALANCES December 31, 2019

General Fund	\$115,051
Restricted Funds	\$58,010
ENDING BALANCE	\$173,061

Terri S. Cuthriell, Treasurer

Note that the Murray Fund was abolished, and the balance was transferred to the General Fund in 2019. The Murray Award will be funded by the General Fund going forward.

VSO OFFICERS

President: Dan Bieker
 Past President: Lenny Bankester
 Vice President: Vacant
 Secretary: Phil Kenny
 Treasurer: Terri Cuthriell
 Raven Editor: Mike Stinson
 Newsletter Editor: Dixie Sommers
 Membership Secretary: Shirley Devan

VSO BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Terms Expire 2020

Rexanne Bruno, Williamsburg
 Ashley Peele, Blacksburg
 Leonard Smock, Richmond

Terms Expire 2021

Patti Reum, Highland County
 Cheryl Jacobson, Williamsburg
 James Fox, Front Royal

Terms Expire 2022

Dianne Lepkowski, Harrisonburg
 Richard Rowe, Lexington
 Jessica Ruthenberg, Norfolk

2020 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 23188-5994

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 Shirley 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.