



# VSO Newsletter

Vol. 66 • No. 1

[www.virginiabirds.org](http://www.virginiabirds.org)

Winter 2019-2020



*Dan Bieker, VSO President*

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## Guest Editor for Winter Newsletter

Shirley Devan

## Change of Address (either 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](mailto:danbieker@gmail.com)

## Christmas Bird Counts

*By Dan Bieker, VSO President*

At this time of year, many of us enjoy participating in a Christmas Bird Count (CBC) or two (or three, or...). It's one of the great holiday traditions and a welcome relief from the traffic, shopping, and busyness of the season.

You might be aware that the first CBC was held in 1900, the brainchild of the great ornithologist Frank Chapman. He proposed it as an alternative to the mass slaughter of birds (and other wildlife) typical of holiday time back then. 27 people participated that first year, in 25 counts held across the US and a couple in Canada. They tallied 90 species. From that humble beginning folks came to realize that counting birds could be as much or even more fun than blasting them. It seems to tickle something deep in our DNA, that instinctive urge to hunt, imprinted over eons.

For us in Virginia and especially points north, weather can factor into the counts in a big way. Ever participate in a count with temps in the teens or single digits, and howling winds? There have been a few of those. Or a cold rain that cuts to the bone, fogs the binos, and finds your vehicle stuck in the mud? Yep, all part of the excitement. I can remember a few winters in the late seventies that were particularly severe, especially in the Midwest. Temps hit 25 below zero in 1977, and in the blizzard of '78 there was 25" of snow on the ground, near zero-degree temps for several days and sustained winds of 40 mph with gusts over 70 mph. People died. Power lines snapped. The Ohio River froze deep enough to walk across. Although occasional winters like that can be healthy for the environment (although not for people), we haven't had those conditions around these parts for some time. So, what's a little nasty wind and rain when there's the chance of scoring a rare waterfowl species, Rough-legged Hawk, Golden Eagle or other intrepid migrant from the north. Many birders will carry on no matter what.

Although conditions and participants vary, most of the CBCs are well established and involve the same people doing the same counts, covering the same territories year after year. And that's a real benefit for science. You'd be hard pressed to find a more reliable, long term indicator of population trends than the 119 years of Christmas Bird Counts. From 27 observers in 1900, now almost 77,000 people participate in over 2500 counts across North and South America – quite a legacy, courtesy of Mr. Chapman. But perhaps the greatest CBC benefit is the social aspect: getting lotsa folks out into the natural world to share a common interest, away from the barren landscape of sound bites and two-dimensional images we're bombarded with.

I hope the excitement and thrill of the hunt is rewarding to all who participate this holiday season. And as January rolls around, the VSO board of directors extends wishes to all our members for a prosperous new year, and many fruitful birding adventures in the months ahead.

# VSO Winter Field Trip

## North Carolina's Outer Banks • January 31 – February 2, 2020

Make plans to join us for the VSO's Winter field trip at the Outer Banks of North Carolina January 31-February 2! 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 great waterfowl, shorebirds and raptors, along with a wide assortment of land birds.

**TRIP REGISTRATION** – To help us plan for the weekend, please register in advance. **Provide the names of participants in your party with a telephone number and email address** so we can contact you if needed. Register with Meredith Bell, trip coordinator, at [merandlee@gmail.com](mailto:merandlee@gmail.com) or 804-824-4958. A detailed weekend itinerary will be sent via email to all registrants a few days before the trip.

**Important!** Please bring FRS (two-way) radios if you have them. This helps us stay in touch in our caravans.

**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 \$75 for oceanfront and \$62 for bay-view (plus tax). Ocean front rooms are available on a first come, first served basis. The 7<sup>th</sup> floor bayside rooms offer a panoramic view of the bay but do not have balconies. The hotel is just two blocks from Jennette's Pier, a 1,000-foot long, 24-foot wide pier that will allow you to get really close to the ocean birds! 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 10, 2020** to get the special VSO rate.

**MEALS** – A complimentary breakfast buffet is included with your stay, beginning each morning at 6:00 AM. For dinner there are many fine restaurants in the area.

**FRIDAY** – You have two options for Friday, and you do NOT need to register in advance for your preference.

**Option 1** – Lee Adams will lead the all-day trip to Lake Mattamuskeet NWR. Meet in the hotel lobby at 7:15 AM for 7:30 departure. Expected driving time is 90 minutes. Bring snacks, beverage, and lunch. Optional: camp or lawn chair for greater comfort while eating 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 such as Jeanette's Pier and other nearby spots.

**Lunch** on your own.

**Afternoon** – Alligator River NWR. We'll explore areas that won't be covered on Sunday's AM trip. Those interested can stay until dusk with Lee Adams' groups to listen for Short-eared Owls.

**Friday Evening** – At 8:00 PM we'll have a slide presentation and weekend overview in the Neptune Room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor at the end of the hall. Complimentary coffee and tea will be available.

**SATURDAY** – Our morning field trips will include visits to the impoundments of Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge and surrounding areas. We'll divide into smaller groups for a safer caravan experience, and every group will visit all areas.

We'll return to the hotel for lunch (on your own), with time afterwards to visit Jennette's Pier, the beach and other nearby areas. Last year at the pier, species of note were 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.

At 6:00 PM there will be a tally in the Neptune Room on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. Complimentary coffee and tea will be available.

**SUNDAY** – We'll explore Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge. Drive on your own and meet at 8:30am at the main entrance on Milltail Road. We'll caravan down the road so you can easily catch up with us if we've already started.

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).

**VERY Important!** All VSO field trips have a registration fee of \$20 for NON-members only. This fee will be applied to an individual membership that will be active until the end of 2020. If two or more people from the same family register, the registration fee is \$25, which covers a family membership. Groups of students accompanied by their instructor are exempt from this fee. Non-members can join in advance at: <https://www.virginiabirds.org/membership-and-donate> or pay the registration fee on the first evening of the event.

## NOMINATIONS FOR THE JAMES EIKE SERVICE AWARD

*By Bill Williams*

The James Eike Service Award Committee is soliciting nominations for the award.

In 1983, the Virginia Society of Ornithology Board of Directors approved the James Eike Service Award, to honor James Eike who was a Virginia Society of Ornithology member from 1933 until his death in 1983. Jim's long and faithful service, his dedication, and his enthusiasm in promoting the work of the VSO gave him a unique status in the organization. The presentation of this Service Award recognizes a VSO member for outstanding service to the Virginia Society of Ornithology.

Eligibility for consideration would include service as an officer, board member, foray director, field trip leader, or other contributions to the organization. The award recipient will be recognized at the 2020 VSO Annual Meeting by the presentation of a silver Raven pin. The first pin was given to Claire Eike, in honor of her late husband for whom the award was named.

Nominators should send a letter of nomination giving the rationale behind the nomination to Bill Williams [billwilliams154@gmail.com](mailto:billwilliams154@gmail.com) by February 1, 2020. In addition, two letters of support are required. The committee will review all nomination packets and make its recommendation to the VSO Board at its Spring 2020 meeting.

A list of James Eike Service Award honorees may be found on the VSO website.

## NOW IS THE TIME TO RENEW YOUR VSO MEMBERSHIP FOR 2020!

*By Shirley Devan, VSO Membership Secretary*

The time is now! Use the membership renewal form on Page 6 or renew online (safely and easily with your debit or credit card or PayPal account) at the VSO website: [www.virginiabirds.org/membership-and-donate](http://www.virginiabirds.org/membership-and-donate)

Your VSO membership runs from January to December each calendar year. Initial renewal reminders were sent by snail mail and Constant Contact in early November. Follow up notices will be sent in early 2020 to those who have delayed renewing.

Dues are not expensive, so if possible, please consider renewing at a higher level for 2020, and also making an additional donation to the VABBA2. We're approaching this project's final year with our efforts directed to southwestern and southern regions of the state. Many logistical expenses are involved, and we need to raise more funds to bring the project to conclusion. Please make a donation to the Atlas with your renewal.

The VSO is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization, so your 2020 membership dues and any donations are tax deductible in 2019 if you pay before January 1.

Keep in mind 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 for 2020 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](mailto:vsomembership@cox.net)

PS: Many thanks to those who have already renewed their membership for 2020! Your early dues and donations are much appreciated by your "volunteer" Membership Secretary!

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## VABBA2 Update for the VSO – Winter 2019/2020

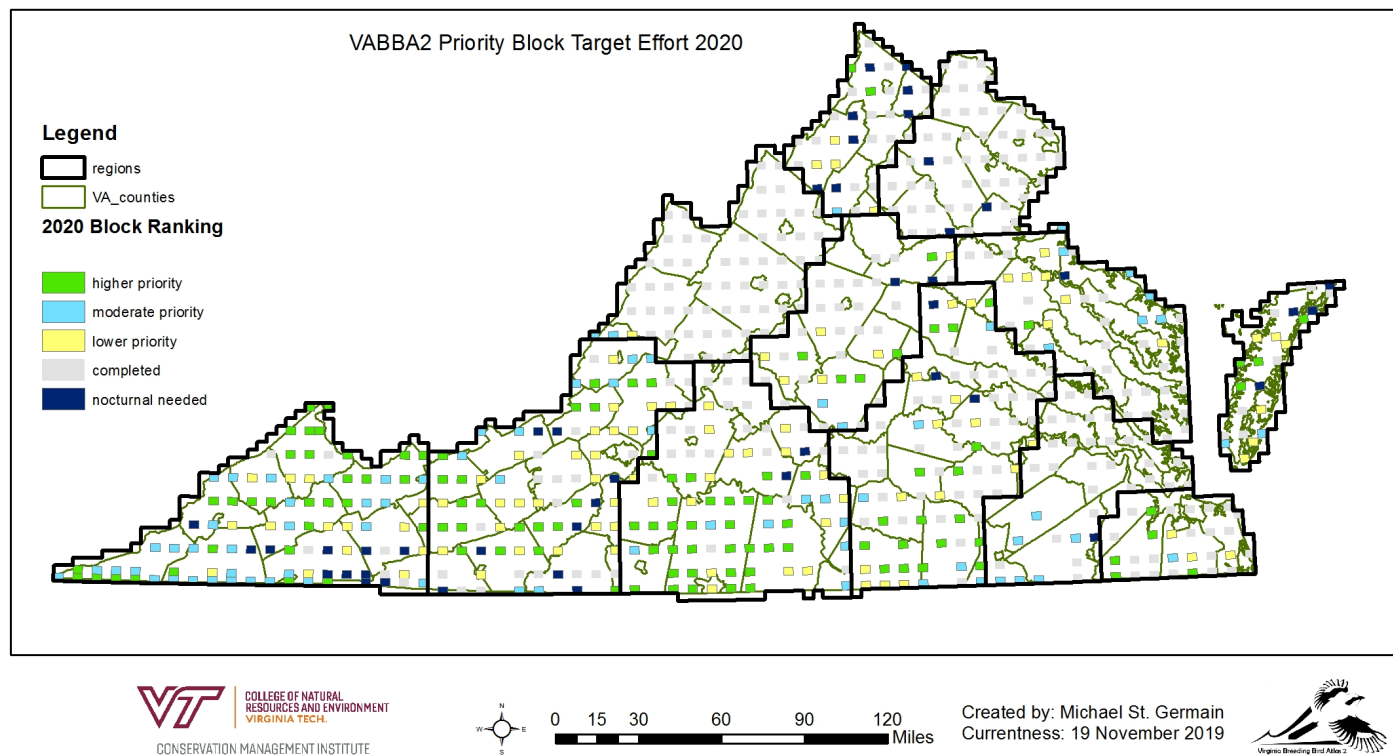
*By Dr. Ashley Peele, VABBA2 Coordinator*

In the fourth field season, VA Breeding Bird Atlas' volunteers stepped up their efforts to target areas of the Commonwealth with large gaps in breeding bird survey data. Filling these survey gaps is essential for developing an accurate picture of the current distribution and status of Virginia's breeding birds and for understanding how that picture has changed over the last 30 years. Gap-filling is especially important in rural regions like south-central and southwestern VA where little regular birding occurs. Aside from targeted birding efforts by county-listers who occasionally venture out into the 'wilds' of counties like Russell, Alleghany, or Pittsylvania, many such rural areas go virtually un-birded from year to year. This lack of information on current bird populations makes the breeding bird data collected in these areas all the more valuable.

In 2019, the combined efforts of individual blockbusters, rally participants, and traditional volunteer activities added significant hours to 1,250 Atlas blocks! This included completion of 220+ priority blocks, plus adding important survey hours and species to a couple hundred more blocks. Volunteer effort in 2019 field season brought about a big increase in

birding coverage throughout south-central and southwestern counties. A big thank you to all who surveyed in these areas.

Despite these important strides, gaps in breeding bird observations still need help in the final Atlas field season. The 2020 Target Effort map (Figure 1 below) illustrates where the remaining gaps in survey coverage are, the largest of which includes the southwestern mountain-valley region. This region is home to many beautiful and all too unknown habitats and species. Being hours from the population centers of DC, Charlottesville, Richmond, and Virginia Beach, too few birders make the trek to bird the mountain-valley region in summertime. And! Only a handful of birders call this area home.



**Figure 1. VA BBA Priority Block Target Map for 2020.** Note: unfinished priority blocks ranked based on a series of criteria including historic effort, current survey time, and effort in surrounding quad. Dark blue blocks denote those for which only nocturnal effort is needed for completion.

For that reason, fellow birders in SW VA continue to need help to document breeding birds in this beautiful corner of the state. In 2020, the VABBA2 project will be making one last big push with both volunteer and paid technicians to fill in breeding bird survey coverage for this and other gaps scattered around the state. However, this takes support, whether in the form of your time and energy, or a donation. If the latter is your best option, the VA Society of Ornithology (VSO) has generously donated seed money for next summer's field technicians. Please consider boosting their support with your own donation as we head into the final Atlas field season (see ActBlue link below).

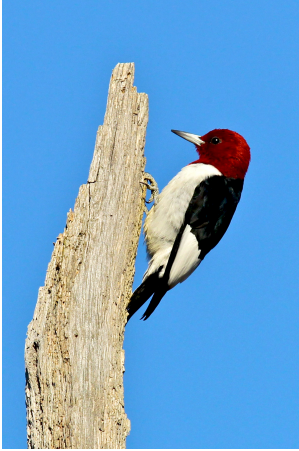
OR! If you are in a position to volunteer your time, then please consider targeting your summer birding efforts toward unfinished Atlas priority blocks. In the new year, the VABBA2 will be pushing out new maps highlighting where volunteer effort is most needed in 2020. Additionally, the project will announce new dates and locations for summer blockbusting rally weekends, which will all target under-birded corners of the state.

Finally, consider coming out to the **Final Atlas Kick-Off Meeting** at VDGIF headquarters on **Saturday, March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2020**. This day-long event will include guest speakers and will be a great day to network with Atlas coordinators, other volunteers, and generally get up to speed with plans for our last big push for Atlas data collection.

We hope to see you (and your breeding bird observations) in the final year of the VABBA2! Stay tuned for more details on registering for this and other events!

Please donate to the VABBA2 project! Visit our ActBlue page at <https://secure.actblue.com/donate/vsowebiste>

## 2020 VSO Annual Meeting will be May 1 – 3 in Williamsburg



*Red-headed Woodpecker by Mike Powell*



*Prothonotary Warbler by Inge Curtis*



*Swainson's Warbler by Nancy Barnhart*

Save the date – May 1 – 3, 2020 – and plan to attend the VSO Annual Meeting in Williamsburg, VA. Headquarters will be the Fort Magruder Inn and Conference Center, 6945 Pocahontas Trail, Williamsburg, VA. Room rates are \$119 plus tax.

Williamsburg is a family friendly destination! While you're birding the local hotspots, your spouse and family can enjoy nearby visitor destinations like Busch Gardens, Colonial Williamsburg, Jamestown, Yorktown, and unique shopping venues like Merchant's Square and Premium Outlets.

If you prefer to camp, we suggest Chickahominy Riverfront Park or Newport News Park.

Annual Meeting/Registration fee: \$45, and banquet ticket: \$35.

Online registration will be available March 1, 2020 at the VSO web site. You'll be able to pay by credit card/debit card/Paypal. Of course, we'll also accept paper registrations and checks and a meeting registration form will be in the spring VSO Newsletter. You don't have to be a VSO member to attend the annual meeting.

Planned field trip destinations include: Hog Island Wildlife Management Area, Cheatham Annex, Grandview Natural Area Preserve, Sandy Bottom Nature Park, Great Dismal Swamp, Messick Point/Poquoson, Bethel Beach Natural Area Preserve, Newport News Park, and several local Williamsburg birding hot spots. Attendees will be able to register in advance for field trips when they register online for the meeting. For early arrivals, Friday afternoon will feature two guided trips and two "self-guided" trips.

A theme of this annual meeting is "Reduce, reuse, recycle." We're working with the hotel to reduce single-use plastics and we're asking meeting attendees to help us.

- We're reducing paper handouts (not eliminating) and will encourage folks to accept registration materials by email in advance. Print out and bring only what you need. Or save the PDFs to your phone or tablet.
- Bring your own tote bag. We're not providing bags at registration.
- Bring your own water bottle. We'll have water on field trips to fill your bottles.
- We're working with the hotel to reduce single-use plastics and to recycle as much as possible.
- We're ordering lanyards for nametags with the intention of passing them on to next year's host club as well as asking participants to turn theirs in to us at the end of the meeting for reuse next year.

Our banquet speaker will be Dr. Bryan Watts, Director of the Center for Conservation Biology at W&M/VCU and the Mitchell A. Byrd Professor of Conservation Biology.

We look forward to seeing you in Williamsburg in May 2020.

Look for more details in the spring VSO Newsletter. Questions: Contact Meeting Chair Rexanne Bruno: [rexannebruno@gmail.com](mailto:rexannebruno@gmail.com)

# NOMINATIONS SOUGHT FOR MITCHELL A. BYRD AND JACKSON M. ABBOTT AWARDS

By Patti Reum, Chair, VSO Conservation Committee

The Mitchell A. Byrd Award, established in 2011, recognizes outstanding scientific achievement in the field of ornithology. Recipients shall demonstrate an exceptional record of contribution to the scientific knowledge of Virginia's birds through evidence including, but not limited to, publications such as papers in peer-reviewed scientific journals and books or book chapters derived from the candidates' original scientific research, conference presentations, recommendation letters from scientific peers, and other forms of peer recognition (e.g. an award from a national scholarly society). Any member of the Virginia Society of Ornithology may nominate a candidate for the Byrd Award. The Byrd Award Committee selects a recipient for the award from among the candidates, and the award is presented at the Annual Meeting. Please contact Patti Reum at [pareum@gmail.com](mailto:pareum@gmail.com) to submit the name of your nominee. Deadline is January 31, 2020.

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

The Virginia Society of Ornithology is seeking nominations for the Jackson M. Abbott Conservation Award, given for outstanding work in conserving Virginia's birds and/or the state's natural areas.

Nominations, including at least three letters of recommendation and a list of the nominee's accomplishments, should be submitted to VSO's Conservation Committee Chair, Patti Reum at [pareum@gmail.com](mailto:pareum@gmail.com) no later than January 31, 2020. The Conservation Committee will make its recommendations to the VSO Board at the February meeting. The award will be presented at the 2020 Annual Meeting.



## 2020 VSO Membership Form

Name & Address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

*Check here if you wish to receive VSO publications electronically by email via Constant Contact. 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 Cloisonne Pin \$5.00
- \_\_\_\_\_ VSO Field Checklist - FREE! Download the latest 2018 list at:  
<http://www.virginiabirds.org/publications/field-checklist/>

**Please return this form with your check, payable to the VSO, to:**

**Virginia Society of Ornithology, PO Box 5994, Williamsburg, VA 23188**

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

[The Virginia Society of Ornithology is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization and all membership fees, donations, and contributions are tax deductible.]

# Tunnel Expansion Will Displace Tern Colony

By Terri Cuthriell

If you've ever been stuck in traffic on the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel but been consoled by the sight of the beautiful terns that spend their summers on the South Island of the tunnel, there's good news and bad. The good news is that traffic relief is in sight, as the bridge tunnel will be expanded over the next five years. The bad news is that work on the South Island has begun, and the nesting ground for 25,000 of these beloved birds has been paved over and is in process of being converted to a construction equipment staging area.

For over 30 years the South Island has increasingly been the nest site of choice for Common Terns, Black Skimmers, Sandwich Terns, Royal Terns, a variety of gulls, and the state-threatened Gull-Billed Terns. It is believed that the waterbird colony nests in this less than perfect location due to habitat alteration and expansion of mammalian predator populations at historical nesting sites on barrier islands and the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

The plight of the colony has been recognized, and the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife Conservation at Virginia Tech published an Assessment of Potential Conservation Measures which concludes that the best way to protect and sustain the colony is to create an artificial nesting island on nearby Hampton Flats using dredge spoils.

Island creation that benefits colonial waterbirds is not a new or untried concept. Royal Terns and Sandwich Terns have benefited from artificial islands for many years in North Carolina and other states along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. It makes sense because habitat creation is a beneficial use of the coarse sand that is preferred by these species. The Hampton Roads Harbor will be dredged this winter and beyond, so substrate is readily available.

In past years, Virginia would have partnered with federal agencies to find a solution when a large construction project would destroy habitat for a significant population of birds. No longer, however, since a major rollback of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act was enacted in 2017 by the United States Department of the Interior, concluding that "The Migratory Bird Treaty Act Does Not Prohibit Incidental Take."

That leaves Virginia on its own to protect the birds. And the Virginia Secretary of Natural Resources has stated concerning the waterbird colony, "Unfortunately, the Trump administration is no longer enforcing the Migratory Bird Act, leaving the Commonwealth without any legal rights to require mitigation from developers."

The VSO, National Audubon Society, American Bird Conservancy, Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, and conservation-minded individuals are not satisfied by the Secretary's statement, believing that we must find a way to save Virginia's last stronghold for these treasured birds. Although NPR and Virginia Public Radio have reported this issue, the local media has not. Public awareness is lacking, yet public involvement is a critical link to protect this colony that will return to Virginia in March, only to find a radically altered and unsuitable location for nesting.

State leadership will be required to implement this proactive conservation solution. Time is not on our side, so please get the word out, and write state decision makers in favor of protecting Virginia's birds.

The Honorable Ralph S. Northam, Governor of Virginia  
Office of the Governor  
P.O. Box 1475  
Richmond, VA 23218  
(governor Northam can be contacted by email as well at the following address)

<https://www.governor.virginia.gov/constituent-services/communicating-with-the-governors-office/>

Secretary of Transportation  
Shannon Valentine  
P.O. Box 1475  
Richmond, VA 23218  
Attention: Secretary Valentine

Secretary of Natural Resources  
Matthew J. Strickler  
P.O. Box 1475  
Richmond, VA 23218  
Attention: Secretary Strickler

Commissioner, Virginia Department of Transportation  
Stephen C. Brich  
1401 E. Broad Street  
Richmond, VA 23219  
Attention: Commissioner Stephen C. Brich

Executive Director Ryan J. Brown  
Director's Office  
Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries  
P.O. Box 90778  
Henrico, VA 23228  
Attention: Ryan Brown

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Secretary: Phil Kenny  
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Raven Editor: Mike Stinson  
Newsletter: vacant  
Membership Secretary: Shirley Devan

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