

Habitat Herald

A Publication of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy
Fall 2016 Volume XXI, Issue 3



Barn Owl
Photo by Katherine Daniels

Barn Owls – Our Ghost Birds *by Nicole Hamilton*

This past summer, I got a text on my phone. It was from Belinda Burwell, local wildlife rehabilitator and director of Wildlife Veterinary Care. The text read, “Are you available to rescue a baby Barn Owl in Purcellville?” Of course I was. Life matters. So, I called Belinda back, got in touch with the property owners, Liz and Steve, and headed over to make the rescue.

The plywood platform in the silo where the nest had been had decomposed and finally fell. Inside the silo was water a few feet deep, but somehow the chick managed not to fall in and instead was huddled in an anteroom adjacent to the barn.

Liz and Steve had just purchased the property. This all happened on day two of their moving in, but luckily their kids were within earshot when the platform fell and went to see what happened. As Liz and I talked, she said that the previous owner had mentioned a “big white

bird” that lived in the barn. So, we climbed up a ladder staircase to the second floor of the old barn to take a look. I gave a quick scan of the beams but my eyes were drawn to the floor – owl pellets, lots of them! Just as we were commenting on the pellets, a silent “whoosh, whoosh” of air went over our heads. It was our ghost bird: a big beautiful Barn Owl exited through an open window.

Recognizing that we had just disturbed the roost, we quickly left and went back down to the baby owl. We assessed the situation and called Belinda. Due to the precarious situation with the water in the silo, no visible way for the adult to get to and feed the baby, and both outdoor cats and signs of raccoons using the barn, we gathered the little one up and took it to Belinda for rehabilitation care.

If the platform had been intact, we would have put the owlet back on the platform for the parent to care for, but in this case the nesting spot

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Planning for Our County's Future

by Nicole Hamilton

Every 10 years, our County takes a look at where we've been and where we want to go in terms of development and creates what we call our General Comprehensive Plan. It defines our vision for Loudoun, sets the priorities for what is saved, destroyed and created. It provides us - you and me, as the voice for wildlife, with what we can stand upon as we make the case for saving habitat and the quality of life that we enjoy in Loudoun. It is not an exciting document, but it is one of the most important, strategic documents that is created for and by our County and it is being revised and revamped now.

To date, our Supervisors have appointed a stakeholder steering committee and hired a consultant to develop the plan. We are concerned that not only are environmental voices underrepresented on this team, but that little emphasis has been placed on the value and importance of preserving natural habitats.

Our current comprehensive plan states up front in Chapter 2 the Planning Approach that, "This Plan establishes the environmental, natural, and heritage features of the County's Green Infrastructure as a single, unifying element for the County as a whole." It outlines programs and policies to implement this concept in the Chapter on Green Infrastructure which have been critical in holding the line against challenges. Above all, this chapter should be carried forward into the new plan and strengthened to include measurable outcomes. We also want to see concepts of natural habitat protection integrated into each of the other sections of the new plan.

Our priority is to make protection of our environment and diversity of our natural habitat across the whole of Loudoun, in suburban, rural and urban areas, a key part of this next 10 year plan. A few of the key elements we want to see are:

- Floodplains, forested wetlands and steep slopes protected outright
- Natural parkland set aside as open space in all of our communities and where possible connected as corridors

- Incentives such as conservation easements for property owners to set natural space aside and protect it from development
- Policies that promote clean water and clean air
- Policies that protect or restore habitat and thereby allow wildlife to thrive throughout the county as build-out occurs



Nicole Hamilton

Your voice is needed as the process unfolds, decisions are made, and visions for our County are established. This is our County. Healthy wildlife habitat is healthy for all of us. Wildlife enhances and enriches our quality of life and we believe that every one of us has a responsibility to ensure that wildlife thrives where we live. It makes Loudoun special. It is also where the next big box store or data center or housing development could be built.

The greatest threat to wildlife is the loss and degradation of natural habitats. We need our Comprehensive Plan to set the parameters for what natural habitat is saved, what areas are off limits to human expansion, and what places and corridors we hold dear as part of our quality of life today that will be preserved into the future.

A life without the richness of the natural world would truly be poor. Loudoun County's policies and plans for the future must protect the natural world. We have a responsibility to make sure that natural habitats are protected and that protection begins in our very own neighborhoods, with your Supervisor where you voice has the greatest impact.

The Board of Supervisors have made it clear that they seek public input into the planning process. It is likely that a series of public input sessions will be held this Fall as well as utilizing other electronic means of collecting the public's views. These meetings will be of enormous importance in deciding the outcome. In coming weeks and months, you will see updates and action alerts from us. When you see them, please jump in. The next 10 years depends on it.

Managing Editor: Sharon Plummer
Lead Editor: Steve Allen
Contributing Editor: Mary Ann Good
Proofreaders: Joe Coleman, Tracy Albert, Jill Miller, Kelly Senser
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The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is a non-profit 501(c)(3) group of volunteers who share a common goal of protecting and perpetuating natural habitats for the benefit of both people and wildlife. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by the law.

The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Board meets quarterly. Board meetings are open to all current members. For more information, or to suggest topics for discussion at upcoming meetings, contact Nicole Hamilton. The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's office number is 703-777-2575.

Loudoun Wildlife now has staffed office hours at Morven Park.

OFFICE INFORMATION

Please check www.loudounwildlife.org for hours of our office headquarters.
 Physical Office: Carriage Museum
 Mailing Address: Morven Park
 17195 Southern Planter Lane Suite 100
 Leesburg, VA 20176

Executive Director	Nicole Hamilton	703-777-2575	nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org
President	Katherine Daniels	703-777-2575	kdaniels@loudounwildlife.org
Vice President	Joe Coleman	540-554-2542	jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org
Secretary	Bill Brown	703-777-2575	bbrown@loudounwildlife.org
Treasurer	Patti Psaris	703-777-2575	ppсарis@loudounwildlife.org
Board of Directors			
	Hatsy Gutshall	703-624-2607	hcutshall@loudounwildlife.org
	Alysoun Mahoney	703-855-4033	amahoney@loudounwildlife.org
	Jim McWalters	703-727-5555	jmcwalters@loudounwildlife.org
	Jill Miller	703-777-2575	jmiller@loudounwildlife.org
	Phil Paschall	540-882-3027	ppaschall@loudounwildlife.org
	Sarah Steadman	703-777-2575	ssteadman@loudounwildlife.org
Programs			
Amphibian Monitoring	Nicole Hamilton	703-777-2575	nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org
Audubon at Home	Ann Garvey	540-882-4405	agarvey@loudounwildlife.org
Bird Surveys	Joe Coleman	540-554-2542	jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org
Bluebird Monitoring	Karla Etten	703-777-2575	ketten@loudounwildlife.org
Butterfly Count	Nicole Hamilton	703-777-2575	nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org
Conservation Advocacy	Vacant		
Development	Patti Psaris	703-777-2575	ppсарis@loudounwildlife.org
Habitat Herald	Sharon Plummer	703-505-7001	splummer@loudounwildlife.org
Habitat Restoration	Vacant		
Membership	Vacant		
Monarch Campaign	Nicole Hamilton	703-777-2575	nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org
Programs / Field Trips	Jim McWalters	703-727-5555	jmcwalters@loudounwildlife.org
Stream Monitoring	Dave Manning		
Volunteer Engagement	Vacant		
Youth & Family Programs	Sarah Steadman	703-777-2575	ssteadman@loudounwildlife.org
Staff			
Bird Atlas Coordinator	Spring Ligi	301-694-5628	sligi@loudounwildlife.org
Communications Specialist	Jill Miller	703-777-2575	jmiller@loudounwildlife.org
Volunteer / Outreach Specialist	Kelly Senser	703-777-2575	ksenser@loudounwildlife.org
Office Management Specialist	Doreen Varblow	703-777-2575	dvarblow@loudounwildlife.org



■ *Barn Owls – Our Ghost Birds, continued*

was gone, and as it turns out Barn Owls are very particular about their nest spot. Conservationists with The Barn Owl Trust, the organization that has studied Barn Owls for almost 30 years, have found that even if an owlet is just a few feet away from the nest spot, the parent will ignore it and not feed it. So, if a Barn Owl owlet falls from a nest before fledging, it must be put back in exactly the same nest spot or it will die of neglect.

Upon inspection, Belinda found that this owlet was dehydrated and starving, so indeed it had not been fed for a few days. A day or so later, I received another text. This time it was from Liz, the property owner. It read, "There is another baby owl in the same room. Any chance you could come get it?" Of course I could. This one was a bit more feisty than its sibling. Feisty is a good sign. I took it to Belinda and once again, it too was in real need of her care. She placed the two in the same enclosure and reported that at first they hissed at each other but then as she went to feed them, they united and hissed at her – and happily took the food.

So what do Barn Owls eat? Rodents! Ninety percent of their diet is some form of rodent: voles, shrews, and mice. Those are the favorites. An adult Barn Owl will eat 3 to 4 rodents per night. During breeding season when there are babies to feed, they will feed each owlet several rodents per day! The amazing fact is that just one pair of nesting Barn Owls and their chicks will consume more than 3,000 rodents per year! They are far more effective than barn cats, which kill a significant number of beneficial wildlife and especially take a toll on birds.

Barn Owls have the most sensitive hearing of any animal tested. This, combined with their lightweight body and a wing load that allows them to fly very slowly or even hover on the slightest drafts, makes them very effective predators, able to pinpoint rodents hidden in high grasses. When they find a vole or mouse, they reach down with their long legs and talons and pull out their meal.

I mentioned earlier that inside the barn, we noticed the owl pellets. Owl pellets are not excrement. They are something different – something special. Owls eat their prey whole but



Barn Owl
Photo by Nicole Hamilton

cannot digest hair or bones. So, these parts are collected in the owl's gizzard. They are compacted and then, when the time is right, regurgitated.

A neat thing about these owl pellets is that Barn Owls do not build any sort of nest. Instead, they use platforms, tree cavities,

abandoned buildings, church steeples and specially designed nest boxes. Rather than bring in nesting materials, Barn Owls simply cough up owl pellets right onto the nesting spot. These pellets are made of soft mouse and other rodent fur, along with tiny bones. As the owl pair is going through courtship and pair bonding, they will roost together at the nest site. If it is a new nest site, the female may scratch at the pellets to break them up, making a soft mat. Barn Owls will use the same nest site year after year so this mat of pellets becomes compacted and is added to as more owl pellets are regurgitated over the years. This becomes the nest.

Barn Owls are not fierce birds despite their hissing and frightful calls. They may be preyed upon by Great Horned Owls and actually have both a high mortality rate and relatively short lifespan. A typical Barn Owl only lives about four years, and 70 percent die in their first year of life. Only one in ten birds will reach the ripe old age of 10 or older.

They have a strategy for overcoming this high mortality rate, however. They start breeding at age one and while they typically nest in the spring, they have been found nesting in every month of the year. Early spring egg-laying is associated with habitat of plentiful food. Less experienced birds seem to breed later in the year. When they do nest, they lay anywhere from 4-11 eggs, which is a lot for a raptor. Incubation starts as soon as the first egg is laid, so the chicks hatch over a period of time rather than all at once. This gives the parents a staggered feeding demand during the early part of the nesting period. In a typical clutch, there will often be eggs that don't hatch and young that don't survive. Hatching success averages just four eggs per nest, and fledging success averages just 2.5 owlets. With only 30 percent surviving their first year, there may only be one or none surviving from a given nest beyond that first year.

The driver for having a successful Barn Owl population, our natural rodent control, is of course habitat, and with that, prey abundance. Barn Owls thrive where there are tall grassy fields, rough meadows and marsh habitats where voles and mice can live. Each individual owl has highly detailed knowledge of its home range and food availability and will travel up to 2-3 miles for food. In the first year having this knowledge is especially critical. As juveniles of 8-14 weeks old they already display hunting instincts, and will hunt on their own as they explore the home territory.



Barn Owl
Photo by Katherine Daniels

■ *Continued on page 5*

Barn Owl Nest Box Project *by Liz Dennison*



Barn Owl
Photo by Liam McGranaghan

... the sight of these ghostly birds gliding silently through the night sky or peering down from the top of a silo is worth the wait.

To support our local Barn Owl population, the Banshee Reeks Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalists has begun a project to install and monitor well-designed nest boxes in appropriate habitat. Everyone is welcome to join the effort!

Our project is modeled on one started by Roger Jones in Rappahannock County. Roger is well-known for his work with kestrels since the 1970s, and for publishing the *Kestrel Karetakers* newsletter. In 2007, Roger and his associates installed six Barn Owl boxes in abandoned silos and unused barns. In the beginning they made boxes from apple crates, an old trunk, used pine boards, and scrap plywood. The boxes always had two chambers, one for nesting and one for roosting. If they were open to the elements, as in a silo without a roof, the boxes were built with a top cover. As the project saw success, they

added better boxes made from new plywood (see www.scvas.org/pdf/cbrp/BuildingBarnOwlBoxes.pdf).

Over the years, Roger has installed 19 Barn Owl boxes. The boxes were monitored and some were relocated because they weren't successful. Others were lost when a barn or silo was torn down. In 2009, only two years after beginning the project, Roger and his team banded 31 young owls. Between 2009 and 2015, they banded comparable numbers of owls of all ages ranging from hatchlings to those ready to fledge. They were even lucky enough to band several adults on the nest.

We can have the same success in Loudoun County. Barn Owls prefer open grasslands, meadows and marshes but agricultural fields and suburban areas are acceptable if there are open spaces nearby with enough mice and voles to feed a hungry Barn Owl family. Nest boxes can be installed in or on unused or lightly used silos, barns and similar structures, or attached to trees or poles. The boxes should be monitored throughout the nesting season by watching for adult owls around the box at dusk and the presence of pellets and other debris below the box. There are several ways to help. You can install and maintain a nest box on your property or help others to do so, contribute materials, build boxes, monitor boxes, or collect and report data. If you already have an active nest on your property, please let us know so we can include it in our database.

This is a project for patient people. It may take several years for Barn Owls to nest in your box. But the sight of these ghostly birds gliding silently through the night sky or peering down from the top of a silo is worth the wait.

Permits aren't required to install and monitor the boxes, but it's illegal to disturb an active nest or handle the birds without a permit. For more information about the project, contact Liz Dennison at 703-309-2961 or at Liz@Dennison.bz. We provide nest box plans, assist in selecting a site and installing the box, and help you monitor and report progress. If possible, we'll band nestlings.



Barn Owlets
Photo by Liam McGranaghan



Barn Owl
Photo by Liam McGranaghan

■ *Barn Owls – Our Ghost Birds, continued*

Barn Owls hunt in almost complete silence. Their feathers are specially adapted with micro-sized “hooks and bows” that buffer the air and create “micro-turbulences” that are hard to detect by ear. Take a moment to look at this two-minute video that compares flight sound between pigeon, falcon and Barn Owl – www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WigEGNnuTE. This silent flight comes at a cost, however. Their feathers do not have any water resistance to speak

of, and in order to be light, quiet fliers, they are not able to store much body fat. As a result, they are not able to hunt in heavy rain and often fall victim to starvation during extended periods of severe weather.

Even with this Achilles' heel, it is the abundance or lack of prey that has the highest impact on survival. In bad weather, a seasoned Barn Owl will know its best foraging spots, fly directly to that location to feed and return back to its sheltered roost. Similarly, prey abundance affects whether or not Barn Owls will nest and lay eggs since it takes a lot of mice and voles to feed a hungry family.

For juvenile birds, like our little owlets from this summer, the highest risk for starvation is during dispersal when they don't know the habitat yet and are learning the good feeding areas. Mortality for Barn Owls peaks from December through March because rodents don't move as much in these colder periods, making it difficult to find the prey, and heavy snow cover may make it impossible to hunt at all.

During the winter, Barn Owls like to conserve energy by hunting from perches rather than hovering. Adding 10-15' tall posts that they can perch on is a nice addition to an area where Barn Owls are being encouraged. They will also take advantage of mice found right inside their roosting or nesting barns and eat those during winter and other rainy weather when they cannot otherwise go outside to hunt. Rodent poison in and around buildings poses a serious threat to Barn Owls in that as they eat the rodents, the owls become poisoned themselves.

Barn Owls are strictly nocturnal, and a Barn Owl seen hunting during the day is one that is desperate for food. If you have Barn Owls roosting on your property, it is important not to disturb them during the day and instead give them their privacy. In addition to roosting in barns, Barn Owls may find a safe stand of evergreens or other trees to roost in. They have even been spotted in gaps in hay bales where they can keep out of the elements and stay warm in winter. If Barn Owls are roosting or nesting at a location that you would prefer they not be in, you can put up nest boxes, but it may take time for the bird to accept the box, if at all.

Barn Owls are not very territorial, and in fact, a number of Barn Owls may use the same hunting and roosting locations. It is even possible to put up multiple nest boxes properly spaced several hundred yards apart to encourage a population. Barn Owls are a widely distributed species, occurring across our country, Europe and beyond, but their presence is spotty. In the end, it's all about the habitat and the prey available. We are lucky that we still have them here in Loudoun. They are our Ghost Bird, our silent fliers, our rodent control. They shriek through the night, and leave pellet presents as a record of the work they have done to keep voles, mice and other rodents in check.

But what happened to the two little owlets from our summer encounter? Well, as I write this at the end of August, these two feisty siblings are growing up strong in Belinda's care. They gobble up mice, hiss and preen. As we head into fall, there will be a well-planned soft release that enables the birds to learn the territory before having to find food on their own. They will go back to the wild and the “Ghost Birds” will fly.

If you have good Barn Owl habitat and want to help build their populations, please contact us. They are very good neighbors.

Eastern Red Cedar *by Brian Balik*

The Eastern Red Cedar is one of the most outstanding trees in Loudoun County, especially in winter. It is a type of juniper and stays green throughout the whole year. It is a beautiful species, and one that is critical to the survival of some of Virginia's wildlife species.

The Cedar Waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) feasts on the red cedar's berries, which are actually a type of cone. Other birds, including grosbeaks, may eat these cones. A butterfly called the Juniper Hairstreak (*Callophrys gryneus*) also takes advantage of eating the red cedar. This cedar is a host of the butterfly's caterpillars, and provides nutrition. Although it is seldom seen in Loudoun County, the Juniper Hairstreak butterfly has been found here, meaning that our red cedars are especially important.

The Eastern Red Cedar is commonly planted on the edges of farm fields and in between athletic recreation fields in Loudoun County. This is because the tree provides an incredible windbreak and is very hardy, which many animals take advantage of. Squirrels and songbirds will sit in the branches of the cedar, knowing that they are protected from wind and predators with the thick cover the tree provides.

When a farm field grows "back to nature" and is left alone for a long time, the red cedar may be one of the first prominent tree species that grows to adulthood. The grasses and shrubs of an overgrown field give way to the red cedar trees, making them outstanding within it, to both people and wildlife in Loudoun County.



Eastern Red Cedar
Photo by Nicole Hamilton

Did you know?

- In the Cherokee legend, cedar trees hold the spirits of ancestors and the wood carries powerful protective spirits.
- Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is named after Eastern Red Cedars for the "Red Stick" cedar heartwood poles used by local Native Americans to demark boundaries between area tribes.
- Cedar oils are used in a majority of perfumes made around the world. Some well-known perfumes included on the list are Obsession, Halston, Knowing, White Linen, Chanel No. 5, Giorgio, Lauren and Poison. Many male fragrances also use red cedar oils, including English Leather, Old Spice, Chaz and Stetson.

The Allergy Myth: Goldenrod vs. Ragweed

by Ann Garvey, Audubon at Home Ambassador

It is very common to hear people remark on not having Goldenrod (*Solidago spp.*) in their gardens because they cause allergies. Goldenrod is a wonderful plant to have in your fall garden to help Monarchs build up their fat supply for the long journey to Mexico. It also supports numerous bees as well as other butterflies. Ragweed (*Ambrosia artemisiifolia*) is the plant that causes many people to have allergy symptoms.

There are numerous important differences between the two species as summarized in the chart (right). In particular, note that ragweed does not support pollinators and its pollen is small grained and carried on the wind.

Some of the goldenrods in our area that produce nectar in late summer and into the fall include:

- Blue-stemmed or Wreath Goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*) – does best in full to partial sun. Indigo Buntings are among the birds that enjoy its seeds.
- Zig Zag Goldenrod (*Solidago flexicalus*) – does well in partial sun and feeds many types of insects.
- Grey Goldenrod (*Solidago nemoralis*) – blooms later in the fall, frequently into November. Spreads by rhizomes and adapts to challenging areas where it is difficult to grow other plants.



Ragweed
Photo by Ann Garvey



Goldenrod
Photo by Nicole Hamilton

	Ragweed	Goldenrod
Flower	Tiny green to yellow	Bright yellow, large clusters
Pollinated	Wind pollinated – flowers lack nectar	Pollinators attracted to nectar
Pollen	Small-grained pollen	Large-grained pollen
Leaves	Smooth, deep lobed	Smooth, no lobes
Stems	Purple, hairy and branched	Thick, green and un-branched – hairy or smooth
Plant type	Annual	Perennial

Butterfly Count 2016: Where Are All the Butterflies?

by Nicole Hamilton

As we headed into the 20th year of our butterfly count on August 6th, many of us wondered what our tally would be. Springtime had been out of whack again. Rains that we should have had in March and April came in May. It was warm and then cool, and the plants seem to be a little behind the clock too. We wondered about those species of butterfly that overwintered as caterpillars or eggs – would they have food in time to develop or would we miss a brood this year?

Well, as we headed out on August 6th, the weather was great for butterflying, so if they were there we were going to find them. Seven teams of over 60 people met up in their sectors at 9 a.m. and started spotting, counting, and identifying butterflies. Across the teams, however, our team leads reported fairly slow going.

All in all, we recorded just 2,145 individual butterflies when on a day with similar weather conditions we typically would

count 3,500-4,500. Our species count was just slightly down. We had encountered 41 species for the day compared to an average of about 45 in prior counts. Some species, like the Red Spotted Purple, were absent from the count altogether. Just 29 Monarchs were seen, compared to 51 last year. Sulphur numbers were significantly lower. There were other surprise misses too. We invite you to take a look at our 20 years of butterfly count data to see which numbers were on par versus down. It's quite interesting. As you review the data, think about the host plants that these different species need to survive. It's all connected.

Resources:

• www.loudounwildlife.org/Butterfly_Count_Summary_Data.htm

2016 Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count, Wednesday, December 28

by Joe Coleman

Since 1899, thousands of people have participated in the longest-running citizen science project in the world, the Christmas Bird Count. This year, in over 2,000 different counts, people will count every wild bird they can find. Join Loudoun Wildlife on Wednesday, December 28, as we participate in this year's National Audubon Society's Annual Christmas Bird Count. The results are used to better understand bird populations and dynamics. Our count circle has a 15-mile diameter and covers 177 square miles of Loudoun's countryside: north to Waterford, south to Aldie, east to Ashburn, and west to Purcellville. Teams will explore the county's natural and not-so-natural areas in search of birds. Counters share their wonder of the wild beauty of feathered creatures with like-minded people and sometimes find truly rare birds. It is always a lot of fun!

The count includes a number of Loudoun's very special locations such as the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, the Dulles Greenway Wetlands Mitigation Project, Beaverdam Reservoir, Morven Park, Ball's Bluff, a number of private estates, about five miles of the C&O Canal in the vicinity of White's Ferry, and much of still-rural western Loudoun County.

Everyone is welcome; amateurs are teamed with experienced birders, and every eye and ear helps! After the counting is done we hope to meet for a Tally Rally where we will find out what others found and share stories about the day's highlights. If you are interested in participating in the count for just a couple of hours or for the entire day, sign up at www.loudounwildlife.org/CBC.htm by December 22 or contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org or 540-554-2542.



A Wilson's Snipe spotted on last year's count
Photo by Mike Friedman



A Monarch at Banshee Reeks
Photo by Nicole Hamilton



Barn Owl
Photo by Liam McGranaghan

Threat to Barn Owls

by Belinda Burwell,
DVM, Director of
Wildlife Veterinary Care

As a wildlife veterinarian and rehabilitator, most of my experience with barn owls has been gained in a hospital setting. I care for them when they become sick or injured, which is how I've learned first-hand about some of the hazards they face in their environment

Barn Owls are one of my favorite species due to their monkey-like face, beautiful gold and white feathers, and their entertaining behaviors. When approached by humans or otherwise feeling threatened, Barn Owls will weave back and forth, shake their head in a motion called "toe dusting," and if that doesn't scare you away, they will make a machine-like hissing sound or give a loud frightening scream.

Barn Owls can appear quite large with their long legs and wings, but they weigh only a pound and are often preyed. Their major predators are other owls and raccoons, and injured barn owls found on the ground will often have bite or talon wounds. Nestling Barn Owls are sometimes rescued from barns when, due to a lack of appropriate nesting sites, they end up on the floor of a barn or silo where the young can be killed by raccoons, opossums or cats.

The majority of injured Barn Owls I have treated have had fractured wings or legs, usually as a result of being struck by a vehicle. Owls will often hunt alongside roadways where litter tossed from vehicles attracts the rodents they like to eat to the side of the road.

By far, the biggest threat to Barn Owls living in proximity to humans is mouse and rat poison. Barn Owls eat almost exclusively

rodents, making them very important for pest control, but the use of rodenticides to control rodent populations will also kill the owls and other predators that eat the poisoned rodents. It's a terrible irony that these rodent poisons kill the very predators that control rodent populations.

The most commonly used rodenticides are anti-coagulant poisons that inhibit an enzyme in the coagulation process, and this prevents blood from clotting. Poisoned rodents, and the owls who eat them, die from hemorrhage and blood loss, usually within three days of consuming a toxic dose of the poison. Even non-fatal doses of these rodenticides can remain in an animal's system for as long as three weeks, and will accumulate to become a lethal dose in the predator eating them.

Because these poisons have the potential to kill many species of non-target wildlife, especially predators such as Barn Owls, they are a poor choice for rodent control. Rodent glue traps also kill a large number of non-target species including snakes, bats and birds, and should also be avoided. A new rodent sterilization drug called ContraPest has been recently introduced and is being tested on rats in New York City, but until it is determined whether this is a safe alternative, the best option to control mice and rats is to use live traps, or if those don't work, the old fashioned snap-traps carefully placed where only mice and rats can access them.

Increased awareness of the threats faced by wildlife can help everyone make their property more wildlife friendly. Creating an environment that is safe for Barn Owls is a great way to encourage these efficient rodent predators to live on your property.



Barn Owl

*High in the chaffy, taffy-colored haze
of the hayloft, up under the starry
nail-hole twinkle of the old tin roof,
there in a nest of straw and bailing twine
I have hidden my valentine for you:
a white heart woven of snowy feathers
in which wide eyes of welcome open
to you as you climb the rickety ladder
into my love. Behind those eyes lies
a boudoir of intimate darkness, darling,
the silks of oblivion. And set like a jewel
dead center in the heart is a golden hook
the size of a finger ring, to hold you
always, plumpest sweetheart mouse of mine.*

~ Ted Kooser



Barn Owl
Photo by Nicole Hamilton



Ruby-Crowned Kinglets Are Returning

by Bill Brown



Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Photo by Noel Reynolds

The Ruby-Crowned Kinglet, one of the smallest songbirds of North America, is now starting its yearly southward migration to, and through, Virginia. In fact, the bird's numbers in Loudoun County regularly peak in October, so now is prime time to find them flitting around in trees near you.

This tiny bird, which measures about four inches in length, has olive-gray upperparts and two white wing bars. The stronger, rear wing bar is accentuated by a broad black patch immediately behind it. A prominent broken white eye ring

female lacks the crown patch but otherwise cannot be distinguished from the male in the field.

When birding, you may first notice the Ruby-Crowned Kinglet not by these field marks but by its constant movement as it feeds high in trees. It moves with a short, rapid darting motion from twig to twig, often hovering in one spot briefly as it gleans spiders, insects, and their eggs from leaves and bark. When perched, it characteristically flicks its wings rapidly.

The Ruby-Crowned Kinglet is a migrant that breeds in the boreal forest from northern New England north through Canada to the tree line and west through Alaska. It also breeds in the higher peaks of the Rocky Mountains, Cascades, and Sierra Nevadas. Its

wintering grounds in the east extend generally from southern Pennsylvania to Florida and through much of Mexico.

Records in eBird, a real-time, online checklist program, show the Ruby-Crowned Kinglet's migratory movement results in a spike in the bird's numbers in Loudoun starting in mid-September and

extending through November as the bird moves south. Northward migration results in a small spike from mid-March through mid-May. Smaller numbers remain in our area throughout the winter. (About 20 are usually reported in the annual Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count.) The bird is virtually absent here in the summer months.

When not in its breeding ground, the Ruby-Crowned Kinglet is a habitat generalist. The bird feeds in deciduous and coniferous woodlands, high in the trees as well as in the undergrowth. They often join mixed-species feeding flocks, which may include Golden-Crowned Kinglets. Kinglets can be found in Loudoun's forests, old fields, parks, and stream banks. If you're lucky, one might even visit a suet feeder in your backyard.

Resources:

- www.bna.birds.cornell.edu
- www.allaboutbirds.org
- www.ebird.org

Ruby-Crowned Kinglet
Photo by Nicole Hamilton



Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Photo by Nicole Hamilton

often helps birders to distinguish the Ruby-Crowned Kinglet from the similar Golden-Crowned Kinglet. The male Ruby-Crowned Kinglet sports the vivid red crown patch for which the bird is named. More often than not, however, that patch is not seen, as the bird usually displays it only when agitated. The



Nooks and Crannies - A Place for Families

Loudoun's Great Places: Youth Photo Contest Winners!

by Sarah Steadman

This summer, we hosted our second annual Youth Photo Contest. While the kids were out of school, we encouraged them to get into nature at one of the many great places to discover right here in Loudoun County (www.loudounwildlife.org/Great_Places.htm).

We challenged young photographers in two age groups (grades K-5 and 6-12) and in three categories: Plants, Landscapes, and Wildlife. The winning photographs featured here also include original titles written by the young photographers themselves. We think they were colorful in representing Loudoun's Great Places; maybe these photos will inspire you to visit a new location this fall!



Title: "Stay Still"
Photographer: Mia Hattaway
Grade and Category: Grade 5, Wildlife
Location: Temple Hall Farm



Title: "The Seed Head Remains"
Photographer: Jordan Meehan
Grade and Category: Grade 8, Plants
Location: Blue Heron Rookery



Title: "Mini Daisies at the Base of a Tree Stump"
Photographer: Natalie Meehan
Grade and Category: Grade 5, Plants
Location: Red Rocks Overlook Park



Title: "Distant Future"
Photographer: Mia Hattaway
Grade and Category: Grade 5, Landscapes
Location: Temple Hall Farm



Title: "Bug at Balls Bluff"
Photographer: Riley Heffron
Grade and Category: Grade 7, Wildlife
Location: Balls Bluff

Marbled Salamander

(*Ambystoma opacum*) by Kerry Bzdyk



Marbled Salamander larva
Photo by Liam McGranaghan

The Marbled Salamander (*Ambystoma opacum*) is a stout-bodied, dark black salamander with bands of white (gray in the female) down its back and tail. It's a beautiful salamander to see (if you can find it)! Adults are three to four inches long, with the female being slightly larger, and are found throughout the eastern United States. They prefer to live in or near damp woodlands and spend most of their time hidden in burrows or under logs, rocks and other debris. They often use abandoned burrows of other critters to stay out of sight below ground. They may emerge at night to feed on invertebrates and insects.

While salamanders might seem like a more appropriate subject for a springtime article, the Marbled Salamander has the unique trait of breeding in the fall. Mating occurs entirely on land and the female will lay 50 to 200 eggs under leaf litter in a dried-up

pool or ditch. She will stay with the eggs and tend to them, keeping them moist, until the pool becomes inundated with water during a fall rain. The embryos will have already developed to an advanced stage within the egg, but will not hatch out until the rains come. The newly-hatched young will overwinter in the pool and continue to develop, completing their metamorphosis into adults in late spring of the following year. This gives the new ones a jump start on development over the springtime breeders. They reach full maturity in about 15 months.

This is a secretive and well-hidden species of salamander that is difficult to find, but striking in its appearance and unique in its reproductive timing. I'll be thinking of them as the heavy rains of fall strip the last of the colorful leaves from the trees and help start the next generation of the Marbled Salamander.

Resources:

- www.virginiaherpetologicalsociety.com/amphibians/salamanders/marbled-salamander/marbled_salamander.php
- www.marshall.edu/herp/Salamanders/marbled.htm



Marbled Salamander
Photo by Liam McGranaghan

Volunteer of the Year: Jim McWalters

Jim McWalters has been a volunteer for the better part of his more than two decades living in Loudoun County. After a dozen years coaching youth soccer, he set his sights on a new goal in 2010: helping out Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. Early days spent assisting at fairs and other outreach events evolved into more active participation in the operations of the nonprofit, where he currently serves as a board member and chair of the programs and field trips committee. In the latter role, he oversees the development of roughly 100 educational nature offerings each year. For his dedication to this process, which has benefited thousands of participants, Jim was named the organization's Volunteer of the Year at the 2016 annual meeting. Following is more about the honoree in his own words:

What inspired you to get involved?

My love of the outdoors and nature. As a kid I would spend all day in the great outdoors wandering the woods, hunting crayfish in creeks, climbing trees, and exploring the natural world. My love for nature may have come from that. Hopefully I passed it along to my kids (my son graduated from Virginia Tech with a degree in environmental studies). Once my kids were grown, and I no longer

coached youth soccer, I really wanted to do more and give back to the community. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy seemed like the perfect fit for me.

What about developing programs interested you?

I was, and still am, a novice when it comes to being a "naturalist," but this seemed the best way for me to help out. It kind of fits my personality since I'm a project manager at work. A side benefit: Having attended all these events over the years, I have learned so much. I am grateful for the experience and all the people I've had the pleasure to share it with.

What are your favorite nearby nature spots?

I've tried to discover every cool natural area the county has to offer. My favorite spots are the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship, the Appalachian Trail between Bears Den and Raven's Rock, and the Dulles Wetlands. I hope other people get out and explore the county as well.

Anything you want readers to know about the organization—or how they can get involved too?

Always looking for help and support in any way. Organizing events, leading hikes, writing, helping on program nights. The folks/board at Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy are the best! My time volunteering has been really rewarding, educational, and a lot of fun!



Morven Park Highlights

Join us in taking in the fall splendor at Morven Park.

We have Nature Walks the first Sunday of the month, or you can come any day except Christmas, Thanksgiving and New Year's Day.

Go to this link to download a map of the trails.

www.morvenpark.org/explore/trails.html



Bluebird parent food delivery
Photo by Jack Nevitt

Bluebird Boxes For Sale

Fall is a great time to install a Bluebird nest box!

Loudoun Wildlife offers for sale a full nest box kit, which includes a Virginia Bluebird Society approved Carl Little designed cedar bluebird nest box with mounting pole and hardware, baffle and Noel guard. The price for the kit is \$40, which is truly a bargain! Fall is a great time to install a nest box. Bluebirds often roost in nest boxes during the winter, which provide protection from the elements and helps keep them safe from hungry predators.

For more info, contact ketten@loudounwildlife.org.



Programs and Field Trips

Space is limited for many of these programs and field trips. Please call the designated program contact for further information and to reserve your spot. For up-to-date information on our programs and to sign up, visit our website at www.loudounwildlife.org.

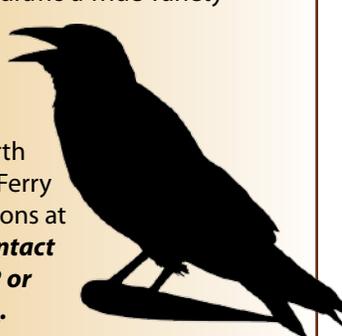
Unless otherwise specified, contact info@loudounwildlife.org with questions.

Morven Park Nature Walk — Sunday, October 2, 8:00 a.m.
Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a free family nature walk through the grounds of beautiful Morven Park. We will explore the native woodlands, look at wetlands and birds, and see what changes the cooler season brings. Check our website for more details. If you own binoculars, please bring them. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

The Secrets of Seeds: A "We're Going Wild" Walk for Youth and Families — Sunday, October 9, 10:00 – 11:30 a.m., Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve. Did you know some seeds bury themselves, grow protective gear, and even travel? Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on this family nature walk for a discovery-based hike in search of seeds and signs of them, and learn all about the weirdly wonderful world of their amazing secrets. Space is limited to 15 children, ages 7+; no infants, strollers, or pets. All youth under age 18 must be accompanied by a legal guardian. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

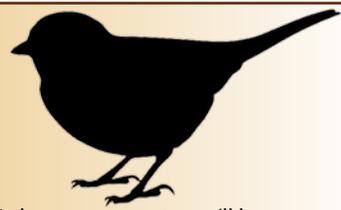
Birding the Blue Ridge Center

The Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship (BRCES) is a beautiful 900-acre preserve in northwestern Loudoun County. With its diverse wildlife habitats, including meadows, streams and heavily forested slopes, BRCES draws a wide variety of birds and other creatures. Come and see what's there! Meet at the Education Center; bring binoculars if you have them. BRCES is located just north of Neersville at 11661 Harpers Ferry Road (Rte 671); detailed directions at www.brces.org. **Questions: Contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.**



October 22, November 26, December 23, January 27, at 8:00 a.m.

Birding Banshee



Whether you're a beginning birder or an expert, you'll be dazzled by the many bird species you'll find at the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve south of Leesburg. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and the Friends of Banshee Reeks for the monthly bird walk at this birding hot spot. Bring binoculars if you have them. NOTE: During the realignment of The Woods Rd., access to Banshee Reeks will be limited. Please check the Banshee Reeks website to get the latest information: www.bansheereeksnp.org. Information can also be found at www.virginiadot.org/projects/northernvirginia/the_woods_rd.asp. **Questions: Contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.**

Second Saturdays: October 8, November 12, December 10, January 14, at 8:00 a.m.

Beginning Birding — Wednesday, October 12, 7:00 – 9:00 p.m., Robey Meeting Room, Purcellville Library; Saturday, October 15, Algonkian Park. Learn the basics of this fascinating activity, which connects people with our most watchable wildlife. This Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy class consists of an evening indoor session plus a morning bird walk the following Saturday. In the classroom session, expert birder Bill Brown will focus primarily on bird identification skills, but will also touch on binocular use and field guides. The bird walk will be a chance to get outdoors, find and identify birds, and enjoy them in their natural setting. Cost: \$15 members, \$25 non-members, age 16+, limited to 25 participants. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

A Year in the Life of an Owl — Thursday, October 13, 7:00 p.m., Rust Library. You may not see them often, but have no doubt, Northern Virginia's resident owls have a very active nightlife. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy to discover what Great Horned, Barred, Barn and Screech Owls are doing after dark. Guided by raptor rehabilitator Liz Dennison, we'll follow them all the way from courtship, to nesting, fledging, and finally dispersal of their young to start the cycle over. Learn what you can do to protect and support a healthy owl population. You may even have the opportunity to meet some of the wonderful owl ambassadors from Adventures with Raptors. **Registration requested: Sign Up Online.**



Nature Stewardship Day — Sunday, October 16, 11 a.m. – 3 p.m. (rain date October 23), Dominion High School, Sterling. Exploring and taking action are the keywords for this event! Through activities and hands-on displays, you'll learn about streams and the bugs and fish that call them home, bird identification, storm water connections, healthy soils, growing native plants for wildlife, and more. Importantly, you'll also discover ways that you can care for the environment. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy will join local non-profits and agencies in supporting students in Dominion High School's Environmental Explorations classes in the day's activities. **Questions: Contact Kelly Senser, ksenser@loudounwildlife.org.**

Smart Gardeners Sale — Friday, October 21, 10 a.m. – 7 p.m., and Saturday, October 22, 10 a.m. – 3 p.m. Watermark Woods will host a sale at their location of 16764 Hamilton Station Rd., Hamilton. For directions see www.watermarkwoods.com. You will get a 20% discount on your entire purchase, and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy will get a donation of 10%. Get a jump on springtime and plant your butterfly garden in the fall! Less money, less weeding, less watering and earlier blooms next year. It is a win win for you, Loudoun Wildlife and the pollinators.

The Vulture: Invaluable Friend, Unfortunate Underdog — Thursday, November 3, 7:00 p.m., Lovettsville Game Protective Association Hall. Katie Fallon, author of the forthcoming book *Vulture*, will give an insightful and exciting program on the life and times of vultures, one of our most misunderstood yet valuable wild creatures. In our area, they have been tormented and sometimes killed by those who are afraid of them, don't like their looks, or don't understand or appreciate their role in our ecosystem. Through this program, we will share amazing facts about these birds, discuss their migratory and roosting practices, de-mystify their behaviors, and discuss how towns across the country actually celebrate their arrival each year. Whether you are already a fan or just curious, come out and learn more about them. Live vultures will be present so you can get to know these interesting birds first hand. This free Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy program is perfect for the whole family. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

Changing Seasons Walk — Sunday, November 6, 9:30 a.m., Morven Park. As the days get cooler and frost is in the air, deciduous trees and shrubs put on an autumn show in all shades of red, yellow, orange and purple. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a walk in the woodlands of Morven Park to enjoy all the colors that Mother Nature provides this time of year. We'll discuss various tree species and why trees change their color in the fall. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

Geology ROCKS! A "We're Going Wild" Walk for Youth and Families — Sunday, November 13, 2:00 – 3:30 p.m., Location TBD. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a hands-on science workshop led by local geologist Joe East. You will get to see some museum-quality hand samples and go on a rock discovery walk too. Handle and learn about rocks, minerals, and fossils from geological settings relative to Virginia. Walk back in time by "reading" the history that rocks can tell. Space is limited to 20

children, ages 7+; no infants, strollers, or pets. All youth under age 18 must be accompanied by a legal guardian. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

Morven Park Nature Walk — Sunday, December 4, 8:00 a.m. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a free family nature walk through the grounds of beautiful Morven Park. We will explore the native woodlands, look at wetlands and birds, and see what changes the cooler season brings. Check our website for more details. If you own binoculars, please bring them. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

Christmas Bird Count Primer: Beginner Birding for Youth & Families — Saturday, December 10, 9:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m., Claude Moore Park Caretaker's House. Get acquainted with participating in the National Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count with this special introduction to the citizen science event! Learn about the survey, which began in 1899 and is held every year across the country. Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy has been coordinating its annual count since 1997. The goal of the count is to gather data that will help us better understand bird populations and trends. This primer will teach you about birds and birding while conducting an unofficial count. We will walk the trails at Claude Moore in as many as three groups, each led by experienced birders. Space is limited to 30 children, ages 7+; no infants, strollers, or pets. All youth under age 18 must be accompanied by a legal guardian. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count — Wednesday, December 28. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy as we participate in National Audubon Society's annual Christmas Bird Count. Begun in 1899, these surveys are held all over North America, with the results used to better understand bird populations and dynamics. Our count circle has a 15-mile diameter and covers 177 square miles of Loudoun's countryside: north to Waterford, south to Aldie, east to Ashburn and west to Purcellville. Everyone is welcome; amateurs are teamed with experienced birders. If you are interested in participating for just a couple of hours or for the entire day, **Sign Up Online or contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org or 540-554-2542.**



For up-to-date information on our programs and to sign up, visit our website at www.loudounwildlife.org.



When the Frost Is on the Punkin

*...They's something kindo' harty-like about the atmusfere
When the heat of summer's over and the coolin' fall is here—
Of course we miss the flowers, and the blossums on the trees,
And the mumble of the hummin'-birds and buzzin' of the bees;
But the air's so appetizin'; and the landscape through the haze
Of a crisp and sunny morning of the airly autumn days
Is a pictur' that no painter has the colorin' to mock—
When the frost is on the punkin and the fodder's in the shock...*

~ James Whitcomb Riley



Fall Foliage

The Science behind the Colors *By Alex Darr*

In the fall, as a response to days becoming shorter, deciduous trees cease the production of chlorophyll in order to save their energy for the winter months when sunlight is limited. During this process, a specialized region of cells where the leaf connects to the twig, called the abscission layer, cuts off the flow of minerals to the leaf.

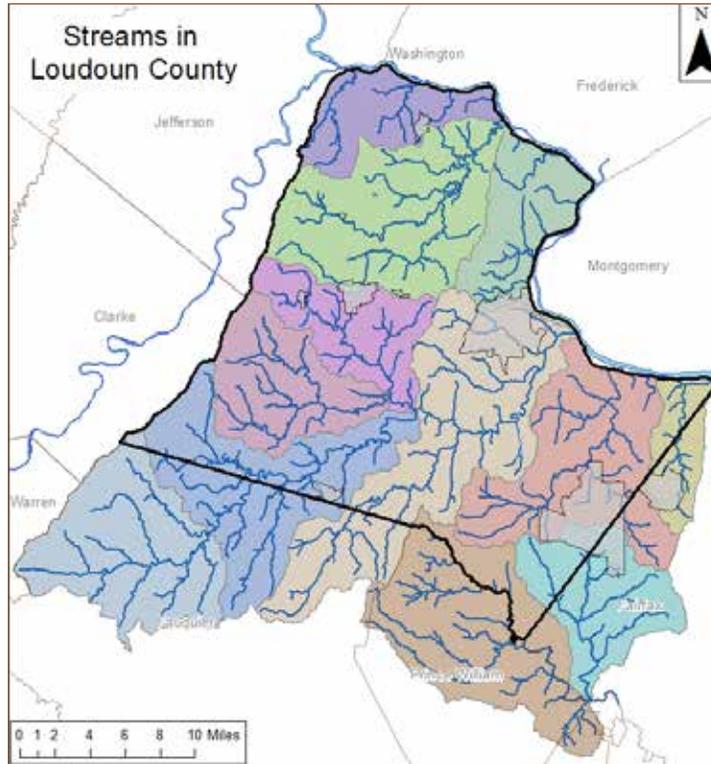
As a result of this, leaves no longer have the materials they need to manufacture new chlorophyll, and the existing chlorophyll rapidly breaks down into other chemicals. As the vivid green of chlorophyll fades, underlying pigments such as xanthophyll and carotenoids, those responsible for yellow and orange fall colors, as well as new secondary compounds called anthocyanins, those responsible for reds and purples, shine through. The exact color of each leaf is determined by the balance of these pigments, as well as the rate at which its chlorophyll degrades. As the season progresses, the abscission layer becomes more brittle, until the leaf eventually breaks free of the twig and falls to earth to recycle its minerals into the forest floor, providing nutrients for following seasons.

Stream Monitoring Update *by Dave Manning*

Loudoun County is connected by an estimated 1,500 miles of perennial streams. These important waterways are critical to the health of wildlife and our human population. Some nature enthusiasts may soak in their splendor on a sunny morning, while others whiz by on their commute, just catching glimpses of glistening ribbons of water in the landscape, but our streams are certainly not paid the attention they are due. All of our stream networks feed into the Potomac River and eventually into the Chesapeake Bay. With the pace of development, it is a daunting task to monitor and care for this liquid network of life. Our state and county governments have a small budget to lend to the task, but there are far more resources required to oversee the necessary operations. Thankfully, there are groups of citizen sentries who are willing to donate their time, thoughtfulness and energy to this important cause.

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is part of Loudoun Watershed Watch, a consortium of citizen groups and government authorities who work together to monitor our streams. Through the years, the number of volunteers on our team has ebbed and flowed, and at times we were not able to reach the level of monitoring that we felt was warranted. So in the beginning of 2016, Loudoun Wildlife decided it was time to strengthen our resolve and revamp our Stream Team, part of our Citizen Science Program. Under the leadership of Phil Daley, Joe Coleman, Nicole Hamilton and David Ward, the Stream Team leadership committee has engaged key members Dave Manning and Jason Kahn (a NOAA Fish and Wildlife scientist). The Stream Team hopes to generate enthusiasm and volunteer participation to give the program its deserved attention.

In April of this year, we kicked off the year as we do annually with an engagement presentation at Ashburn Library. From the 35 persons who attended, the 15 new volunteers gathered at the Purcellville Train Station to learn the Virginia Save Our



*Map showing the vital network of streams in Loudoun County
Graphic by Dave Ward*



*Volunteers gathering data in Milltown Creek
Photo by David Ward*



*Stream monitors analyzing the stream health
Photo by David Ward*

Streams (VA SOS) protocol. The protocol uses benthic macroinvertebrates living in the stream beds as a proxy indicator of water quality and stream health. The trainees learned to identify the 20 different invertebrates monitored in the VA SOS protocol, as well as collection procedures. After the classroom session, the volunteers trekked to the South Fork of Catoctin Creek at the Chapman-DeMary trail to get wet and practice the sampling procedures and invertebrate identification.

Since that April training, a team under the leadership of Sandy Burrill and Chris Cook began monitoring on the North Fork of Goose Creek, southeast of Sleeter Lake. An Ashburn Farms team led by Valerie Sheckler and Carole and Bob Kuhfahl has formed an enthusiastic group that hopes to inspire more volunteers from that community. Many other volunteers are studying and waiting for an opportunity to take the certification exam. Loudoun Wildlife volunteers will participate in a certification event set up by Jeff Millington of the Goose Creek Association and given by Gem Bingol. If all goes well, Loudoun Wildlife will add a number of certified stream monitors to its ranks and begin rebuilding its ability

to amply monitor the health of Loudoun's waterways.

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) only accepts monitoring data collected under the supervision of a certified monitor. This is to ensure consistency and quality of the data, which DEQ uses to qualitatively assess the state of Virginia's vital waterways. Increasing the cadre of certified monitors, along with expanding the amount of monitoring sites, will be key to getting our streams under a consistent monitoring program. For more information on becoming a stream monitor or supporting in these efforts, visit www.loudounwildlife.org/Stream_Monitoring.htm or contact Dave Manning at dmanning@loudounwildlife.org. Come on and get your feet wet with us on this fun, rewarding and important stewardship role.



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Living in Harmony*

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*Gum trees provide fall color and seeds for wildlife
Photo by Sharon Plummer*

Join, Renew for 2017, Donate Today!

Your support makes it possible for us to offer free nature programs that inspire and engage people in nature, lead citizen science projects that teach and provide data on wildlife and habitats of Loudoun, pay for plants and equipment to restore habitat, and develop robust positions needed to be your voice for wildlife.

Membership benefits (for annual donation of \$25 or more) include: *Habitat Herald* mailed to you, special member discounts at local businesses, email announcement of programs/events, annual meeting invitation. Donations of \$100 or more are recognized in our annual report.

To pay online by credit card, go to www.loudounwildlife.org/Join.htm

To mail in your contribution: Please check your donation level below and return this form with your contribution and contact information to Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, PO Box 1892, Leesburg, VA 20177.

Join/Renew/Donate Today – \$25 \$50 \$75 \$100 _____ Other Amount

Donations of \$100 or more receive special recognition in our annual report plus additional benefits; \$1,000 plus – Leaders Circle.

Check the website for details!

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