



# Habitat Herald

A Publication of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

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Spring 2011

## Otters

by Emily Cook

The most exciting part of any zoo visit for our family is the trip to the otter habitat. We watch for what seems like hours as they slip and slide, roll and tumble around their enclosure to the delight of those lucky enough to see the show. It's almost as though they know we're watching, making sure to provide unending comedic antics and a heavy dose of cuteness for their audience.

Otters are not just adorable, though, they are also quite remarkable animals. They belong to the family *Mustelidae*, making them cousins to the weasel, badger, ferret, and mink. There are 13 species of otter inhabiting five of the world's continents, but most of us are only familiar with the two most commonly found here in the United States: the Sea Otter and the North American River Otter. Few have had the pleasure of knowing their international cousins

and some of the lesser-known species of otter, which include the African Clawless, Asian Small-Clawed, Congo Clawless, Marine, Neotropical, South American River, Eurasian, Spotted-Necked, Hairy-Nosed, Smooth-Coated, and Giant Otter. Until fairly recently, there had also been a 14th species known as Maxwell's Otter, which is now presumed extinct following the drainage of their habitat in Iraq.

Otters fall into two rather distinct categories: river otters and sea/marine otters. They can be distinguished fairly easily by observing their behavior and physical traits. River otters tend to swim belly-down with most of their lower body submerged underwater, while sea otters often swim belly-up and float high on the water's surface. River otters are also more adept

at land travel, whereas their sea-faring cousins tend to leave the water less frequently and are more awkward on their feet. This preference for land vs. sea is also apparent when it comes to sleeping arrangements. A river otter enjoys playing and hunting in the water but will retreat to a dry den for sleep, while the sea otter will snooze as he floats, often rolling himself in kelp to keep from drifting with the currents.

All otters sport a thick, heavy tail and dense, velvety fur that protects them from frigid water temperatures. River otters

have smaller webbed hind paws that are circular in shape, while the sea otter has fully webbed paws with longer outer toes that make it hard to maneuver on dry land. Naturally, there are differences in dietary preference, based on what is available to them in their habitat. Since otters are carnivores, river otters tend to prefer fish, snails, and clams, while their sea-faring counterparts consume crabs, sea urchins, and abalone or shellfish. River otters have also been known to eat small reptiles, amphibians, birds, and insects.



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## A Word from the President: Streamside Buffers — Yes!

by Joe Coleman

For over a year now, Loudoun County has been working on an ordinance to protect our streams by preserving vegetated streamside buffers. Vegetated streamside buffers, or riparian buffers as they are also known, are strips of grass, shrubs, and ideally trees and shrubs along the banks of rivers and streams. They serve as a buffer between our uses of the land and the water itself, and are the last line of defense for water quality. To understand how a buffer works imagine drinking a cup of coffee made without a filter or even one with half a filter; think of all the sediment that would end up in your coffee.

Unfortunately, the people opposed to this ordinance are using fear tactics and mistruths in an attempt to derail this effort. They falsely claim that there is no sound science supporting buffers when there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of documents based on extensive scientific research that demonstrates the effectiveness of streamside buffers, and especially forested buffers. By cherry picking some of these reports, they claim they prove their point of view, when the opposite is true.

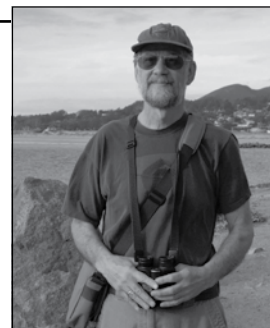
The opposition claims a streamside buffer ordinance will harm property values and the county's finances when it has done neither in the 84 Virginia counties that have already adopted the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Ordinance. Seven of those 84 counties have Triple-A bond ratings and most of them received that rating after they adopted the Ordinance. Obviously, it did not harm their finances or their ability to balance their budgets.

Although Loudoun County is not required by law to adopt the ordinance, a 2003 report, *Implementation of the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Act* by the Joint Legislative Audit and Review

Commission of the Virginia General Assembly, states (pages 90 – 91) that “hundreds of studies have been done on the impact of vegetative buffer and forest buffers on water quality” and “the hundred-foot buffer zone that is used in the Bay Act is within the typical range that is described as effective in the scientific literature...” The report goes on to state “the expansion of the program could assist in minimizing nutrient and sediment influxes to waterways ...” It is not surprising that one of the country's fastest growing counties, Loudoun, is the first jurisdiction listed each time expansion of the program to non-Tidewater areas is mentioned.

During the Board of Supervisor's stakeholders meetings, the opposition found people to represent Homeowners Associations that not only have no lots impacted by the ordinance, but also so called “representatives” neither lived there nor had any legal connection with the HOA. Under these circumstances one has to wonder how many valid members of the Homeowners Association were aware this was occurring.

Recently their attacks have become more strident and outrageous. They have personally attacked, named and demanded that county employees who were explaining why the ordinance was valid and important be fired. They are even claiming that these employees will be investigated by the State Attorney General. It is obvious that they are interested in intimidating those same employees into silence and hope the Board of Supervisors will be swayed by their threats. One can only hope that reasonable people will see the absurdity of this sort of campaign. Please let your representatives on the Board of Supervisors know how upsetting the outrageous behavior of the opposition is and how important it is that the county adopt the Chesapeake Bay Preservation Ordinance now.



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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 the first Tuesday of each month. Board meetings are open to all current members. For more information, or to suggest topics for discussion at upcoming meetings, contact Joe Coleman.

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## ■ Otters, continued

Otters are highly intelligent, and sea otters are one of the few mammals to use tools to aid in the consumption of their meal. After bringing their catch to the surface, the sea otter will often place a stone on his belly and use a second stone or other heavy object to pound the shellfish until the shell is compromised, enabling the removal of its contents. The tool preference can vary from otter to otter and is often passed from mother to pup. The otter collects the tool from the sea floor, tucking it into a deep fold of skin under the arm as they carry their prey to the surface. Food stealing is another common practice, particularly among sea otters. The male otter will often kidnap a young pup, holding it hostage until the female relinquishes some of her food to him. The pup is only released once the handoff has been made.

Habitat is critical to the preservation and proliferation of otters, and loss of habitat is one of the biggest threats to otters worldwide. Highly sensitive to tainted habitat, the river otter has already disappeared from nine states as a result of pollution and habitat destruction. Sea otter habitat is also impacted by pollution, as well as commercial fishing and mass devastation of habitat from oil spills.

River otters, such as the North American River Otter here in Loudoun County, frequent lakes, ponds, coastal marshes, and estuaries. They will frequently "borrow" the dens and burrows of woodchucks, beavers, and muskrats. River otters can be found in most states across the country while Sea Otters inhabit rocky, coastal areas along the West Coast.

Otters are expert swimmers and divers. They have ears that are specifically designed to enable deep dives, and their noses have a valve-like membrane that closes the nostril opening, making them watertight. An otter can stay under water for several minutes and swim at an average speed of 7 miles per hour.

Communication between otters is done via chirps, chuckles, grunts, whistles, and screams and by marking their territory with scent. They have a very playful disposition, but play is secondary to meeting basic needs such as nutrition and shelter. Perhaps this is why otters in captivity are so playful compared to their wild cousins.

The life expectancy of an otter is approximately 15 years in the wild. Otters have few natural enemies, particularly when they are in the water. Young otters can fall prey to a variety of predators



ators when on land including foxes, coyotes, and the larger birds of prey. Most otter deaths are due to illegal hunting by humans, pollution of natural habitat, and habitat destruction.

Several varieties of otter are in serious danger, and four are currently listed as endangered, with their numbers on the decline. These include the Marine Otter, South American River Otter, Hairy-Nosed Otter, and Giant Otter. While the North American River Otter is in good shape, the Sea Otter is still listed as endangered, though fortunately its numbers have remained stable in recent years.

We are lucky to have these plucky critters right here in our neck of the woods. Otters are actually quite shy, but if you keep a keen eye out while you're hiking in wetlands or fly-fishing a local river, you might just get lucky and spot one taking a quick dunk or grabbing a fish dinner.

### Sources:

**Otter Species** [www.otterspecialistgroup.org/Species.html](http://www.otterspecialistgroup.org/Species.html)

**General Otter Information** [www.otternet.com](http://www.otternet.com)

**Why Otters Play** <http://animals.howstuffworks.com/mammals/otters-playful.htm/printable>

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**Sea Otter** <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/sea-otter/?source=A-to-Z>



River Otters swim low and belly down



River Otter in the marsh



A pair of River Otters

Photos by Nicole Hamilton





Red-winged Blackbird  
Photo by Gerco Hoogeweg

## Bird ID: Red-winged Blackbirds

by Kerry Bzdyk

A friend of mine recently recalled her first close encounter with a Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) in her youth. While visiting the Eastern Shore with her family, she was drawn to the remarkable sound of a bird singing its heart out somewhere in the tall reeds. She made her way into the thick and startled a beautiful black bird with bright red wing patches that flew away quickly. It was a clear memory of a moment that has stayed with her for years.

Distinctive sound and striking appearance are the hallmarks of this abundant North American bird. The Red-winged Blackbird is a boldly colored medium-sized bird (slightly smaller than a Robin). The male of the species is most easily recognized: a glossy black bird with shoulder patches of bright red underlined with yellow. The females are less intensely colored, with streaks of light and dark brown, a lighter color on the breast, and a white eyebrow. The more subdued coloring of the female may be an adaptation that helps hide her during the nesting season. The appearance of this species may vary slightly depending on their location.

Red-winged Blackbirds are found throughout the United States, Mexico, and southern Canada. In the northern ranges they may migrate further south for the winter months, but those in the southern part of the continent are permanent residents.

While these birds prefer wetlands for feeding and nesting habitat, they are very adaptable and will also nest in fields and grassy areas, in meadows, and near streams. Nests are built close to the ground and woven into upright vegetation such as phragmites or cattails. The female will lay 3 or 4 pale blue eggs with black or brown

markings that she will incubate for 12 days. Males are fierce defenders of nesting and feeding territories and will attack even humans who stray too close to the nest. Each male will have up to 15 female mating partners, and they will group their nests in close proximity to each other. This group nesting helps guard against predators by increasing the number of alert parents on watch. Nests are in danger of being raided by snakes or raccoons. The pair will raise two or three broods a season, building a new nest for each new clutch of eggs.

Primarily seed eaters, Red-winged Blackbirds will also eat insects during the nesting season, especially aquatic insects like caddisflies, damsel flies, and mayflies as they emerge from their larval aquatic stage. Three quarters of their diet is seeds and grains.

You can watch for this beautiful bird in many areas in Loudoun County, but two of my favorite locations to see them are at the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship and Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve. If you stop and listen you will hear the distinctive three-syllable call of the male as described in this love song from the Civil War era written by W. W. Fosdick:

*When the blackbird in the Spring,  
'Neath the willow tree,  
Sat and rock'd, I heard him sing,  
Singing Aura Lea.*



### Sources:

[www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-winged\\_Blackbird/id](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Red-winged_Blackbird/id)  
Peterson, Roger Tory (1999). A Field Guide to the Birds:  
Eastern and Central North America

## Plant ID: Stinging Nettles

by Ryan Robison

The stinging nettle (*Urtica dioica*) is a curious plant, capable of causing extreme pain while also providing beneficial medicinal properties. Common throughout the world, the highest concentrations can be found in Europe and North America. We find them in our moist woodlands, thickets, by waterways, and along partially shaded trails — pretty much anywhere in the woods and trails we hike in Loudoun County.

The stinging nettle looks like a typical weed. It ranges from two-to four feet tall, has a slender stalk and opposite leaves. Stinging nettle flowers are greenish brown and born on axillary inflorescences. The dull, green leaves can grow up to six inches long and are covered in hair. These hairs are actually small hypodermic needles that inject irritating chemicals into unsuspecting skin contacting with the hairs. This mixture of chemicals causes the painful stinging sensation for which the plant is named.

Stinging caused by the plant is comparable to multiple bee stings and often causes a rash. Although no serious or permanent damage comes from the sting, it is important to treat oneself as soon as possible to avoid further discomfort. One reported treatment comes from the leaf of jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*), which can be rubbed on the irritated area to provide quick relief. Hikers are fortunate jewelweed often can be found growing near stinging nettle. Once back at home, the affected area should be gently cleansed. Be careful not to touch the rash with your bare hands as it is possible to spread it to other parts of the body. Aloe vera or a comparable ointment can reduce the stinging.

Although the stinging nettle's ability to sting gives it a bad reputation, it also has many beneficial uses. Nettles have been used for over 2000 years in a variety of ways. Flagellation with nettles was said to reduce inflammation and pain — perhaps because the patient was so distracted by the pain from the stinging nettles! Today, plant extracts are used to treat arthritis, anemia, hay fever, prostate and kidney problems. Stinging nettle is said to strengthen all the systems of the body and to taste like spinach when cooked. Nettles can be prepared in soups and used to make tea and beer. Stinging nettle plants contain a tough fiber which can be used to make fabric. In the wild, stinging nettles play host to several varieties of insects and provide food for woodland creatures.

While we may not want to introduce stinging nettles into our yards or gardens, these beneficial plants play an important role in our ecology, pharmacy and kitchen. Just be careful to make sure you don't brush up against them while enjoying our beautiful walking trails this spring!

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Stinging Nettle plant  
Photo by Liam McGranaghan



Effects of Stinging Nettle  
Photo by Liam McGranaghan

## Stream Monitoring: Where Does the Data Go?

**O**ur volunteers monitor our local streams for the educational experience, to meet old friends, create new friendships, and just enjoy the sights and sounds of a babbling brook for a couple hours. Additionally, the data generated from stream monitoring has a great deal of significance and impact.

LWC uses the Virginia Save Our Streams (VA SOS) Modified Rocky Bottom Sampling Method to monitor streams for benthic macroinvertebrate organisms.

These bottom-dwelling organisms are great indicators of overall aquatic stream health. The protocol was developed by the Izaak Walton League of America and reviewed and approved by the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality (VDEQ). By using the approved VA SOS method, our data is credible to local, state, and federal governments and can be shared and compared with other conservation organizations statewide.

Let's follow the data and see how two hours of stream sampling can have an impact on public opinion and government policy. After each monitoring event, a trained, certified team leader sends the data to our manager, who does a quality control check and adds the information to our database. It is then forwarded to Loudoun Watershed Watch ([www.loudounwatershedwatch.org](http://www.loudounwatershedwatch.org)), a local stream-monitoring consortium, and to the VA SOS organization ([www.vasos.org](http://www.vasos.org)), which then forwards it on to VDEQ.

VDEQ is the state agency responsible for assessing and reporting on the surface water quality of Virginia's streams and rivers. Because VDEQ has limited resources to monitor the thousands of miles of streams in the state, they have approved methods that enable citizen volunteers to submit monitoring data. The information we supply provides them additional eyes on the water.



The stream-monitoring data is used by VDEQ to assess whether the surface water quality meets its adopted standards in five areas: recreational use, aquatic use, drinking water supply, fish consumption, and wildlife support. Recreational use is determined by bacteria level; aquatic use is based on benthic macroinvertebrates. If a stream segment is found to have lower than acceptable standards, VDEQ will designate the stream as "impaired." VDEQ has assessed approximately 30% of Loudoun County's streams for aquatic life use and 25% for recreational use. Impairments are reported to EPA and may trigger a lengthy process that can eventually lead to stream restoration. That process involves the development of a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) for the pollutant of concern. A TMDL is the average daily maximum amount of pollutant the stream can assimilate and still remain unimpaired. Loudoun County has six watersheds for which a TMDL has been written and approved.

The next step in the process is the creation of an implementation plan. This plan identifies the particular areas and practices that must be modified in order to bring the water quality below the TMDL. These modifications can involve a wide variety of tasks from public education and incentive programs to large construction projects. The cost is often in the millions. Loudoun County's one implementation plan, a five-year project to improve the water quality in Catoctin Creek, was completed in 2009.

Although VDEQ has a methodology to assess, define, and eventually remediate stream segments, the entire process is very time consuming and costly. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. The more we can do to educate people about stream quality and practices that can prevent stream degradation, the greater the likelihood we can prevent very large expenses down the road. And, the rewards are great — improved health for both streams and streamside habitats.

Since 1997, LWC volunteers have conducted 400 benthic macroinvertebrate sampling events and almost 1,000 bacteria water sampling events. Our teams also assess the overall health of in-stream and riparian areas. Our stream-monitoring program produces credible scientific data that is used by all levels of government to monitor the health of our surface water. However, perhaps more important is the educational value obtained from the simple act of monitoring. The cost of stream restoration clearly indicates that the primary solution to water quality problems will come from modifying our actions on the land.

Stream monitoring at Phillips Farm  
Photo by Nicole Hamilton



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*We monitor because  
we care,  
We care because  
we are informed,  
We are informed because  
we monitor.*

(Cassie Champion, of the  
Minnesota Metropolitan  
Council)

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## Insect ID: Spring Azure

by Nicole Hamilton

The Spring Azure (*Celastrina ladon*) is one of our early spring butterflies and a member of the subfamily of "Blues." This subfamily also includes the Eastern Tailed Blue and the Summer Azure, which looks the same as the Spring Azure but appears later in the year. Lepidopterists debate the need for splitting the species.

The Spring Azure is a small butterfly, only about an inch in width. The underside of the wings is a pale dusty blue with grayish spots while the topside is a vibrant purplish blue. It generally rests with its wings closed and has a rather erratic flight pattern.

In terms of habitat, this tiny butterfly can be found in edges of wooded areas as well as wetlands, fields and gardens. They are easily attracted to gardens and yards as their host plants are ones we commonly use for landscaping: dogwood (*Cornus*), viburnum (*Viburnum*), New Jersey tea (*Ceanothus*), blueberry (*Vaccinium*), and meadowsweet (*Spiraea salicifolia*). They will nectar on a wide range of flowers but especially enjoy dogbane, privet, New Jersey tea, blackberry, and common milkweed. If you plant a combination of host and nectar plants, these beautiful butterflies will likely visit your garden.

Spring Azures overwinter in the pupal form, safe inside their chrysalis. As spring starts up, check your host plants for the tiny caterpillars. The caterpillars are greenish or pinkish with a dark stripe on the back. The Spring Azure caterpillars feed on flowers and fruits and are tended by ants. Don't worry though, they won't eat enough to do any damage but will turn into flying azure jewels that will brighten your spring.



Spring Azure butterfly  
Photo by Nicole Hamilton

## Summer 2011 Nature Day Camps

Children entering grades three through seven will find lots to like about Natural History Day Camp taking place at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve this summer. Planning is underway for two educational and fun-filled weeks (June 20-24 and June 27-July 1) sponsored by LWC, the Piedmont Environmental Council, Loudoun County Parks and Recreation and the Friends of Banshee Reeks.

Banshee Reeks is located about five miles south of Leesburg on The Woods Road (between Route 15 and Evergreen Mills Rd). Participants will spend each day in

the outdoors exploring the woods, fields and waters of the preserve and learning about the plants and animals that live there. Camp hours are from 9:00 am - 3:00 pm each day. The cost is \$130 per week, or \$240 for both sessions; space is limited to 18 campers per session. An overview of last year's camp can be found in the Winter 2010 issue of the Habitat Herald.

For more information and registration forms, please contact Phil Daley at 540-338-6528 or [PEDALEY@verizon.net](mailto:PEDALEY@verizon.net). Additional details are available on the

LWC website: [www.loudounwildlife.org](http://www.loudounwildlife.org).



## Drive for Charity - May 19, 2011

For the sixth year in a row the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy has been chosen as one of the recipients who will receive a share of all of the tolls collected on the Dulles Greenway on a single day.

Drive for Charity on Thursday, May 19, 2011, and see 100% of your tolls returned to the community. On that day all the tolls collected on the Dulles Greenway will be donated to charity. Approximately \$226,000 was raised during last year's 'Drive' and donated to six charities: the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, the March of Dimes, ECHO, the Loudoun Abused Women's Shelter, Fresh Air/Full Care and Dulles Greenway Citizen Award.

# Chirps – Spring 2011

by Donna Quinn

## **Following the Water: A Hydromancer's Notebook**

by David M. Carroll

David M. Carroll's watery meditations in *Following the Water* revolve around his beloved turtles and other inhabitants of the wetlands, the essence of time and change in the natural world, and the true meaning of 'seeing.' Each season reveals new delights as creatures great and small go about the business of living in harmony with their surroundings. Carroll lovingly journals his encounters and observations and provides us with not only a vivid representation of life in this wet place but also an enchanting map, so the reader might trace his footsteps through brook, stream and alder carr. "The water remembers and returns, enlivening the landscape with light, sound, movement, and silent reflections as it retraces ancient courses and refills historic pools," as do the author and reader in this journey through the seasons and wetlands.



*Over the seasons, certain days and times, not fixed dates on any human calendar, are my own holidays, constants within the season's variables... Though regulated by the sun and the moon and the spinning of the Earth, they are not limited to any twenty-four-hour period; there is no affixing a number to them. I mark these times as I see them with a common denominator: "Again."* — David M. Carroll

We are touched by profound moments of great simplicity, such as the first drink taken by a turtle hatchling. Carroll pauses to observe this tiny creature who, with eyes closed, sips for twenty-one "unchanging" minutes before coming up for air. Words such as 'unchanging,' 'again' and 'same' achieve epic meanings as mankind encroaches on this fragile economy. Carroll does not accuse or blame, but there is sadness in this book which is hard to overlook. "We are too many, and we tread too heavily. (Perhaps the planet is to blame for being too small.)" Carroll advocates protecting conservation areas from humans as he observes when parks are used by humans, it is nature that suffers. "We cannot seem to allow room for ecosystems to play out their destinies free from human intervention. A room of its own is biodiversity's only requirement."

Despite the sadness and sense of impending doom in this book, we found it inspirational. LWC readers rededicated themselves to what we can do to make sure our children and their children are able to celebrate their own seasonal 'holidays' such as the first spring peeper, or the first golden leaf of autumn, again, and again...

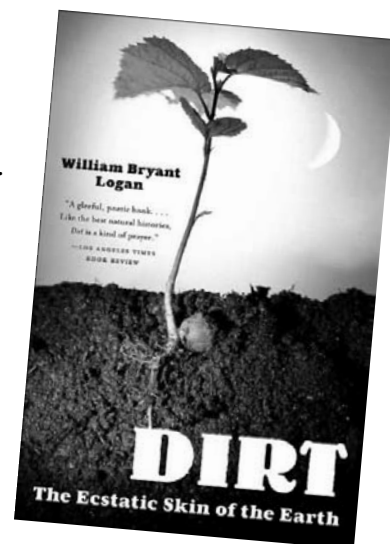
Next Book Club Selection: *Dirt, The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth* by William Bryant Logan (see below for description), April 26, Rust Manor House, 7 p.m.

### **Chirps Recommends:**

***Dirt! The Movie*** — "It's under our feet and under our fingernails, but what is it? And how did it get there? Inspired by William Bryant Logan's acclaimed book *Dirt: The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth*, find out how industrial farming, mining and urban development have led us toward cataclysmic droughts, starvation, floods and climate change. *Dirt* is a part of everything we eat, drink and breathe which is why we should stop treating it like, well, dirt." — PBS, [www.shoppbs.org](http://www.shoppbs.org). Watch *Dirt! The Movie* based on *Dirt, The Ecstatic Skin of the Earth* and join our book club discussion April 26.

***The Nesting Season*** by Bernd Heinrich – Everything you've always wanted to know about bird reproduction from whether birds fall in love to monogamy, polygamy, promiscuity and more. Heinrich reminds us we are animals physiologically almost identical to other animals, muscle for muscle and eye for eye. Based on our similarities, he poses it is more unreasonable to assume animals do not have feelings than to accept that they must experience what humans call emotions such as love (an adaptive behavior causing one to act irrationally for the sake of reproduction) and grief. Charming, strange, beautiful, brutal, the book is illustrated with Heinrich's own watercolors and drawings.

■ Continued on page 9





## Annual Meeting and Turtle Program on June 5

Each year the LWC annual meeting provides an opportunity for members to come together and celebrate another year of accomplishments, socialize with other members, and hear an interesting guest speaker. This year—the Year of the Turtle—we will welcome Dr. Roger Wood who will describe the efforts that he and his team at the Cape May Wetlands Institute are taking to save the Diamondback Terrapin. The annual meeting will also include light refreshments, a raffle, science fair and volunteer award presentations, and a brief business meeting. All LWC members are invited to attend. The event will take place on Sunday, June 5 from 5:00 to 7:30pm at the Rust Nature Sanctuary at 802 Childrens Center Rd, Leesburg, VA. RSVP



to [hvanryzin@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:hvanryzin@loudounwildlife.org) or call 540-882-4187. Look for additional information on our website: [www.loudounwildlife.org](http://www.loudounwildlife.org).

### ■ *Chirps continued*

**The Crossley ID** by Richard Crossley – Hot off the presses, this book will be reviewed in the next issue of Chirps. In the meantime, you might want to pick up a copy and learn what the buzz is about!



### Chirps Honors: Arthur W. 'Nick' Arundel, 1928 - 2011

Chirps honors Mr. Arundel for the example he set as a conservationist, journalist, and public servant in Northern Virginia. "Growth must not and shall not happen at the price of destroying this county's beauty, natural heritage and its vital farm industry." A hero and pioneer, he was a visionary for land conservation. Nick said, "In the first part of your life, you learn, the second, you earn, and in the third, you give it all back."

## Birdathon 2011! May 7 - 15

**Help raise money for bird conservation  
and have fun at the same time!**

- All skill levels welcome.
- Great prizes for different age groups and skill levels.
- Bird on your own, form a team, or come on one of our walks for International Migratory Day, and to count species.
- A fun way to get outside and identify birds while raising money for our local birds and their habitats.

**Join Us!**



### Two Ways to Participate

#### 1) Be a Birdathoner

- Register to be a birdathoner participant by signing up on the website.
- Gather pledges from friends, family, neighbors in support of helping birds.
- Select your count day (a 24-hour period between May 7 - 15).
- Visit our website to sign up for one of the bird walks for International Migratory Bird Day.
- Conduct your own count, identifying as many species as you can.
- Follow up with your sponsors to collect their pledges and mail them in to LWC by June 15.

#### 2) Be a Sponsor

- Want to support the Birdathon but don't have time to gather pledges? Please consider making a pledge.
- You can make a flat contribution to the birdathon or sponsor a team and challenge them to find as many species as they can!

**More information on our website - [www.loudounwildlife.org](http://www.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.



**Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Board Meeting** — LWC's Board normally meets the first Tuesday of every month at 7:00 p.m. All LWC members are welcome. *Contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or [jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org) for additional information.*

**An Evening With the Peepers at Algonkian Park in Eastern Loudoun** — **Saturday, April, 7:00 - 9:00 p.m.** (date to be confirmed, need a rainy night). A sure sign of the change of seasons, the sounds of these tiny frogs are often some of the first spring calls we hear. Join us in a discussion of peepers and wood frogs—their behaviors, lifecycles and habitat needs—then head into the field to listen to their calls. Wear boots and raingear and bring either a flashlight or headlamp. Registration required, class size limited to 10: *Sign Up Online or contact Nicole Hamilton at [nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org).*

**Earthday@Loudoun Festival** — **Sunday, April 10, 11 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.** at Willow Creek Farm, 42920 Broadlands Blvd, Broadlands VA. This free festival will offer virtually everything for the eco-conscious, a Marketplace offering earth-friendly products and services, hands-on educational activities for all ages and many other entertainment options. The festival is designed to be a family-oriented event to inform Loudouners on the environmental changes happening in the local area. Every year new performances bring diversity and fun to the event. *For more information visit: [www.earthdayatloudoun.org](http://www.earthdayatloudoun.org). Stop by our tent for free materials and information!*

**Exploring Southwestern Loudoun County and Northern Fauquier County** — **Saturday, April 16, 8:00 - 11:00 a.m.** Meeting place TBD. Join Joe Coleman and Christine Perdue for a birding trip in this beautiful rural area. Meet at 8 a.m. and carpool along rural dirt roads searching for the many different birds that call this area home or migrate through it. Among the many places visited will be the historic Goose Creek Bridge, which was built between 1801 and 1803 and is the longest remaining stone turnpike bridge in the state of Virginia. **Registration required: Sign Up Online or contact Joe Coleman at [jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org) or 540-554-2542.**

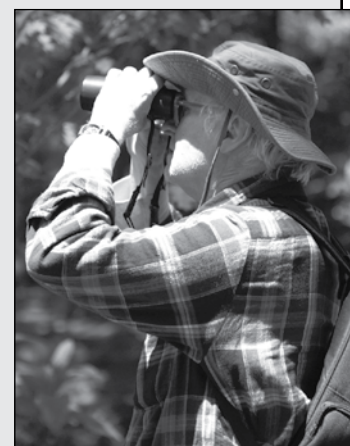
**Leesburg Flower and Garden Festival** — **Saturday, April 16, 10:00 a.m. - 6:00 p.m. and Sunday, April 17, 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.** Visit us at our booth for displays and lots of free handouts. LWC t-shirts, hats, and pins, as well as kits for creating your own monarch waystation will be for sale to help us raise money for our programs. For more information on the event, visit the festival website at [www.idalee.org/parks/events/FlowerGarden](http://www.idalee.org/parks/events/FlowerGarden).

**The Brown Marmorated Stink Bug** — **Wednesday, April 20, 7:00- 9:00 p.m.** at Ida Lee Recreation Center in Leesburg. Join us at this free LWC program given by Dr. Tracy Leskey, entomologist at the USDA Appalachian Fruit Research Station in Kearneysville, WV. Dr. Leskey and her colleagues are in the forefront of research into the Brown Marmorated Stink Bug. She also co-chairs a special USDA working group composed of farmers and agriculturalists that is trying to find ways to respond to the serious economic and environmental problems this insect poses. *Questions: contact Laura McGranaghan at [lmcgranaghan@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:lmcgranaghan@loudounwildlife.org).*

**Wildflowers, Warblers, and Wine at Tarara Winery** — **Saturday, April 23, 9:00 a.m. Registration Required.** Join Andy Rabin and Jim McWalters for a rare walk around the 475-acre farm of Tarara Winery. Explore the many diverse natural areas the farm has to offer and take a stroll along the Potomac River. Enjoy some of Tarara's award winning wines after the hike! The cost of the hike is free; optional wine tasting is extra. Tarara Winery is located at 13648 Tarara Lane, Lucketts, VA. **Registration required: Sign Up Online or contact Laura McGranaghan at [lmcgranaghan@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:lmcgranaghan@loudounwildlife.org).**

## Birding Banshee

Join LWC and the Friends of Banshee Reeks at the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve for the monthly bird walk. Because of its rich and varied habitat, it is a birding hot spot. Please bring binoculars. Questions: contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or [jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org).



**Saturday, April 9**  
**Saturday, May 14**  
**Saturday, June 11**  
**Saturday, July 9**

**Walks begin at  
8:00 a.m.**

Continued on page 11

## ■ Programs & Field Trips, continued



# Birding the Blue Ridge Center

**O**n the fourth Saturday of each month (except December), LWC leads a free bird walk at the Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship. This beautiful 900-acre preserve is located on Harpers Ferry Road, Rte 671, in northwestern Loudoun County. Only a few miles south of Harpers Ferry and the confluence of the Potomac and Shenandoah rivers, the property includes meadows in the valley and heavily forested slopes on the Blue Ridge. Meet at the visitor center. The Blue Ridge Center is located just north of Neersville, at 11611 Harpers Ferry Road, Rte 671. Detailed directions can be found on the website, [www.brccs.org](http://www.brccs.org). **Questions: contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or [jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org).**

**Saturdays: April 23, May 28\*, June 25, July 23**  
Walks begin at 8:00 a.m.

*\*Co-sponsored with the Audubon Naturalist Society and The Northern Virginia Bird Club*



**Arbor Day at The Hill School, Middleburg — Saturday, April 30, 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.** Visit The Hill School for another wonderful Arbor Day celebration that includes activities for kids, great nature displays, family fun, and lots of food. Stop by and visit the LWC booth. Pick up a copy of our Gardening for Wildlife Plant List, which includes an extensive list of native trees, shrubs, wildflowers, and grasses that provide excellent habitat for our native wildlife. *If you'd like to volunteer at our booth or have questions, please contact Robert Daugherty at [rdaugherty@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:rdaugherty@loudounwildlife.org).*

**Go Wild! Go Birding! International Migratory Bird Day — Saturday, May 7 – Sunday, May 15.** During spring, thousands of migratory birds move through North America to their nesting territories. Some will stay and nest in our area, while others will spend only a few days here replenishing their energy before continuing a journey that may be thousands of miles long. To celebrate and highlight this natural phenomenon and the importance of natural habitats, LWC has scheduled several International Migratory Bird Day walks and is sponsoring a

Bird-a-thon between May 7 and May 15. To participate, **Sign Up Online or contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or [jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org).**

**Bird-A-Thon 2010 — May 7 - 15.** LWC is again sponsoring a Bird-a-thon this year as part of Go Wild! Go Birding! International Migratory Bird Day. Have fun birding and help raise money for LWC. Participating teams pick any 24-hour time period between May 7 and 15 for their own Bird-a-thon. If you do not want to participate in the Bird-a-thon but still want to help, you can sponsor one of the teams. Visit our web site at **[www.loudounwildlife.org](http://www.loudounwildlife.org)** for more information.

**International Migratory Bird Day Walk for Children, at the Rust Nature Sanctuary in Leesburg — Saturday, May 14, 9:00 – 11:00 a.m.** Join LWC naturalists for a bird walk through a variety of habitats, documenting the many birds that live or pass through the area during the annual spring migration. This walk is designed for children, ages 8 – 12, who are interested in learning about birds and how to identify them. Dress for the weather and wear comfortable walking/hiking shoes. **Registration required: Sign Up Online or contact Phil Daley at [pdaley@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:pdaley@loudounwildlife.org) or 540-338-6528.**

**Mid-Week Nature Walk along Goose Creek at the Goodstone Inn — Wednesday, May 11, 8:00 – 11:00 a.m.** Join Christine Perdue and Joe Coleman for a birding walk along the creek and surrounding fields during the peak of spring migration. Meet at lower parking lot of the Inn. **Registration required: Sign Up Online or contact Joe Coleman at [jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org) or 540-554-2542.**

**Annual Meeting: Celebrating Loudoun's Wildlife and the Year of the Turtle — Sunday, June 5, 5:00 – 7:30 p.m. at the Rust Nature Sanctuary in Leesburg.** Join us for LWC's annual membership meeting. The event will include light refreshments, a raffle, awards presentations, our annual business meeting and an exciting program. Dr. Roger Wood will describe the efforts that he and his team at the Cape May Wetlands Institute are taking to save the Diamondback Terrapin. All LWC members are invited to attend! **Registration required: Sign Up Online or contact Helen Van Ryzin at [hvanryzin@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:hvanryzin@loudounwildlife.org) or call 540-882-4187.**

**Bird Walk at Banshee Reeks and Dulles Wetlands — Wednesday, June 15, 7:00 – 11:00 a.m.** Join Joe Coleman and Mary Ann Good on one of LWC's mid-week birding trips. Meet at the Dulles Wetlands at 7:00 a.m. or meet at the visitor's center at Banshee Reeks at 9:00 a.m. Hiking footwear (waterproof if you are coming to the Wetlands), long pants, and insect repellent are advised. This walk is co-sponsored with the Audubon Naturalist Society. **Registration required: to register or for questions contact Joe Coleman at [jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org) or 540-554-2542.**

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■ *Programs & Field Trips, continued*

**Butterflies at Banshee Reeks — Saturday, June 18, 10:30 a.m. - 12:00 noon.** Join Jon Little for one of our free family butterfly walks. Investigate some of the many diverse, natural areas at Banshee Reeks and identify all of the butterflies we can find. If you own binoculars, please bring them. *Questions: contact Nicole Hamilton at [nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org) or 540-882-9638.*

**Summer Stroll on the AT — Sunday, June 19th, 8:00a.m.** Join Liam McGranaghan and Jim McWalters for an early summer stroll on the Appalachian Trail. Marvel at the sights and sounds and take in the beauty along the trail. Pack a snack for the mountaintop view before we return via the Blackburn Trail Center. Meet at the parking lot at the AT along Rt. 9 a few miles west of Hillsboro. Car shuttles back to the parking area will be provided. **Registration required: Sign Up Online or contact Laura McGranaghan at [lmcgranaghan@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:lmcgranaghan@loudounwildlife.org).**

**Dragonfly Walk at Bles Park — Sunday, June 26, 10:00 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.** Join Andy Rabin on a free, fun, and informative dragonfly walk as he visits some of the best dragonfly habitat in the county. Learn how to catch, handle, identify, and release these insects. Bring an insect net if you have one (some extra nets will be provided). Adults and children welcome. Meet at Bles Park in Ashburn (for directions [www.loudoun.gov/Default.aspx?tabid=924](http://www.loudoun.gov/Default.aspx?tabid=924)). *Questions: contact Andy Rabin at [stylurus@gmail.com](mailto:stylurus@gmail.com).*

**Butterflies of Loudoun Identification Class and Field Session — Saturday, July 16, 10:00 a.m. – 2:00 p.m.** Learn about tips and tricks for identifying many of our local butterflies. Nicole Hamilton will lead the class in an indoor session. Then everyone will head out to the gardens and wild, weedy areas at Ida Lee to see and identify as many butterflies as we can. This is a great way to hone your skills and get ready for our 15th Annual Butterfly Count in August! All experience levels are welcome. Meet in the downstairs classroom at Ida Lee Park and please bring a lunch. **Registration required: Sign Up Online ([www.loudounwildlife.org/SignUp.htm](http://www.loudounwildlife.org/SignUp.htm)) or contact Nicole Hamilton at [nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:nhamilton@loudounwildlife.org).**

## SUNDAY IN THE PRESERVE

**J**oin a naturalist from the Friends of Banshee Reeks and LWC for a free informal, family walk around the preserve. Search for the many natural wonders that make this such a special place. For information call the Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve at 703-669-0316.



**Sundays, April 17, May 22, June 19, and July 17 at 1:00 p.m.**

**Dragonflies and Damselflies of Loudoun Field Trip — Sunday, July 24, 9:30 a.m. – 4:00 p.m.** Join Andy Rabin and Kevin Munroe on a free, fun, and informative day of “dragon-hunting” as we visit some of the best dragonfly and damselfly habitats in the county. Learn how to catch, handle, identify, and release these insects. Bring an insect net if you have one (some extra nets will be provided), a hat, sunscreen, lunch, snacks, water, and binoculars. We may be walking off-trail through some tall vegetation. To get the most out of this trip you will want to be an active participant, so be prepared for the possibility of getting your feet wet and muddy. Adults and interested children are welcome. Meet at Bles Park in Ashburn (for directions [www.loudoun.gov/Default.aspx?tabid=924](http://www.loudoun.gov/Default.aspx?tabid=924)). **Registration required – limit 12 participants. To register and for questions, please e-mail Andy Rabin at [stylurus@gmail.com](mailto:stylurus@gmail.com) (preferred) or call 703-723-6926.**



### Questions about the above programs?

Contact Laura McGranaghan at [lmcgranaghan@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:lmcgranaghan@loudounwildlife.org)  
For up-to-date information on our programs or to sign up online check our web site at [www.loudounwildlife.org](http://www.loudounwildlife.org)



## 2010 Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count Results

by Joe Coleman

**T**he 106 people participating in the 14th Central Loudoun CBC, sponsored by LWC, found 92 species and 26,497 individual birds on Wednesday, Dec. 29, 2010. Only once in the 14 years of the count have more people participated in the count, and the 15 participants under 19 is by the far the largest number of young people who have ever joined us on the count. We were thrilled that one of the teams was comprised of Liam McGranaghan and three of his students from Loudoun Valley High School, the beginning of what we hope will be a trend of student teams which will grow and expand on future counts.

For those of us owling, the day started with disappointment, especially for the three young boys who joined one of the teams in Philomont at 5 AM, as fewer owls and no unusual or uncommon species were found compared to the past few years. In terms of individual birds, this pattern continued into the day as only 133.6 individuals were found per party hour. However, the 93 number of species observed, including a count week Pine Siskin, is better than average, and those 93 included some very exciting species. One of the reasons the individuals per party hour count was low was the small number of European Starlings (1,832 seen was far below the count average of 6,500).

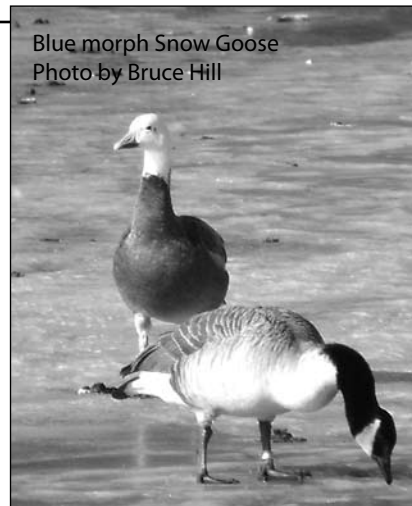
The highlights of the count included two different Loggerhead Shrikes, a state threatened species. One, found by Cliff Fairweather and his team, was north of Purcellville and the other, found by Gerry Hawkins and Joe Coleman, was on private property along the Goose Creek close to Mountville. The count also had two firsts: a Lesser Black-Backed Gull, found at the county landfill by Bob Abrams, and a Pine Warbler, found by Kevin McKee, Paul Miller, and David Van Tassel. Other great finds were a blue morph Snow Goose, seen and photographed by Bruce Hill near the Beaverdam Reservoir; a Virginia Rail

that surprised the team headed by Gerco Hoogeweg and Donna Quinn at the Dulles Greenway Wetlands Mitigation Project; and a Black-Capped Chickadee, only the second time this species has been found on the count. It was visiting a feeder at Bob and Ryan Jordan's in Philomont along with a lot of Carolina Chickadees and gave that team an excellent opportunity to compare the two different species.

It was also nice to see that a couple of the sectors had seven-woodpecker days, and, considering that almost every patch of still, and in many cases, flowing water was frozen, there was a surprisingly decent number of waterfowl species, including, for this count, a record number of Mallards and Hooded Mergansers. Also found were six Common Goldeneyes and a Redhead, both of which have been found on only four of our counts. The waterfowl were found in the few areas where water was open, such as the Potomac River and a small part of Beaverdam Reservoir. My team found the Goose Creek more frozen than it has ever been on any of our previous Christmas Bird Counts.

Russ Taylor, who was assisting Steve Makranczy north of Leesburg and near the Potomac River, was excited to find seven Brown Creepers all in the same area. American Pipits, Horned Larks, and a wide variety of sparrows including Chipping, Field, American Tree, Savannah, Fox, Swamp, and White-Crowned were also found in a wide variety of locations. While none of the teams found many blackbirds, and not a

Blue morph Snow Goose  
Photo by Bruce Hill



■ Continued on page 14



Loudoun Valley High School Team  
Photo by Laura McGranaghan

CBC, continued



Eastern Screech Owl  
Photo by Gerco Hoogeweg

single Brown-headed Cowbird, the team headed by Gerco Hoogeweg and Donna Quinn found a small flock of Eastern Meadowlarks, and Carole Miller and Linda Millington found a small flock of Rusty Blackbirds, a species whose numbers have dropped dramatically in the past decade. The more interesting finches included Purple Finch and a count-week Pine Siskin.

Always interesting are the birds seen in higher numbers than any previous years. This year that included Wild Turkeys (43), Red-shouldered Hawks (125), and American Crows (1,178).

Afterwards about half the participants met at the Rust Nature Sanctuary for the Tally Rally to share tales of their day and find out what the count's highlights were. All of us appreciated the efforts of Helen Van Ryzin, Karen Coleman, Ellie Daley, Rockie Fera, Sheila Ferguson, Bruce McGranahan, and Karen Strick for setting up and working with Mama Lucci's Restaurant, as well as all the others who helped clean up after a long day in the field, ensuring that the Tally Rally was a success.

LWC is thankful to all the counters, and especially the sector and subsector leaders, for helping with this count, one of over 2,000 different Christmas Bird Counts, part of the longest and largest citizen-science effort in the world. We also appreciate all the private and public landowners who give us permission to visit their properties to survey the birds there – those permissions make an incredible difference in the numbers and diversity of what is found!

To compare this year's count to previous years', check out [www.loudounwildlife.org](http://www.loudounwildlife.org). To compare the Central Loudoun CBC to other counts, check out [www.audubon.org/Bird/cbc/](http://www.audubon.org/Bird/cbc/).

And to all of the many counters, **Thank You!**

Gerry Abbott  
Susan Abraham  
Bob Abrams  
Alex Andrews  
Ana Arguelles  
Dale Ball  
Gem Bingol  
Dave Boltz  
Joanne Bradbury  
Clara Bradford  
Emily Bradford  
Jacob Bradford  
Christopher Butterfield  
Rosaria Butterfield  
Constance Chatfield-Taylor  
Roger Clapp  
Eli Clizbe  
Ike Clizbe  
Kent Clizbe  
Joe Coleman  
Anita Colvard

Casey Crichton  
Ellie Daley  
Phil Daley  
Robert Daugherty  
Cooper Dzema  
Michelle Dzema  
Tim Eckert  
Kate Eldridge  
Cliff Fairweather  
Karen Fairweather  
Cindy Foster  
Michael Friedman  
Ann Garvey  
Ton Garvey  
Mary Ann Good  
Dirck Harris  
Gerry Hawkins  
Bruce Hill  
Teri Holland  
Robin Hoofnagle  
Gerco Hoogeweg

Bruce Johnson  
Steve Johnson  
Paul Julian  
John Kamerud  
Sharon Kearns  
Hannah Levi  
Spring Ligi  
Sidney Lissner  
Colin Little  
Steve Little  
Steve Makranczy  
Karen Marr  
Andy Martin  
Nan McCarry  
David McCarthy  
John McCray  
Laura McGranaghan  
Liam McGranaghan  
Kevin McKee  
Larry Meade  
Carole Miller

Paul Miller  
Linda Millington  
Mark Moran  
Rusty Moran  
Gary Myers  
Jim Nelson  
Ed Patten  
Grace Payne  
Rob Payne  
Suzanne Payne  
Zach Payne  
Christine Perdue  
Jonathan Plissner  
Sheryl Pollock  
Donna Quinn  
Nancy Reaves  
Rebecca Redmon  
Dori Rhodes  
Bob Ryan  
Jordan Ryan  
Sally Snidow

Emily Southgate  
Karen Strick  
Kay Styer  
Norm Styer  
Russ Taylor  
Anna Urciolo  
Helen VanRyzin  
David VanTassel  
Jenny Vick  
Anthony Wagner  
Warren Wagner  
Nancy Walker  
Scott Walker  
Jeff Wallace  
Nancy Wallace  
Mary Weeks  
Marcia Weidner  
John Williamson  
Jeff Wneck  
Holly Wolcott  
Jane Yocum

## Every Bird Counts for the 2009-2013 Loudoun County Bird Atlas

The next time you discover an interesting bird at your backyard feeders or favorite spots throughout the county, consider reporting your sighting for the Loudoun County Bird Atlas. Contact the Atlas Coordinator, Spring Ligi, at [sligi@loudounwildlife.org](mailto:sligi@loudounwildlife.org) to join our enthusiastic group of over 55 atlasers. Or, simply send us your sightings, and we'll enter the data for you. We would also appreciate hearing from anyone with property in Loudoun that can be made accessible to atlasers. For more information and the latest results, check the atlas website at [www.loudounwildlife.org/Bird\\_Atlas.htm](http://www.loudounwildlife.org/Bird_Atlas.htm).





## Adventures of Zoom & Compass The River Otter's Playground

by Senia Hamwi

"Hmm... a mysterious path, you say? Leading into the stream?" Zoom tapped the desk with her fingers as she spoke with Zane on the phone. "We'll be right over," she said.

"I know how to get us there," said Compass, jumping out of his seat. "The stream is along the edge of an abandoned farm—we could take the bikes over—c'mon."

When the detectives arrived, they found Zane photographing a trail about a foot wide that began at the top of a steep hill and stopped at the water's edge. "The pictures are for my wildlife journal," he said looking up. "See how the grass is flattened—it's almost like a steamroller went over it."

"Or a river otter," said Compass with a smile.

"A river otter?" asked Zane. "But the trail stops at a stream, not a river."

"River otters don't just live close to rivers — as long as there is a clean body of water, you can find them near lakes, ponds, and marshes, too," replied Zoom. "Let's explore a bit and see if we could find a holt."

Seeing the confused look on Zane's face, Compass explained, "A holt is the otter's den, typically found close to the water. It can be under tree roots or really large rocks, even an abandoned beaver's den."

"And that's not all," said Zoom. "The holt can have more than one entrance so that it can escape a predator like a fox, bobcat or bear. It's not unusual to find an opening into water where it can swim away."

"Sounds like the otter makes a pretty neat home for itself," said Zane. "What about its diet? What does it eat?" he wondered.

"An otter will spend a lot of time hunting in the water so fish is definitely a staple food, but its diet also includes tadpoles, frogs, aquatic insects—even small birds or ducks," answered Zoom. "Oh, and it just loves those," she said, pointing to several crayfish crawling alongside the stream.

"It is an opportunistic eater with good manners," added Compass. "The otter won't gulp down its food in one or two bites like many other animals do. Instead, it'll take small bites and chew its food well before swallowing."

"Well, I guess we should all be more like the otter in that respect," Zane joked. "It must be a great swimmer spending time as much as it does in and close to water, huh?"

"It absolutely is!" answered Zoom. "Not only does it have a long slender body that makes it so agile while swimming, but it also

has a long muscular tail that it uses to steer and navigate." She paused and then added, "And strong webbed feet that it uses to push up and down and help it do somersaults in the water."

"And it doesn't need to worry about taking in water because its nose and ears shut automatically when it dives in," said Compass, clapping his ears to emphasize the point. "And it can hold its breath underwater for several minutes—that comes in handy when foraging along the streambed, looking for animals."

"That reminds me," said Zoom, "an otter uses its whiskers to sense movement, helping it to find prey even in muddy waters or at night when it's dark."

"It also has sharp and sensitive claws that help it to do the same," Compass added. "Forward facing eyes are a real plus for spotting prey, and it's got fantastic sharp front teeth to grasp slippery fish and strong back teeth to chew with. You could say that otters have the total package!"

"I'll have great information for my journal now about the otter—but we still haven't found its holt, and we've been looking for some time now," said Zane. "I'd love to take a picture of it—or better yet, one of the otter!" he exclaimed.

"We'd be lucky indeed to find the holt as the otters' territory can extend for miles," replied Zoom. "And even more lucky if we spotted a river otter since it tends to stay away from humans."

"We could stay awhile and see if the otter returns to its playground," suggested Compass. "The muddy slide appears fairly new—see the flattened grass that looks fresh? Otters will create these slides and then go down over and

over again just like kids do."

"Speaking of kids... well, pups, in the case of the otter," said Zoom. "A small litter is born in early spring after a short gestation period of maybe a couple of months. Helpless at birth, with eyes still shut, the pups are taken care of by the mom inside the den for the first three months of their lives. After a few months, the pups come out with their mother to learn to swim and hunt."

A big smile spread across Zane's face. "That's right about now!" he cried. "We could get really lucky and see more than one otter!"

Zoom and Compass smiled back in agreement. They would be back to check on this playground.

### Sources:

*Animal Neighbors: Otter* by Michael Leach. New York: PowerKids Press, 2009

*River Otters* by Jen Green. New York: Scholastic, 2008





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