

Habitat Herald

A Publication of the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy

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Winter 2021



Yellow-crowned Night-Heron

Fox Sparrow

Birding off the Beaten Path

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A Journey of Discovery to Olde Izaak Walton Park

story and photos by Michael Myers

Solitary Sandpiper

Cape May Warbler

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, more people are spending more time outdoors. While it's great to get outside, we must do so in a responsible way to not overwhelm the places that we love. Unfortunately, Loudoun County does not have enough natural, open-space parks and trails to accommodate all of this new traffic. Early in the pandemic, many parks' parking lots were closed to encourage people to only visit parks near their homes. This policy didn't really have the desired effect, but there is value in visiting local parks and open spaces, no matter how small or insignificant they may seem to be.

A great example of this is Olde Izaak Walton Park in Leesburg. My wife and I recently moved to a house that is within walking distance of both downtown Leesburg and the W&OD Trail and only a few blocks from Olde Izaak Walton Park. After work and on weekends, I started visiting the park to go birding, but also to see what other wildlife was present. The park is rather small, nestled between the Route 7 bypass and Tuscarora Creek, and it includes a dog park and small pond.

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Executive Director's Message



It's a new year, and we've hit the ground running with programs and events. This year we plan on continuing to produce more virtual content, but we look forward to eventually hosting more in-person programs. Late winter and early spring are always a busy time for us at Loudoun Wildlife, and this year is no

different. Many of our citizen-science programs are hosting virtual programs to prepare for their upcoming data collection efforts, and planning is ongoing for our Spring Native Plant Sale this year (fingers crossed).

This year we're going to be doing Wine for Wildlife a bit differently than in the past. Instead of in-person event, we will host an online auction featuring the Birdhouses of Loudoun, hand-painted by local artists. And we have Perks Program booklets available for sale. These voucher books offer a variety of discounts and experiences at local craft beverage establishments throughout Loudoun County. You can support wildlife while supporting local businesses!

I know it seems like we just finished our previous Birdathon, but our 2021 Birdathon is right around the corner. Spring migration

for birds will be here before we know it! We tried out some new Birdathon rules in the fall and the response was positive, so we're going to build upon that success and give you additional opportunities to get involved this year. Besides additional birding programs to see the unique species that migrate through Loudoun County, our Birdathon teams have a friendly competition to see who can identify the most species and raise the most money. You can form your very own team and compete for prizes. Be sure to check out our website for all the details. Help us Celebrate Birds in 2021!

Our important advocacy work to protect floodplains, stream corridors, and other natural assets in Loudoun County continues. Keep an eye on your inbox for advocacy alerts and information on how you can get involved and make your voice heard.

We're always adapting and finding new, creative solutions to bring great wildlife programming to the residents of Loudoun County, and we look forward to seeing you at one of our upcoming programs or events.

Happy trails,

Michael

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Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is a nonprofit 501c3 nonprofit organization that inspires, motivates, and engages people to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat in Loudoun County. Contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.

The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Board meets bi-monthly. Board meetings are open to all current members. For more information, or to suggest topics for discussion at upcoming meetings, contact Julie Borneman at jbormeman@loudounwildlife.org.

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Ballfield Proposal Presents Many Threats for Major Floodplain

by Michael Myers, Executive Director

Editor's Note: Shortly before presstime, the Loudoun County Board of Supervisors approved the Temple Baptist Church application by a 5-3-1 vote on January 19.



Threats to clean water, floodplains, and the natural assets that compose green infrastructure are constant and ongoing. While we wish the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy had the resources and time to stand up to all threats, unfortunately we do not. We are committed to educate local, state, and federal legislators, and the public, on important environmental and natural resource topics and concerns. We

update our website and social media channels with important information about ongoing and evolving advocacy topics and send advocacy alerts via email. Loudoun Wildlife also partners with a variety of other local and regional nonprofits including the Piedmont Environmental Council, Audubon Naturalist Society, and other members of the Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition on advocacy topics. We invite you to also visit their



websites for great advocacy information and resources.

At the county level, the Temple Baptist Church application highlights a major ongoing concern and threat to wildlife habitat in Loudoun County. The proposed application seeks a special exception to build two ballfields in the major floodplain of Broad Run, an impaired stream.



The current Zoning Ordinance does not prohibit ballfields in a major

floodplain, but the new Comprehensive Plan adopted in 2019 prohibits it due to the River and Stream Corridor Resources District Classification. The challenge is that the Zoning Ordinance Rewrite has not yet been completed to codify the updated regulations.



Furthermore, when the original Kincora development was approved, it proposed to impact wetlands. To offset those impacts, the developer had to create additional wetlands at another location on the property. This proposed application would destroy a portion of those created

We need your voice to protect the environment and our natural resources. Reaching out to your local, state, and federal representatives can have an impact on how they vote, and you can make a difference. Here are some tips to craft a compelling message:

- **Introduce.** Briefly describe your position on the legislation, policy, or topic.
- **Persuade.** Tell your personal story and how the topic relates to you. Your story has impact.
- **Inform.** Provide background information and data on the topic.
- **Conclude.** Restate your message with a call to action.

wetlands. If approved, Loudoun County would be giving permission to destroy wetlands they previously required to be built. The proposed application does not include comparable mitigation of equal conservation value at this site or elsewhere.



Additionally, Virginia's Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) and the Army Corps of Engineers must approve

any impacts to wetlands, and they have not received a complete application about this project or the potential wetlands impacts. Despite the failure to complete these necessary steps — getting a special exception approved by the Board of Supervisors and getting approval from DEQ and the Army

Corps of Engineers — in 2019, a floodplain alteration plan approval was granted to allow ballfields to potentially be built in the floodplain. The plans have changed since the original application, so another floodplain alteration plan will have to be submitted and approved.



This disjointed approval process raises concerns that the Board of Supervisors is not receiving adequate information on the scope of environmental impacts to wetlands before decisions are made.

Among the many negative impacts that would occur within the major floodplain of Broad Run, this proposed project would destroy part of a functioning wetlands; remove the buffer to the functioning wetlands; destroy wildlife habitat; reduce the ecological value of the area; and potentially



add more sediment, fertilizer, and other harmful contaminants to the Broad Run watershed.

The Board of Supervisors have an opportunity to set the tone for the rest of their terms and prove that Loudoun County cares about our environment and greenspaces, and will protect our floodplains as was agreed upon and intended in the Comprehensive Plan.

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Teamwork Makes Church's Public Space A Wildlife Habitat

by Anne Owen, Audubon at Home Program Coordinator

When Linda Colucci, a congregant of Ashburn's Crossroads United Methodist Church, saw an advertisement for Audubon Society of Virginia's Burke Grant program on the Plant NOVA Natives website in the spring of 2018, she was excited about the possibility of creating a wildlife garden at the entrance to the church. With the enthusiastic support of the church leadership, Kathy MacKrell, Mission and Serve Coordinator, assisted by Nan McCarry, longtime Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy volunteer and native plant advocate, wrote and submitted an application. They were delighted to be selected as one of six faith communities in Northern Virginia awarded a grant to create a native plant habitat at the church.



Garden volunteers spent hours preparing the beds outside of the church's entrance for planting. Photos by B.J. Lechrone



In September, native plants with colorful, pollinator-attracting flowers grow in a space once occupied by standard lawn.

Another congregant, BJ Lechrone, a Virginia Master Naturalist and Audubon at Home Ambassador, took over the next phases of the project, which meant developing a detailed planting plan and making sure that everything would be planted before the Burke Grant deadline of fall 2019. Said BJ, "As an AAH Ambassador, I am familiar with the key guiding principles to support wildlife — get native plants from specialist nurseries who can guarantee

they are neonicotinoid-free, make sure that there is something blooming throughout the spring, summer and fall, and put in a variety of native plants to support both generalist and specialist pollinators."

To design a garden that would enhance the entrance to the church as well as support wildlife, BJ spent a couple of months researching and planning the garden while taking into account soil and light conditions, plant height and spread, and working out exactly where each plant needed to go to make best use of the available space. She also had to stay within the Burke Grant budget, which covered only the plants themselves.

The garden installation itself was a big job, but a Dominion Energy Community Service Volunteer team of twelve volunteers pitched in alongside eight Crossroads volunteers, and the whole project — stripping out lawn grass, amending the compacted clay soil beneath with leaf mulch, planting a total of 160 plants and further mulching — was completed in a day!



Dominion Energy Community Service Team volunteers help church volunteers install native plants in the new garden.

Getting the garden designed and planted are really only the initial phases of the project, though, says BJ. The new garden needed to be watered daily for the first week, and then weekly until its first winter. Other maintenance continues to be done, at least monthly. Weeds need to be pulled until the native plants can fill out the space, and the young plants need water occasionally if the weather is very dry. A few plants didn't make it through the winter and had to be replaced, while one or two others are spreading very quickly and have to be trimmed back to maintain the overall balance and diversity of the planting. It takes a small team of volunteers to do all this, and special thanks go to Mo Colbert at Crossroads Church.

In the spring of 2019, with the new garden emerging from winter dormancy, another important aspect of the project got underway: engaging the wider congregation. As a first step, signs were installed explaining the importance of the garden and

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Virtual Auction To Benefit LWC Begins Feb. 20

by Michele Savage

The COVID-19 pandemic may have prevented the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy from holding many of its most anticipated events over the past year. But it hasn't prevented members from finding new ways to support Loudoun Wildlife and its mission. Preparations are under way for the annual fundraising auction, and for the second year in a row organizers are planning a virtual event, beginning February 20.

"The auction will feature the 25 'Birdhouses of Loudoun County' along with other art and experiences," said Julie Borneman, president of the Loudoun Wildlife board. "Among other things, we'll be offering art from Nicole Sudduth as well as a lunch tour of JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary."

Usually dubbed Wine (and Art) for Wildlife and held at one of Loudoun's scenic wineries, this year's auction will be live online

February 20-27. A link to the auction will be made available ahead of time, Julie said. Interested participants may check loudounwildlife.org or the Loudoun Wildlife Facebook page for more information and a peek at some items up for bid — including the birdhouses designed and decorated by local artists.

Anyone interested in donating art or an experiential package for this year's virtual auction may contact jborneman@loudounwildlife.org.

Last year's virtual auction raised more than \$13,000 to support Loudoun

Wildlife's work to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat in Loudoun County.



Loudoun Wildlife will accept bids for the 25 Birdhouses of Loudoun County and other items during a virtual auction Feb. 20-27. Photo by Anne Owen



Teamwork, continued from page 4

how it is beginning to provide food, water, and shelter, the most basic requirements to support wildlife. BJ partnered with others to market the plans and educate the community. Nan and BJ presented to the congregation about the garden and followed that up with a talk to the Vacation Serve camp on how native plants act as hosts for the early stages of the pollinator life cycle. BJ wrote a Plant-of-the-Week feature for the electronic newsletter Hope in Action, supported with handouts at weekly church services. In the fall, about 60 people attended two 90-minute presentations developed from the "Landscape for Life" curriculum to continue to spread the word about native plants and wildlife habitat.

Of course, events in 2020 made it hard to maintain momentum, but the garden continues to thrive and is already giving back. It has been so productive that in June, over 100 plants were dug up and offered free of charge to community members for their own

gardens, and in November more plants went home with the 3rd Grade Bible Class families. Kathy also continued to list the plant of the week in the Hope in Action newsletter.

This project has required effort to transition from standard lawn. Has it been worth it? Please judge for yourself — here's what Crossroads United Methodist has to say: "In the short time since we planted the native plant garden and added the bird bath at Crossroads United Methodist Church, we have already seen more pollinators and birds visiting the area than when it was just lawn and non-native plants. The grant provided the resources that allowed us to be better stewards of God's Creation (at least the portion that Crossroads is responsible for). The garden has also enhanced the beauty of the church's main entrance, making it more inviting and welcoming. Because of the variety of plant species selected, something is always in bloom from spring through the fall."

Resources:

Plant NOVA Natives: <https://www.plantnovanatives.org/>



New Web Tool Helps NoVa Wildlife Gardeners

by Juan Gonzalez and Megan Agosti

Starting a native plant garden always begins with the same set of questions — “What plants work for my space? Which plants are most beneficial and likely to attract wildlife?”

For the past few years, Northern Virginia gardeners would start their journey by referencing resources like Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's *Planting for Wildlife in Northern Virginia*, a thorough book

providing information on various native trees, shrubs, flowers, and more. This past year, two volunteers endeavored to make this information even more accessible by creating an interactive web tool for Northern Virginia's residents. In collaboration with Loudoun Wildlife staff and volunteers, we are pleased to announce the Northern Virginia Wildlife Gardening Database located at www.novawildlifegarden.net.

This web tool provides users with *Planting for Wildlife's* full catalogue in a digital format for easy filtering to answer even the most specific questions. Users can use a search function or filter results with seven different plant characteristics, including popular questions like preferred light, soil moisture, bloom month, and wildlife benefits. Favorite plants can be saved in the Saved Plant List which can generate a report summarizing your selections. You can plan for year-round interest, find deer-resistant plants, and start your dream butterfly garden with the Northern Virginia Wildlife Gardening Database.

To explore Northern Virginia Wildlife Gardening Database's full catalogue of native plants, go to www.novawildlifegarden.net and select the Plant Library tab. Select the plant type you are interested in from the drop-down menu to begin your search. Here you can filter your selection by specifying preferred light source, moisture level, bloom months/color, plant height/spread, and wildlife benefits. Further refine your selection by utilizing the search bar to make further queries (for example, “fragrant,” “deer resistant,” “hummingbird”).

Once filtered, the table provides additional context for each plant. Users can see the plant's description and learn more about the wildlife benefits of each. Get detailed information by clicking on scientific names to view the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center entry for each plant. Explore the Glossary tab to define common terms used throughout the database.

Users can save their favorite plants using the Saved Plant List feature. To save a plant, click its respective row and then the green Save Selected button on the bottom left. This feature allows for multiple selections, so pick as many as you would like. See your list by navigating to the Saved Plants tab. When ready, generate your report by clicking the blue Generate Report button in the Saved Plants tab. This report summarizes your plant selection and generates tables for the various filters found in the web tool. Use these tables to review your selection or ensure year-round interest in your garden.

Loudoun Wildlife hopes you find this new web tool useful. It has been developed and is maintained by volunteers Juan Gonzalez and Megan Agosti. For any comments or questions please contact them at novawildlifegarden@gmail.com.

Bloom Months

Plant	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Claytonia virginica				✓								
Erythronium americanum				✓								
Aquilegia canadensis				✓	✓							
Dicentra eximia				✓	✓	✓	✓					
Erigeron pulchellus				✓	✓	✓						
Monarda media						✓	✓	✓				
Garden				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				

Wildlife Benefits

Plant	Caterpillar	Butterfly	Insect	Bird	Mammal	Reptile
Claytonia virginica		✓	✓			✓
Erythronium americanum				✓		
Aquilegia canadensis	✓		✓	✓		
Dicentra eximia		✓	✓	✓		
Erigeron pulchellus	✓	✓	✓			
Monarda media	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Garden	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	



Meet the Muskrats of Loudoun

by Dan Sill



A muskrat spotted at the Broadlands wetlands boardwalk in Loudoun County. Photo by Gerco Hoogeweg

Muskrat Susie, Muskrat Sam ... OK you probably know the song that was a hit for Captain and Tennille back in 1976, and most people either like it or loathe it. Nevertheless these medium-sized, semi-aquatic rodents are part of the Loudoun County landscape and are native to North America, found over most of Canada and the United States and a small part of northern Mexico. Muskrat trapping for its fur became an important industry in northern North America in the early 20th century. The fur is noted for its warmth and was used for coats and hats. They were introduced as a fur resource and have spread throughout northern Europe and Asia.

Muskrats grow to be 2 to 4 pounds and 16 to 28 inches long, with half of that being the tail, which is 8 to 11 inches long. Their fur is dense, medium to dark brown, and has two layers, which provide protection from cold water. To aid them in swimming, their tails are slightly flattened vertically and covered with scales rather than hair. The character of the tail alone is sufficient to distinguish the Muskrat from all other mammals. Their hind feet are semi-webbed, although when swimming their tails are the main means of propulsion.

The Muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus*) is the only species in the genus *Ondatra* in the subfamily of rodents that includes voles and lemmings (but not rats). The Muskrat's name derives from Native American *muscasus* or *musquash*, and because the Muskrat secretes a musky odor (*zibethicus* is Latin for musky), British colonists gave it the common name musk-beaver, later altered to Muskrat due to the animal's resemblance to the brown rat.

Muskrats inhabit marshes, ponds, lakes, and streams, particularly where there are cattails, rushes, water lilies, and open water. Muskrats burrow into stream or river banks to create a nest with an underwater entrance, or in marshes with less of a bank they build small lodges 2 to 3 feet above water made out of vegetation and mud with a side entrance above the water line. Marsh lodges stay in place due to the lack of current but can sometimes be swept away by spring floods. Trumpeter Swans sometimes build their nests on top of muskrat lodges. Muskrats feed on aquatic

vegetation including cattails and water lilies and occasionally freshwater clams, frogs, and fish. They also eat alfalfa, clover, corn, and other crops that happen to be in their territory. Muskrats are prolific breeders, and females can have two or three litters a year of six to eight young.

Muskrats have been seen throughout Loudoun County, for example at Bles Park and in the marshy area at Horsepen Run in Sterling, but are not as plentiful as in locations such as Fairfax County, where perhaps there are not as many of the predators that hunt Muskrat. These include mink (a major predator), otters, bobcats, house cats, domestic dogs, coyotes, foxes, eagles, large hawks and owls, and even bass.

Muskrats make a valuable contribution to aquatic communities. By harvesting plants for food and den sites, they create open water for ducks, geese, shorebirds, and other wildlife. In addition, a variety of animals — including snakes, turtles, frogs, ducks, and geese — use muskrat lodges and platforms to rest and nest. Muskrats are, however, considered pests when their burrowing activity damages dams and dikes, and when their feeding activity damages new plantings and crops.

Lastly, if you ever bump into Susie and Sam doing the jitterbug out in Muskrat Land, it's possible they may indignantly remind you that, regardless of their name, they are *not* members of the genus *Rattus*!

Ballfield Proposal, continued from page 3



The residents and wildlife of Loudoun County benefit from protecting clean water, wetlands, and our natural resources from unnecessary development.

There will be more applications that the Board of Supervisors will have to act upon before the Zoning Ordinance Rewrite is completed, and we will continue to fight to protect our green infrastructure in Loudoun County, especially when those protections are explicitly stated in the Comprehensive Plan.

There are many other ongoing local and state applications, legislation, and topics that we will continue to monitor and educate the public about. Please continue to look for our updates and advocacy alerts. Volunteers are always needed to raise our collective voice for healthy wildlife habitat. If you are interested in becoming more involved with our advocacy work, please reach out to info@loudounwildlife.org.



The 2021 Virginia Legislative session is only 30 days long, concluding on February 27. While much discussion and many votes have already occurred on proposed legislation, there is still time to reach out to your delegate or state senator on important conservation-related topics such as conservation easements, wildlife corridors, invasive species, environmental education, and other conservation issues.



Young Monitors Take On Old Bluebird Trail

by Joanne Davis, Bluebird Trail Assistant

While collecting data for the 2020 Loudoun Wildlife Bluebird Monitoring program, we were dismayed to discover that the nesting boxes at Franklin Park in Purcellville had not been monitored last year. As luck would have it, we received an inquiry through Loudoun Wildlife's website from Annaliese Meistrich, a Loudoun Valley High School senior, expressing interest in the trail.

Annaliese is passionate about ornithology, photography, habitat conservation, and solutions to use of land and water. She has many extracurricular activities, including serving as an emergency medical technician for the Purcellville Volunteer Rescue Squad. But Annaliese wanted to share her passion for birds while educating others, so she founded the Loudoun Valley Birding and Ornithology Club, the school's first birding club. Annaliese feels "birding is much more fun with a group" and that monitoring the trail would be a perfect activity for the club.

The Franklin Park trail houses hundreds of Eastern Bluebirds and encompasses a rich habitat for these cavity nesters. Annaliese was already very familiar with the trail, having spent at least five hours a week there at peak migration seasons over the past several years. She has reported many eBird checklists under the park's location and cataloged some interesting sightings over the different seasons, including a Blue-headed Vireo. Annaliese says she loves the "undisturbed habitat at the park — acres of dense, diverse woods, open grassy fields, and a pond. There's lots of opportunity for birds to thrive within the park. ... This past spring, I found an American Redstart and have seen many Red-shouldered Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, and Bald Eagles flying around the park, and even an Osprey."

While we walked the trail to gather information on its current state, Annaliese demonstrated remarkable knowledge of the many birds we encountered in the surrounding woods. We were delighted to see dozens of bluebirds on the ballfield fences keeping an eye on us, a clear indication of the trail's past successes.

The Franklin Park trail was established in 2004 with 23 boxes. Over the years, it grew to 37 boxes. Some are old and weathered, but most are in good shape and need a simple cleaning. Annaliese has mapped the current path and plans to reduce the number of boxes to a more manageable 10 to 15 in a loop that would take under two hours per visit to monitor. Old poles, baffles, and boxes will be replaced and all boxes relabeled.



Annaliese Meistrich checks a bluebird nesting box on the Franklin Park trail. Photo courtesy of Annaliese Meistrich

Annaliese will go off to college in the fall to study environmental science. "I enjoy learning about concerns for the increasing demands of both land and water because the solutions require a level of critical thinking that suits me," she said. "However, I would hope to one day become a professor and teach another generation of young minds to appreciate and learn from the natural world."

The rest of the Loudoun Valley club will carry on at the trail and ideally recruit additional students. We're very excited to have Annaliese and the birding club join the more than 140 volunteers who monitor trails in Loudoun County each year.



An Eastern Bluebird watches from a safe distance as human monitors walk the Franklin Park trail. Photo by Annaliese Meistrich

A Red-shouldered Hawk surveys the park. Photo by Annaliese Meistrich



Franklin Park Map

Red pins on a map mark the bluebird trail's existing boxes.

The new monitors from the Loudoun Valley Birding and Ornithology Club plan to reduce the trail's 37 bluebird boxes to a more manageable number. Photo by Jeff Davis



Another Very Successful Christmas Bird Count

by Joe Coleman, Birding Coordinator



Family birding fun: Laura McGranaghan (left) enjoys the recent Christmas Bird Count with her parents, Marcia and Rich Weidner, and husband, Liam McGranaghan. Photo by Laura McGranaghan

In spite of the pandemic, 110 observers came out for the 24th Central Loudoun Christmas Bird Count and found 94 different bird species and 37,439 individual birds, all higher than our 24-year count average.

While the primary purpose of the Christmas Bird Count —the world's longest-running citizen-science project — is to study the population dynamics of birds, it's always fun to find rare and unusual birds, and this year provided several. Allison Gallo and Polly Nagell found a Western Kingbird, a very rare visitor to our area, and also observed a Golden Eagle, only the second for this count. Both were in a location northeast of Leesburg within a sector that has been coordinated by Steve Makranczy for several years. This area has proven, year-in and year-out, to be one of the count's most productive, owing in large part to Steve's extensive knowledge of the sector and its rich natural areas.

Cackling Geese were found for only the third time in the history of this count. A Palm Warbler was found in western Loudoun a little south of Goose Creek, only the fourth time that this species was located. A Merlin was another uncommon find for the count.

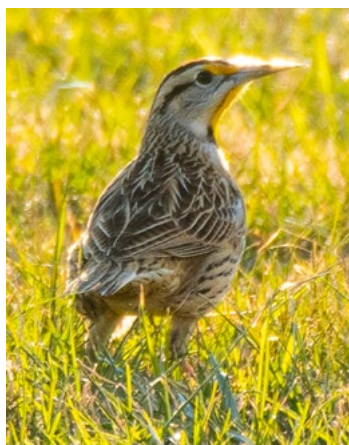
In terms of sheer numbers, the landfill, which is covered by Bob

Abrams with special permission from the County, usually has the most individuals because of the large flocks of gulls, crows, and starlings that find it a vast buffet. The landfill also usually provides some rarities and uncommon species, and this year was no exception. While Lesser Black-backed Gulls are certainly more common than they used to be in the mid-Atlantic, the one Bob found this year is still a rare visitor to Loudoun County.

Changes from year to year are always fascinating. While last year was a boom year for several species of woodpeckers, only Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers showed up in relatively high numbers this year. In fact, the 10 Red-headed Woodpeckers found were a dramatic decrease from last year's record 84, but their decline had a rational reason which we've seen before — when the mast (acorn) crop is low, as it was this year, most Red-headed Woodpeckers don't overwinter in the area.

It was wonderful to see 760 Eastern Bluebirds tallied, not only a record for this count, but a dramatic turnaround from the declines they endured during the height of West Nile virus's impact. One can't help but wonder how much Loudoun Wildlife's extensive Bluebird Trail monitoring program has helped reverse that trend.

Other high counts occurred for Black Vultures (733), Red-shouldered Hawks (163), Fish Crows (1,410), Chipping Sparrows (53), and White-throated Sparrows (2,455), along with 44 Eastern Meadowlarks, especially good news for this grassland species whose numbers have been decreasing for years.



Eastern Meadowlark. Photo by Michael Sciortino



Immature Red-shouldered Hawk. Photo by Laura McGranaghan

The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy thanks the many participants as well as the numerous landowners who gave us permission to visit their properties. Without both, this count would not be the success it has been for 24 years and we wouldn't have this snapshot of what is happening to birds in Loudoun in early winter.

To see our totals and how they compare to previous years, check out <https://loudounwildlife.org/citizen-science/bird-counts/christmas-bird-count/>.

Hope to see you next year — it's not too early to put Tuesday, December 28, 2021, on your calendar!



Volunteer of the Quarter: Chrissy Boeckel

by Kim Strader, Volunteer Coordinator



Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is fortunate to have a team of dedicated and passionate volunteers from a variety of backgrounds and experiences to assist us in educating, motivating, and inspiring people to protect, preserve, and restore wildlife habitat in Loudoun County. Some people choose to share their professional skills with us, while others look to us as a way to

pursue their passion. Board Member Chrissy Boeckel falls into the latter category.

While Chrissy's professional experience falls within state tax analysis, her heart is rooted in preserving the environment by creating awareness about how we impact it and sharing information to help people make informed decisions that result in positive changes.

Since being elected as a Loudoun Wildlife board member in 2020, Chrissy has become involved with the Fundraising Committee. Her attention to detail and her thoughtful and innovative ideas were invaluable during the planning and execution of the virtual 25th Anniversary Celebration. While Executive Director Michael Myers was the front person as the master of ceremonies for this event, it was Chrissy who reigned behind the scenes to make sure the show went smoothly by queuing all the videos and slides to play at the right time. The show could not have gone on without her, and we are grateful she volunteered her "master of Zoom" experience to assist with the celebration. The Fundraising Committee looks forward to continuing to working with Chrissy to execute exciting new fundraising opportunities in 2021.

Chrissy's interests also extend to birding, and she has attended some of Loudoun Wildlife's monthly bird walks. She was a member of the Fully-Palmated Birders Birdathon team in 2020 that helped raise funds to help us continue to fulfil our mission by providing quality programming despite the pandemic. Chrissy also participated in one of our new programs — Herpetology Count — when we counted reptiles and amphibians at JK Black Oak Sanctuary in August 2020.

We are fortunate to have Chrissy as a board member and appreciate all she has done in the short time she has been with us. It is thanks to people like Chrissy, who share their time, energy, knowledge, passion, experience, and talent with us, that we are able to create places in Loudoun County where people and wildlife thrive.

LWC Commemorates 25-Year Partnership With Dulles Greenway

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Loudoun Wildlife's community partnership with the Dulles Greenway. In 1996 Toll Road Investors Partnership II (TRIP II), the Dulles Greenway's parent company, established a private 149-acre wetlands preserve in Leesburg during the construction of the Dulles Greenway roadway to mitigate the loss of roughly 64 acres of federally protected wetlands. This mitigation provided a 2:1 replacement ratio for forested wetlands, and a 1.5:1 replacement ratio for emergent wetlands. The Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy has provided stewardship of the Dulles Greenway Wetlands since 1996.

The Dulles Greenway Wetlands are home to numerous rare and unique species, and with the charitable contributions of the Dulles Greenway — over \$535,000 in the past 25 years — Loudoun Wildlife has been able to use the property for local wildlife education. These funds have contributed to our goals of supporting citizen science and habitat conservation, and we've been able to host more than 90 educational programs and field trips that engaged over 2,400 people from around the area annually.

Many of the rare species recorded in the *Birds of Loudoun: A Guide Based on the 2009-2014 Loudoun County Bird Atlas* were found almost exclusively at the Dulles Greenway Wetlands. In fact, 158 bird species were recorded on the Dulles Greenway Wetlands, including Great Blue Herons, American Egrets, Green Herons, Mallards, Black Ducks, Green-winged Teals, Red-tailed Hawks, Wilson's Snipe, sandpipers, nesting Bald Eagles, and numerous species that are rare to Loudoun County. The site also hosts a variety of other wildlife, including red foxes, deer, beavers, river otters, painted turtles, snapping turtles, and box turtles.

"We are grateful for the instrumental support of the Dulles Greenway over the past 25 years and excited about continuing our partnership with them to support the local wildlife and habitats in the Dulles Greenway Wetlands," Loudoun Wildlife Executive Director Michael Myers said.



A recent snow coats a section of the Dulles Greenway Wetlands.
Photo by Jeff Mauritzen



Birding off the Beaten Path, continued from page 1

While I knew that other birders had visited Olde Izaak Walton Park over the years, and it is listed as a hotspot on eBird, there were only a few eBird lists for the site from five different birders having recorded 61 species as of August 2019. I started visiting regularly in late summer of 2019, and by the end of the year, I set a goal to ensure the park had at least one checklist per week. I almost made my goal. I was out of town during the second week of February 2020, and I didn't submit a checklist. But I'm hoping to complete that goal this year.

What I found at the park over the last year plus was quite surprising, and I'm excited to share my journey of discovery with you. Numerous other birders have visited the park during this period, and there have now been 120 species recorded at the park, including several unusual sightings. I hope my story inspires you to spend some time exploring those little nature spots near you. You may be surprised by what you find.

The park sits at the end of Davis Court SE in Leesburg, and right before the official entrance is a one-lane bridge. This is a great spot to stop and look both ways up and down Tuscarora Creek. Oftentimes, I have been greeted by a Belted Kingfisher patrolling the creek and calling as it flies back and forth, sometimes even under the bridge. I like to think it's saying "Hello!", but it's more likely saying, "Why don't you go away already!"

Last May, I was treated to a Yellow-crowned Night-Heron standing in the creek off to the right of the bridge about 50 feet away from me. I was excited as I furiously flipped through multiple settings on my camera to get a photo of the bird, as they are seldom seen in Loudoun County, though another was seen at Bles Park that same morning. Off to the left of the bridge, farther down the creek, there is a rocky point bar that is a common spot for birds to get a drink of water, and a popular spot for wading birds such as Solitary and Spotted Sandpipers. Another birder located a White Ibis on this rock bar in August 2020. In the fall, I found great mixed flocks of warblers and other birds next to the pond, including Cape May, Bay-breasted, Blackburnian, Chestnut-sided, and Black-throated Green Warblers all in the same tree.

Although Tuscarora Creek has the slimmest of riparian buffers (thanks to a future planned development that has stripped away a larger contiguous forest), it can be surprisingly productive for songbirds, especially during migration. While many songbirds can utilize narrow riparian buffers during migration, the ecological value of a buffer increases as it widens. I can only imagine what the diversity of birds and other wildlife was like when there was a wider, more protective riparian buffer.



*A female Chestnut-sided Warbler perches on a tree branch in Olde Izaak Walton Park.
Photo by Michael Myers*

There are often quite a few cars parked in the parking lot due to the dog park. While the dogs are noisy at times, there is a lot of ambient noise anyway since the park is right next to the highway. This makes it difficult to bird by ear in places, and it is certainly not a place to visit to experience the solitude of nature. I did spot a Yellow-throated Warbler high in a Sycamore adjacent to the dog park, and when the parking area was closed due to COVID-19, a

Swainson's Thrush escaped into the woods in this area.

Even in a small suburban park, there can be notable biodiversity, and I encourage you to get outside and explore. While spring and fall migration bring an even greater diversity of birds, you never know what, or when, you'll spot something neat if you take the time to go outside and look.

While these small greenspaces can provide pleasant surprises, we must continue to advocate for protecting our greenspaces, stream corridors, floodplains, riparian buffers, and other natural assets that make Loudoun County a special place. All residents of Loudoun should be able to experience the awe and wonder of nature within walking distance of their homes.

Next Issue: A guided walk through Olde Izaak Walton Park.

Do you have a favorite local place off the beaten path that you'd like to tell us about? Please contact Michele Savage at msavage@loudounwildlife.org to discuss submitting an article in this series.



Programs and Field Trips



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

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 hotspot. Bring binoculars if you have them. **COVID-19 protocols will be followed. Registration required. Questions: Contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.**

Second Saturdays:

February 13, March 13, April 10, May 8, 8:00 am

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Board Meeting — The Board typically meets the second Tuesday of every other even-numbered month at 7:00 pm. All Loudoun Wildlife members are welcome. Contact Julie Borneman at jboreneman@loudounwildlife.org for additional information.

Exploring Nature in Winter — Sunday, February 7, 1:00 – 4:00 pm, Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship.

Join naturalists Phil Daley and Paul Miller on this Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy winter walk to discover and discuss how animals and plants adapt to the coldest months of the year. This will be a relatively easy, but wet, walk during which we will examine the trees, plants, animal sign, and insects we find along the trails and hopefully discover some skunk cabbage poking its flower heads up through the mud and snow (a sure sign that spring is on its way). We will enjoy a beautiful time out of doors in this magnificent setting, but participants should have sturdy, water-resistant footwear and dress for the weather. **COVID-19 protocols will be followed.** Directions can be found at www.brces.org. Limit: 18 participants. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.** **Questions: Contact phildaley40@gmail.com or 540-338-6528.**

Bluebird Nestbox Monitoring Program Kickoff — Sunday, February 7, 2:00 – 3:30 pm, Virtual. Lisa McKew, coordinator of Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's bluebird monitoring program, will provide an orientation on nestbox monitoring and the protocol used in Loudoun for collecting and reporting data. She will give an overview of the program, discuss the current trails being monitored around the county, and take us through a slide show about bluebirds, their nesting habits, habitat needs, and preferred foods. Tips on gardening for bluebirds will be discussed as well as the use of natural cavities and nestboxes. A

typical nestbox system with predator guards will be set up for demonstration. Those interested in joining a monitoring team for the 2021 season can sign up during the meeting. Those interested in monitoring a home nestbox or trail and providing data to Loudoun Wildlife can register their trails/boxes during the meeting as well. **Sign Up Online.**

Waterfowl of Loudoun County — Field Trips Monday, February 15, and Sunday, February 28, Times and Locations TBD. Winter brings a good variety of waterfowl to Loudoun, and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is offering two field trips so you can see these attractive creatures. Each field trip will visit a couple local hotspots where we should find many of the species that regularly visit the county. Because of COVID-19 we won't be able to share spotting scopes, so everyone should bring binoculars to get close-up looks at these beautiful winter visitors. **COVID-19 protocols will be followed. Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

Loudoun Wildlife Winter Adaptations for Survival — Tuesday, February 16, 7:00 – 8:00 pm, Virtual. Join Jacob van Schilfgaarde, wildlife conservationist and Facility Supervisor at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, for a Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy presentation on wildlife in Loudoun. He will show us three strategies that wildlife use to survive, and discuss their typical habitats, feeding behaviors, and how to identify tracks. **Sign Up Online.**

Auction: Birdhouses of Loudoun County — February 20–27, Virtual. Another exciting online auction to benefit Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy begins at noon on February 20 and closes at 10:00 pm on February 27. Up for auction are beautiful and unique birdhouse art pieces and other works by local artists, as well as experiences including an exclusive picnic tour of JK Black Oak Wildlife Sanctuary. Watch our social media for a preview of the 2021 birdhouses. This auction will not disappoint — don't miss out! Find all the details on our website, loudounwildlife.org.

Backyard Bats — Wednesday, February 24, 7:00 pm, Virtual. Join us for a great program co-sponsored by the Loudoun County Public Library and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy to learn about our local bats! Leslie Sturges of the Save Lucy Campaign will describe the fascinating and enchanting world of bats, our only flying mammal, and how important they are. She will also introduce the seven species of bats, some common and some



Birding the Blue Ridge Center

The Blue Ridge Center for Environmental Stewardship (BRCES) is a beautiful 900-acre preserve in northwestern Loudoun. With its diverse wildlife habitats, including meadows, streams, and heavily forested slopes, BRCES draws a wide variety of birds and other creatures. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on our monthly walk 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. **COVID-19 protocols will be followed. Registration required.** Questions: Contact Joe Coleman at 540-554-2542 or jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.

**Fourth Saturdays:
February 27, March 27, April 24, 8:00 am**

rare, that call Loudoun home. **Sign Up Online.**

Woodcock Outing at the Institute Farm — Wednesday, March 3, 7:00 – 8:30 pm. Rain date March 4. Witness the incredible courtship displays of the woodcock, one of our most fascinating avian residents. On this Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy outing, we will watch and listen for the woodcock's "peent" at the Institute Farm near Aldie. Date is subject to change depending on the presence of woodcocks in the area. Limit: 15. **Registration required: Sign Up Online. Questions: Contact Emily Southgate at ewbsouthgate@gmail.com.**

Audubon at Home Ambassador Orientation — Thursday, March 4, 7:00 pm, Virtual. The Audubon at Home program supports people who want to create and sustain native wildlife habitat in their own backyards, neighborhoods, schools, and other outdoor spaces. Audubon at Home Ambassadors make site visits and provide practical suggestions on three essential requirements for healthy habitat: shelter, water, and food — most of which may be provided by suitable native plantings. You can become a trained Audubon at Home Ambassador by attending this orientation session, then accompanying experienced ambassadors on site visits. **Questions and to sign up: Contact Anne Owen at aowen@loudounwildlife.org.**

GiveChoose — Tuesday, March 16. GiveChoose is 24 hours of giving organized by the Community Foundation for Loudoun and Northern Fauquier Counties to benefit local charities serving our community. The goal is to inspire our community to come together to give generously to charities that make our community the best place to grow up and grow old. With a donation of as little as \$10, you can support wildlife habitat and help make Loudoun a place where people and wildlife thrive together. To support Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy on this day, go to <https://www.givechoose.org/LoudounWildlifeConservancy>.

Amphibian and Vernal Pool Monitoring — Saturday, March 20, Times and Locations TBD. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy out in the field during a day or night hike as we celebrate and discover the different animals that use vernal pools and their surrounding forest habitats. Jenny Swiggart will lead us into these habitats, which truly come to life as spring takes off. We will look for Wood Frogs, salamanders, toads, Spring Peepers, Fairy Shrimp, and more as Jenny shares her knowledge of these important habitats, which vanish by summer. Meeting locations and other details will be provided to participants. Space is limited for each of these field trips. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

Spring Ephemeral Talk — Saturday, April 3, 2:00 pm, Virtual. Ami Mason, an Audubon at Home Ambassador and Resident Gardener at Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve, will share photographs and expertise on local native plants at this Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy talk. She will discuss spring ephemerals that have already bloomed in late winter and what's blooming this time of year. Ami will discuss the threats to their survival and what we can do to help. **Sign Up Online.**

The Birds of Loudoun County: An Introduction — Thursday, April 8, 7:00 pm, Virtual. Over 260 bird species can be found in Loudoun due to its rich natural diversity. Joe Coleman, an enthusiastic and knowledgeable birder, will discuss and show slides of many of them. He'll also identify some of the best spots to find them and give you tips on how to become a better birder. This free program is co-sponsored by the Loudoun County Public Library and Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy. **Sign Up Online.**

Spring Native Plant Sale — Saturday, April 10, 9:00 am – 3:00 pm, Morven Park main parking lot. A landscape alive with birds, butterflies, bees, and other animals is the sign of a healthy environment. Piedmont native plants thrive in Loudoun and offer the added benefits of their beauty and value to the ecosystem. Enhance the biodiversity and success of your landscape with native plants available at this Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy sponsored sale. Flowers, shrubs, trees, vines, and ferns will be available from Watermark Woods Nursery, Hill House Farm and Nursery, and Nature by Design. **Questions: Contact Janet Locklear at jlocklear@loudounwildlife.org.**

Spring Wildflower Walk — Saturday, April 10, 10:00 am – 1:00 pm, Balls Bluff. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a field trip to explore this beautiful wooded riverside park for the early spring wildflowers that enrich the Potomac River Valley. We will also watch for early migrating birds. Bring binoculars if you have them. Limit: 15; sign up early for this popular event. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**



Spring Wildflower Walk — Sunday, April 11, 10:00 am – 1:00 pm, Banshee Reeks Nature Preserve. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy for a field trip to explore this beautiful, wooded preserve for the early spring wildflowers that enrich the Goose Creek floodplain and rich woods. We will also watch for early migrating birds. Bring binoculars if you have them. Limit: 15; sign up early for this popular event. **Registration required: Sign Up Online.**

Splash into Citizen Science with Stream Monitoring — Sunday, April 11, 2:00 – 4:00 pm, Location TBA in Purcellville. Did you know that the health of your neighborhood stream is vitally important to sustaining diverse wildlife habitat, both locally and along our larger tributaries like the Potomac River and Goose Creek? And that citizen scientists (like you!) can efficiently measure and monitor the health of our local streams by systematically collecting, identifying, and tallying the variety of aquatic macroinvertebrates collected from the stream bottom? Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy and Loudoun Soil and Water for a demonstration of how a watershed system operates, and get your feet wet as we conduct a biomonitoring survey of a local stream and identify and tally the amazing creatures we discover. We will also discuss where this data goes, how it is used, and how you can get involved as a Loudoun Wildlife stream monitoring team member. This is a family-friendly event, geared toward those 10 and up. Limit: 20. Registration required: **Sign Up Online.** **Questions: Contact Amy Ulland at aulland@loudounwildlife.org.**



This Great Horned Owl was among the great finds of the Dec. 28 Christmas Bird Count. Photo by Michael Sciortino

Leesburg Flower and Garden Festival — Saturday, April 17, 10:00 am – 6:00 pm, and Sunday, April 18, 10:00 am – 5:00 pm. The annual Leesburg Flower and Garden Festival is a great way to kick off your spring activities! Visit Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy's booth for hands-on activities for kids of all ages, see what bear scat really looks like, quiz yourself on different wildlife tracks and signs, and pick up lots of free handouts with ideas for the whole family to get outside and explore nature. We will also have a special section of the booth set up with all of our Monarch Butterfly materials. For more information on the event, visit <http://downtownleesburgva.com/flower-garden-show/>.

Celebrate Birds, Go Birding! — April 24 through May 23. Join Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy in celebrating bird migration, one of our planet's greatest wonders! From late April through early June, millions of birds journey north from their wintering grounds. Some of these birds will stay and nest in our area, but

Birding Bles Park



Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy is pleased to offer a regular bird walk at **Bles Park** located along the Potomac River in eastern Loudoun. More than 175 different species of birds have been observed at Bles Park in a great mix of habitat. Everyone is welcome, whether you are an experienced or beginning birder. Bring binoculars if you have them. **COVID-19 protocols will be followed. Registration required. Questions: Contact Bryan Henson at bhenson@loudounwildlife.org.**

**Third Sundays:
February 21, March 21, April 18, 8:00 am**

many will only stay long enough to feed and replenish their strength before heading further north. As a result, it is possible to observe over 100 species of birds in a single day. To celebrate this phenomenon, Loudoun Wildlife invites you to join one of our bird walks at hotspots throughout the county. We also invite you to either sponsor one of our teams or participate in our Birdathon, Loudoun Wildlife's largest fundraiser, sometime between April 24 and May 23 the peak of migration in our area. How many species will our intrepid birders find? Would you like to join them? To find out more about forming your own Birdathon team, or making a donation to an existing team, visit <https://loudounwildlife.org/citizen-science/bird-counts/celebratebirds-birdathon/>.

Registration required for all walks; Sign Up Online. Questions: Contact Joe Coleman at jcoleman@loudounwildlife.org.

Run the Greenway! — Saturday, May 1. See the Greenway like you have never seen it before! The Dulles Greenway is hosting Run the Greenway, its first 5K, 10K, and Kids Fun Run races. The family-friendly race is the only time you can legally speed on the Dulles Greenway! Race participants will join their community in celebrating 25 years of the Dulles Greenway connecting Loudoun County to the Metropolitan region. You can raise money for your favorite nonprofit. **Sign up here** and start raising money for Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy: <https://runsignup.com/Race/VA/Dulles/RunTheGreenway>. **Questions: Contact info@loudounwildlife.org.**

Dates and locations are subject to change. For up-to-date information on our programs or to register, visit our website at www.loudounwildlife.org or contact info@loudounwildlife.org.




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The significant funding from these supporters supplemented the funding from our members and contributed to Loudoun Wildlife's success in 2020. Thank you all for helping us help people and wildlife thrive together!

